

Niagara



Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill

Directed by Henry Hathaway. Produced by Charles Brackett. Screenplay by Charles Brackett, Richard L. Breen and Walter Reisch. Cinematography by Joseph Mac Donald. Art Direction by Maurice Ransford and Lyle Wheeler. Original Music by Sol Kaplan. Song 'Kiss' by Lionel Newman and Haven Gillespie. Edited by Barbara Mclean. Key Costumer: Dorothy Jenkins.

Cinematic length: 88 minutes. Distributed by Twentieth Century Fox. Cinematic release: January 1953. DVD release 2006. Check for ratings. Rating 85%.

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Written Without Prejudice

Cast

Marilyn Monroe as Rose Loomis

Joseph Cotten as George Loomis

Jean Peters as Polly Cutler

Casey Adams as Ray Cutler

Denis O'Dea as Inspector Starkey

Richard Allan as Patrick

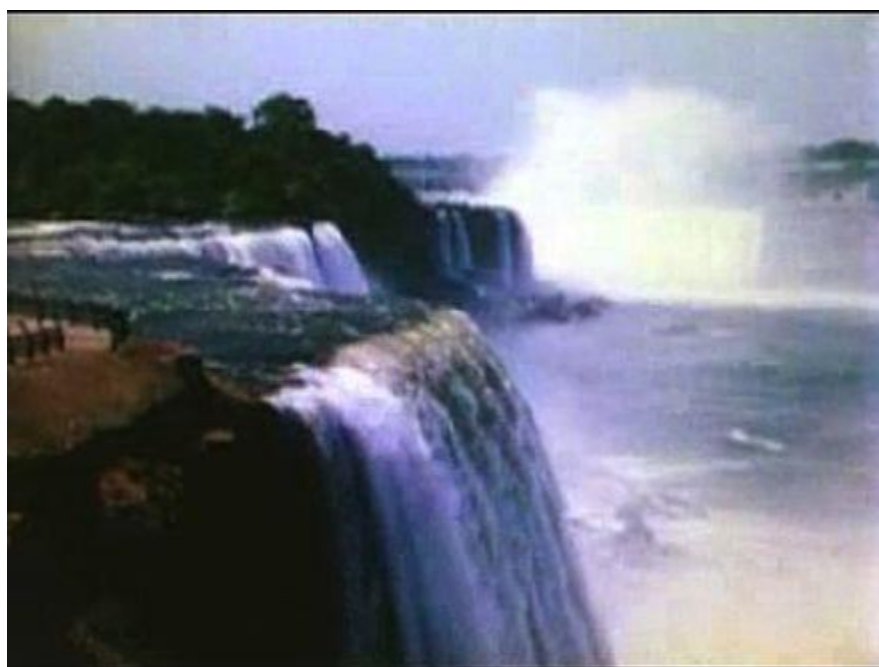
Don Wilson as Mr. Kettering

Lurene Tuttle as Mrs. Kettering

Russell Collins as Mr. Qua

Will Wright as the boatman

Harry Carey Jr. as the taxi driver



Review

The filmmakers behind the suspense drama *Niagara* clearly learned a good deal from Hitchcock and the makers of earlier film noir efforts. That is no derogatory comment, for the film gains from the similarities. The themes here of obsessive love and the detection and pursuit of a murderer was frequently used by Hitchcock. The slow, sinister pacing, the depiction of a society where something below the surface normality is not right and an emerging danger appear very much in the Hitchcock mode. Also very much in Hitchcock's style is the chase through the city of Niagara and then the carillon tower, the denouement and the slightly abrupt ending.

From film noir comes the hidden and frequently not so hidden sexual world. As usual in film noir and in many cinematic efforts before the sexual revolution of the 1960s, sex, punishment and death entwine. Death of course serves as a form of punishment for the individual and serves to cleanse sensuality from society. This happens so that society can return to normality – or the appearance of it. Even before the film's end this is made clear by the actions of normal married couple Ray and Polly Cutler, who are on a delayed honeymoon at Niagara Falls. They have delayed their honeymoon for Ray's work, but soon Ray's boss and Ray's wife will join them and the four will form a microcosm of normal society.

Audiences gave up on watching witch burnings in the town square centuries ago. Now cinema can serve the same function – and with narratives that give us variety. Bad women are now dispensed with in various ways, such fates seem one of the prime outcomes in film noir. In *Niagara*, (as in most film noir efforts) a sense of alienation, of isolation and failure permeates the life a central character, in this case George Loomis (Joseph Cotten). As in so many film noir works, money does not motivate crime. With George Loomis his sense of failure leads him into jealousy, obsession and then crime. Seemingly decent, ordinary people can rapidly become calculating criminals.

Niagara differs from most film noir by being shot not in black and white, but in Technicolor. The usual film noir settings of claustrophobic, noisy urban streets and jazz bars are replaced with the clean, open quiet Canadian town of Niagara Falls. Director Hathaway uses the wide shots of the falls and surrounding forest to advantage, the setting becomes virtually another major character. Surprisingly

most of his films are the apparent opposites, either westerns or film noir, here he combines aspects of both.

The film starts with a narration by George Loomis and then switches to the cabin where his wife Rose lies in bed covered by a sheet. She has her knees wide apart and a happy, dreamy expression on her face – which vanishes and is replaced by hostility when she hears her much older husband coming and she pretends to be asleep. The sexual politics of this marriage are established with body language before they speak and he tries to make love. Arriving in the same hotel are the newly-weds on a delayed honeymoon Ray and Polly, who so typify 1950s middle America that viewers are entitled to wonder if Hathaway is imitating Hitchcock here with a parody of happy bland normality.



Rose is actually smiling with contempt while George is intense from vexation more than desire. The white and black bars are open to multiple interpretations – to show their opposite ways, a sense of division or imprisonment

In tirades George rapidly reveals himself to be deeply neurotic, self-pitying and unable to solve his personal and marital problems. A former Korean War soldier

but not in the front lines, he still ended up in a psych ward before being discharged. At the Niagara resort he reverts into a childhood state where he actually smiles and relaxes – because he successfully built a little model vintage car.

Ray knows to stay away from him and warns Polly to avoid them both. He also becomes wary of Rose after he sees her with another man. Polly unfortunately avoid what turns out to be very good advice, as George gains some bonding with Polly. This turns out to be a mistake as vast, loudly obvious and as dangerous as Niagara Falls.

The Cutler's are drawn into the Loomis's marital woes like troops in a war zone, except they are not sure which side they are on. Rose is so much George's opposite that there can be no compatibility. She is smart and calculating; he tells his life story to strangers, oblivious to how they might feel or how he sounds. She is young, vibrant and popular: he is old, tired and wearying. The resort party shows their clash of personalities. Rose sensually enjoys the song 'Kiss' so he then charges out snarling and smashing the record with his fist, embodying repression,



Monroe as Rose, sensuality incarnate, enjoying the sweet romantic song 'Kiss'

Munroe as a product: studio shots from the film making





Jean Peters as Polly. She gives some depth to the role of a sympathetic decent woman who becomes involved with both the Loomis people.



The entire cast do very well with their roles. Marilyn Munroe showed that she could use sultry sex appeal well on screen as part of a film character's personality, not just as her star persona. Even so, Joseph Cotten virtually steals the show. One of Hollywood's most versatile actors even within either comedy or tragedy, he could embody self-sacrificing decency or calculating malevolence with equal conviction, self-confident authority figures or humble losers. From the film's start, with a few lines and by using body language and facial expressions he establishes a fully rounded, complex character. The rest of the film develops that personality, making his self-destructive and bizarre behaviour credible. Amazingly for this work he did not even get a best actor academy award nomination.



Joseph Cotten. A studio shot

Historically *Niagara* was important for two reasons. It was one of the last Hollywood films actually made in technicolor, although the term continued to be incorrectly used for colored films for decades to come. Technicolour was difficult to match with the new process of cinemascope, so eastmancolour soon replaced it in much of the world, although one Chinese studio was still filming in real technicolour into the 1980s. *Niagara* was also the film that made Marilyn Munroe a superstar. She had been making films since 1948 in roles that gradually increased in importance, but *Niagara* was the first film where she got top billing. As the film was a commercial success at a time when Hollywood films were being hard hit by television and she was clearly one of the film's strongest assets, her star power increased.



Henry Hathaway 1898-1985