

## Island in the Sun



Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill

Directed by Robert Rossen. Produced by Daryl F. Zanuck. Screenplay by Alfred Hayes. Based on *Island in the Sun*. A 1955 novel by Alec Waugh. Production design and art direction by John De Cuir. Cinematography by Freddie Young. Original Music by Malcolm Arnold. Edited by Reginald Beck. Key Costumers: Phyllis Dalton & David Folkes. Cinematic length: 119 minutes. Distributed by Twentieth Century Fox. Cinematic release: June 1957. DVD release 2006. U-tube copy available. Check for ratings. Rating 90%.

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Written Without Prejudice

## Cast

James Mason as Maxwell Fleury

Harry Belafonte as David Boyeur

Joan Fontaine as Mavis Norman

Joan Collins as Jocelyn Fleury

Dorothy Dandridge as Margot Seaton

Michael Rennie as Hilary Carson

Patricia Owens as Sylvia Fleury

John Justin as Denis Archer, the governor's aide

Stephen Boyd as Euan Templeton

Diana Wynyard as Mrs. Fleury

Basil Sydney as Julian Fleury

John Williams as Colonel Whittingham, the head of police

Ronald Squire as Governor Templeton, the governor of the island

Hartley Power as Bradshaw, the journalist

## Review

*Island in the Sun* is set in the 1950s on the fictitious island of Santa Marta in the Caribbean. The introductory voice over tells us it was a former French colony taken over by the British and is now on the way to becoming independent. A hundred thousand people live there. Of these we are told that 90% are Black, the descendants of slaves, the remainder white. Actually the film shows local Indian characters. Being ruled by Governor Templeton (Ronald Squire) who controls the island's police and administration means that the Whites have the political power. They also have most of the economic power as the island's economic base is in their plantations. The move to independence sets the island's whites into unease as the established order is waning and change will clearly come. Fading colonial politics becomes one theme in the film: the other is romance in the Caribbean. The two themes entwine, influencing each other.



*1950s studio portraits of cast members Dorothy Dandridge and Michael Rennie*

Romance applies to five couples who meet different fates. They are all in the one place early in the film at Governor Templeton's garden party. Black independence leader David Boyeur (Harry Belafonte) arrives with a shop assistant Margot Seaton (Dorothy Dandridge) and they make it clear in their banter that they do not particularly like each other and drift apart as they mix around the party. Margot quickly makes a very willing conquest of Templeton's adjutant and would-be novelist Denis Archer (John Justin). There is also the enigmatic Hilary Carson, (Michael Rennie) a former army officer, widower and unknown quantity present.

Mavis Norman (Joan Fontaine) meets Boyeur at the garden party. She is descended from one of the island's early planter aristocrats and has fond childhood memories of David, who worked as a kitchenhand on her family estate. She hopes to rekindle old feelings, but Boyeur appears to be a man more concerned with politics than romance.

Julian Fleury (Basil Sydney) and Mrs. Fleury (Diana Wynyard) are an apparently stable elderly couple. Island aristocracy, the Fleurys have been plantation owners for generations. They give the impression that they have recovered from the death of their eldest son in WW2 and will survive Santa Marta's changing ways. Their daughter Jocelyn (Joan Collins) says she feels restless, bored with endless sun and endless paradise and wants to live in England. That sounds strange for those who have never lived in the tropics for some time, but experiencing endless heat can be enervating; no contrast can be wearying and Santa Marta is an island. Then she meets the governor's handsome, personable son Euan Templeton (Stephen Boyd) who will be soon returning to England and he seems entranced with her...

Their son, Maxwell Fleury (James Mason) married to Sylvia, comes across as so self-destructive that he would be unlikely to sustain a romance within his marriage. When his wife Sylvia (Patricia Owens) returns home and he tries to hug her, she matches the weary fatalistic distaste on her face with "not now I feel hot and sticky" in wearied tones that says everything about her unhappy marriage. In a whining tirade against his parents Maxwell tells them that it was always his dead brother they preferred and admired. That was probably so, but he does not seem to consider that there could be very good reasons for that. Middle-aged, he sounds and acts like a muddled teenager. James Mason gives an extraordinarily effective portrayal of a frequently well-meaning man tormented and wracked by a sense of inferiority and ineptitude that feeds jealousy and suspicion. Wanting to be Santa Marta's new political leader, his failings make him an all too apt representative of an outdated, imploding ruling class.



*Maxwell has a way of getting into violent arguments whenever he speaks. In these depicted scenes he refuses to take his wife home, tears her dress and gropes her. In Carson's room he makes insinuations, loses his temper with the result shown below.*





*1950s Studio portraits of upcoming stars Joan Collins and Stephen Boyd.*



Ironically the couple who seem to have the best chance of success have the least stability in their lives. Their discovered relationship leaves them little status, less money and fewer work prospects and so they cannot stay on Santa Marta. With the others it is their racial relationships, wealth, rising prospects and being on racially aware Santa Marta that cause them problems.

*Island in the Sun* was fairly daring for its time in mentioning pregnancy outside marriage and unpunished illicit affairs within it. Earlier films had shown interracial marriages and romances, but they almost always showed these as failures, usually with the woman involved dying. Not this time and not with guilt or punishment. One couple are happy with each other. Unusually white aristocrat Mavis Norman initiates the romance (such as it is) with Black man David Boyeur. In her 1978 memoirs Joan Collins recalled the effect the images and sounds of a 1950s Caribbean calypso singer had on sex appeal - and this became a part of the breaking down of racial barriers.

In the television show *Death in Paradise* those barriers are mercifully long gone. This series, set on a Caribbean island called Santa Marta, where the French once ruled but the British retain a strong interest, seems loosely based on Rossen's film and/or Waugh's novel. While the film had one murder being investigated, the series deals with a murder an episode. In the film John Williams gives a masterly portrayal as Colonel Whittingham, the head of police. Calm, unassuming, and at first puzzled by the murder, he then suspects and when he knows, begins a mental duel with the killer. Slowly drawing him in, he has some sympathy with him, but does his job.

*Island in the Sun* has so much going for it. Filmed in Barbados and Grenada the beautiful settings, are so well filmed by Freddie Young, one of the great cinematographers. His camerawork and Rossen's direction make the island the real star. The ensemble cast works as a director's dream and as usual with Rossen's films, the cast are wisely used. The famous names do not crowd each other out and give us recitals. They are not used in a stagey way either. They delineate their characters and then show us some subtleties and depth in a story where the counter-play between the idea of paradise so many have (including apparently the 1957 audience) and the realities of existence clash. When Boyeur takes Mavis Norman "to see where I come from" an implicit criticism lurks as a subtext, for apparently despite having always lived on the island, she has never seen this shanty town. Or has she seen it but stays being reticent, letting Boyeur's worldview dominate? He also shows her the shanty town's fishers at work. As their boats come in they sing. As he says sometimes they sing sad songs when they catch

nothing and at other times they sing happily. We also see the shanty dwellers singing a shanty as they haul in the nets. They look happier than the Fleurys, who do not live in tiny tin shed shanties, but have a plantation so massive, and so tastefully immaculate and surrounded by such lush tropical gardens and spectacular views, that royalty would envy them. Rossen, a man of the left, was wise to include both settings as these scenes give a balanced view of unbalanced life in the Caribbean, the working class and the rich.



*Joan Fontaine*

*The setting for the Fleury's mansion was burned shortly after filming ended.*





Rossen, novelist Alec Waugh and screenplay writer Alfred Hayes all seem to be working to develop the characters and their unfolding story to do more than just create a balanced picture of life on a Caribbean island. They show us that no matter how beautiful the environment, problems will emerge where inequality, intolerance, envy and an inability to relax exist.



*Robert Rossen 1908-1966*