

# DU MAURIER



## NEOGOTHIC

Left: Joan Fontaine and Judith Anderson in Alfred Hitchcock's 1940 adaptation of *Rebecca*. Above: Ryan Silverman (Maxim) and Jill Paice (his new bride), stars of the musical.

## THEATER

# The Good Wife

*Rebecca: The Musical* and the perennial pull of de Winter's tale.

BY MICHAEL CALLAHAN

**"LAST NIGHT I DREAMT I WENT TO MANDERLEY again."** The opening line of Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* is one of the more timeless in modern literature, a metaphorical swinging open of the gates to the tale of a Cornwall estate engulfed by the looming shadow of its late mistress.

I discovered the book during a period of self-imposed intellectual betterment, my commute given over to the classics one usually pretends to have read. After a particularly dreary spell of Melville, Hugo, and Dostoyevsky, I was desperate for a dollop of gothic romance and found...Manderley.

Three years later we are having a *Rebecca* moment. A musical adaptation is set to open on Broadway; next year the novel will celebrate its 75th anniversary. And there's the omnipresence of Alfred Hitchcock's Best Picture-winning 1940 film, with Joan Fontaine achingly skittish as the primrose swept up by Laurence Olivier's brooding Maxim de Winter; a widower imprisoned in a suit of armor of regret.

The plot of *Rebecca* is thus: A naive girl on holiday in Monte Carlo meets and falls for a mysterious if abrasive lord of the manor, who whisks her back to his English country home as his new bride. There the second Mrs. de Winter—her name is never revealed—finds her-

self tormented by the specter of the first, a raven-haired bon vivant whose ghost is nursed by one of fiction's greatest villainesses, the housekeeper Mrs. Danvers, "tall and gaunt, dressed in deep black, whose prominent cheek-bones and great, hollow eyes gave her a skull's face, parchment-white, set on a skeleton's frame."

Published in 1938, the novel was dismissed by some critics as so much flordid pulp. Writing in the *Christian Science Monitor*, V.S. Pritchett predicted it would be "here today, and gone tomorrow." So much for that. Pritchett and his ilk underestimated the pull of the story's dark glamour: Du Maurier stitched together archetypal noir elements—a gloomy estate, towering cliffs, buried secrets, a shipwreck, a murder, a costume ball—with the same cool efficacy with which Mrs. Danvers serves two lumps of gaslighting with afternoon tea.

Although the book carried echoes of *Jane Eyre* (another story of a demesne haunted by a formidable first wife—though in that case a living one), *Rebecca* was foremost "simply a study in jealousy," according to its author: Du Maurier knew of what she wrote: She had battled the apparition of her own husband's former love, like Rebecca a dark beauty who died badly. (She threw herself in front of a train.) "We are all ghosts of yesterday," du Maurier mused in her 1977 memoir.

In that sentiment lies the timeless allure of *Rebecca*. In its hero-ine we see ourselves—anonymous and uneasy, continually trying to find our footing, always comparing, never quite able to suppress our yearning for immortality. "Whenever I walked into Manderley...I met Rebecca," the new Mrs. de Winter confesses. "I knew the scent she wore, I could guess her laughter and her smile. If I heard it, even among a thousand others, I should recognize her voice. Rebecca, always Rebecca. I should never be rid of Rebecca."

Thankfully, neither should we. ●