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Baby Doll: The Success of Scandal

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Baby Doll hit America's cinemas with a resounding bang in 1956, and while not the financial and critical success that *A Streetcar Named Desire* had been some six years before, the film proved without a doubt to be the most sensational of Hollywood's adaptations of Tennessee Williams's works. In fact, *Baby Doll* is quite likely the most sensational (we should probably say notorious) Hollywood film released in a decade when, for cultural reasons we will touch on, films could still arouse shock upon release and were often marketed with this affective goal in mind.

¶2 If a sensation, *Baby Doll* was hardly either a critical or financial success. There seem to have been two reasons for this. First, its dramatic material, while interesting and original, had not been worked into a form that led to popularity on the stage; thus, it was undeniably weaker than the Broadway hit sources of the three films that experienced outstanding box office sales (*A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, and *Sweet Bird of Youth*). Second, and ironically, the film's notoriety, to some degree the result of a carefully calculated marketing strategy, put off exhibitors after *Baby Doll* was denounced from the pulpit by Francis Cardinal Spellman of New York. Furthermore, the Legion of Decency combined its forces to discourage Catholics from viewing it.

¶3 Whatever the film's artistic value, however, *Baby Doll* is at the very least an important event in Williams's career. Its release and reception mark the larger American public's greatest interest in his themes and characters, however misappropriated and misrepresented by the engines of studio publicity. The furor aroused by the film, based largely on distorted views of its content and moral tone promulgated in the popular press, confirmed Williams as an amoral if not immoral purveyor of lurid Southern Gothic, whose sexual obsessions were as anti-establishmentarian as they were unashamedly erotic.

¶4 Unlike other contemporary laborers in this literary vineyard (Erskine Caldwell comes particularly to mind), Williams did not limn the South simply as the locus of an unrestrained romantic sensuality. This was a staple element in the plantation myth still popular in the 1950s and dominates even today in the pulp romance "bodice-rippers" which are set in the antebellum era. *27 Wagons Full of Cotton* (the one-act play source of the film's main plot), it is true, centers on a finely nuanced seduction and a surrender (in some sense), but the erotic encounter that dominates the play has little if anything to do with romance or even affection. Neither is the "coupling" of Vacarro and Baby Doll purely sexual, though the physical chemistry that develops between them is undeniable. Their mutual desire, if that indeed is the proper term, is also fueled by anger and a drive for revenge.

¶5 The closest literary analogue to Williams's conception here might well be the medieval *fabliau*, which eschews romantic attachments, yet deals with characters who, in the modern sense, are sex-obsessed. Chaucer's *Reeve's Tale*, for example, centers on the sexual revenge visited by two randy university students upon a cheating and self-important miller who is not much different from Archie Lee, *Baby Doll*'s dishonest cotton gin owner, who likewise suffers a well-deserved sexual comeuppance. It is true that the rich thematic mix of

Southern Gothic often generates characters who are as venal as they are passionate (such is the case, for example, in Caldwell's *God's Little Acre*). The cold-blooded selfishness and yet unmistakable allure of *Baby Doll*'s characters, however, offers a strikingly unusual twist on generic conventions. Williams's black comedy, with its intimations of spiritual awakening and deliverance, charmingly flirts with the metaphysics of desire. The grim, sub-literary naturalism of *God's Little Acre*, to say the least, lays no metaphysical claims.

¶6 This is not, however, to deny the earthiness of the plot, only to emphasize the poetic sensibility with which Williams develops it. Vacarro is drawn to Baby Doll Meighan because he has been wronged by her husband Archie Lee, who has burned down the cotton gin managed by this Sicilian outsider in order to make more business for his own gin. Archie Lee's crime, however, does not stem from greed but from lust. He must eliminate his business rival in order to earn the money he needs to make his wife Baby Doll honor her bargain to consummate their hitherto chaste union. The play's action unfolds on the day before her twentieth birthday when she has promised to give herself to Archie Lee, who is consumed with a long-delayed lust to possess the beautiful innocent. Baby Doll's agreement with her erstwhile husband calls for him to provide her with a fully furnished house, but everything it contains is carted away by the bank as the story begins.

¶7 If Archie Lee is reduced to crime and deception to satisfy his lust, lust for Vacarro, at least initially, is a means, not an end, making the competition of the two men for Baby Doll an unusual love triangle. The prime motive in Vacarro's attempted seduction of Archie Lee's wife is to obtain her testimony against her husband, so that he may be found guilty of arson, though Vacarro, it becomes clear, is also seeking a more primitive form of vengeance. Baby Doll, in turn, is the sexually innocent child bride of a man she loathes more than loves, and yet she, like the two men competing for her favor, endorses, at least in theory, a connection between financial reward and sexual favor. Innocent of his ulterior motives at first, Baby Doll discovers in the attentions of Vacarro genuine sexual feelings for the first time, but Williams does not show her "falling in love" in any conventional sense. Like Vacarro, she is angry with Archie Lee. She has wearied of his domination of her and resents his broken promises to provide her with a comfortable life (the repossession of the family furniture, leaving her in an empty house, immediately precedes the arrival of Vacarro, who plays artfully on her consequent disappointment).

¶8 The erotic connection between Baby Doll and Vacarro interestingly mirrors that between Blanche and Stanley in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, a play that also engages the conventions of the Southern Gothic. Kazan, we should recall, helped mount the stage and screen versions of Williams's most acclaimed play, so the resemblance between the two texts may in some sense be the result of his role in their shaping. All four characters, in fact, are passengers on the streetcar of desire, not romance, and not a one among them is above using sex, or the promise of sex, as the means to some other end. *Baby Doll*, of course, is a comedy, and thus in this play the drama of mutual exploitation does not culminate in violent possession but finally opens onto the possibility of a romance, for Vacarro may return to claim the woman who now wants him. Such ambiguity is absent from Williams's published version of the screenplay, which ends with Baby Doll falling into Vacarro's arms like a piece of ripe fruit. Kazan's films of *Streetcar* and *Baby Doll* thus stand in stark contrast to the screen versions of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and *Sweet Bird of Youth*, both directed by Richard Brooks. These latter two plays could be, and were, more readily accommodated to the requirements of Hollywood melodrama because the sexuality they thematize is explained, at least in large part, by notions of romantic love. As we will see, it is the unconventionality (rather than the illicitness or explicitness) of the sexual themes in *Baby Doll* that insured

the film a sensational reception. During the quite public controversy over the immorality of *Baby Doll* that unfolded in New York City (of all places!) over the film's release, Williams, his works, his reputation, were for a time front-page "news," which is not something that can often be said about playwrights in this period—except perhaps when they married Hollywood stars.

¶9 Williams scholars, however, have paid the film little attention. The standard studies of the playwright and his works treat it briefly or not at all. To take one example among many, in Philip C. Kolin's *Tennessee Williams: A Guide to Research and Performance*, an otherwise masterfully comprehensive survey, the film rates only two sentences of comment; interestingly, the relevant work of cinema historians as opposed to theater scholars is not cited therein, though the book's survey of research on Williams is otherwise impressive. In fact, *Baby Doll* has fallen into the same undeserved critical limbo to which Arthur Miller's *The Misfits* has also been unfortunately consigned. Involving the leading Hollywood directors of the period (John Huston and Elia Kazan), featuring interesting all-star casts, and with scripts by America's two leading playwrights, both films say much about the interconnection (often, as here, a productive form of symbiosis) between Hollywood and Broadway during the 1950s. They are also important, revealing cases of artistic collaboration between writer and director, surely of interest for this reason alone to any proper assessment of the careers of Williams and Miller. Critical neglect is thus regrettable.

¶10 In the case of Williams, the slighting of *Baby Doll* is even more surprising because the relationship between Kazan and Williams is an essential part of the playwright's stage achievement. It is disappointing, then, that Brenda Murphy's otherwise comprehensive and insightful examination of that collaboration includes only a short (if nevertheless interesting) discussion of *Baby Doll*, more or less strictly from the point of view of adaptation. This critical approach values the source text more than its realization in another medium. Because *27 Wagons Full of Cotton* and *The Unsatisfactory Supper* do not rate highly in the Williams canon, the adaptation approach does not justify much attention paid to the screen version. Nor, I might add, does Murphy have much to say throughout about Kazan's success in Hollywood. Because Kazan energetically pursued careers in Hollywood and on Broadway, his connection with Williams sometimes must be understood as that of a film director desperate to find appropriate material for his next project.

¶11 This is certainly the case with *Baby Doll*. Though the accounts by the principals involved do not always agree, Kazan, it seems most likely, was the chief mover in the project. He prodded Williams to stitch together two one-acters after the duo had abandoned earlier plans to produce an anthology film on the model of the two successful Somerset Maugham adaptations, *Trio* (1950) and *Quartet* (1948), and their several Hollywood imitations such as *O. Henry's Full House* (1952). The reason is not difficult to surmise. If, on the one hand, Kazan was eager to exploit a then-popular anthology form, he must, on the other, have also been interested in tapping into the wealth of shorter dramatic works Williams, now at the height of his popularity, had already written and which were awaiting profitable production, on stage, screen, or both. In regard to their earlier collaboration on the film version of *Streetcar*, the roles of playwright and director were now reversed. Desirous that his Pulitzer Prize winning Broadway drama be transformed into a successful Hollywood film, Williams had earlier importuned Kazan to repeat as director, with Charles K. Feldman, the film's producer, also playing a very active role in putting together the creative team. In the case of *Baby Doll*, Kazan intended to make a successful film from material that was not of already proven popularity but was instead still being shaped as production began:

> When I proposed this film to Tennessee Williams, he wasn't interested. I went ahead anyway, put a script together, and sent him what I'd done; he gave me an unenthusiastic 'go ahead.' . . . He said he'd work on *Baby Doll*, but what he did he did with half a heart. He'd mail me a page or two of the stationery of whatever hotel he was at, with the instruction: 'Insert somewhere.' In places these scraps helped; often they did not. (562)

Williams's interest was piqued, however, by seeing Carroll Baker perform as Baby Doll in an informal Actors Studio production of Kazan's script. The fact that Kazan arranged for the production and for Williams's attendance at the performance says much about the director's desire to see this film project to fruition.

¶12 Extracting a promise of cooperation from Williams prompted Kazan to negotiate a release agreement with Warner Brothers and produce the film himself. More of an independent production in the tradition of then popular European art cinema (of which more below), *Baby Doll* was made on a much smaller budget than the Williams blockbusters of the period directed by Richard Brooks. Williams was persuaded to come to Benoit, Mississippi for location shooting (interiors were shot in New York). According to his own recollections, Kazan hoped for more help with finishing the script than he actually received. As Kazan remembers, though Williams did some work in Benoit, he soon left, pleading the strange behavior of the townspeople toward him. Karl Malden, who played Archie Lee, offers a somewhat different view: "Tennessee was there for, oh, I think three or four weeks, working on the last twenty pages of the script" (Steen 4). In any event, the film's ambiguous ending (so similar to those of *Streetcar*, *Cat*, and other Williams texts) was contributed by the playwright. Much of the dialogue and some of the plotting belongs to Kazan, as Williams subsequently confirmed in an interview: "The movie has many things in it that I did not write" (Devlin 44). Yet Williams did not disavow *Baby Doll* entirely. The precise nature of this venture in joint authorship awaits careful examination of all relevant archival materials.

¶13 What is perhaps more remarkable, at least from the point of Williams's career, is that the filmscript, undoubtedly incorporating much of what Kazan contributed, became the basis for Williams's subsequent workings and reworkings for print and for the stage. The revised playscript would eventually be produced under the title *Tiger Tail*. In his later years, Williams continued to take great interest in the material. Further work needs to be done on this complex and unusual collaboration, involving a rare transposition from the stage to the screen and then back to the stage again.

¶14 But *Baby Doll* also deserves further examination as a cultural event, as I hope to do in the remainder of this essay. The film's production and reception have not been neglected by cinema historians, for the simple reason that the furor over *Baby Doll* marks an important juncture in Hollywood's ever-changing relationship with public taste and morality. Leonard Leff, Jerold L. Simmons, Murray Schumach, and Frank Walsh, among others, have had much to say about the furor aroused by the film. Their emphasis has been on Hollywood self-censorship and *Baby Doll*'s questionable conformity to the Production Code, enforced by the Production Code Administration from 1930 until the end of the 1960s. Though the film was approved by the PCA, it was granted a certificate only after much debate over the seduction scene, which Kazan was able to keep, more or less intact, in the final cut.

¶15 But many, including some public figures important in PCA operations, deemed that *Baby Doll* violated the spirit if not the letter of the code and was thus morally unacceptable. Frank Walsh shows that Martin Quigley, a prominent Catholic journalist who had worked hard to establish the PCA and its Code in 1930-34, was convinced that *Baby Doll*'s release might prove the final undoing of the PCA, whose moral policing of

Hollywood films had been weakened, nearly fatally, because the Code had been flouted or circumvented by others within the industry (Walsh 274-77; see also Leff and Simmons 185-232). Quigley was the prime mover behind Spellman's attack from the pulpit. The Catholic position on prior censorship, however, did not go unchallenged. The Cardinal's sermon started a cross-town pulpit war with Episcopalian Bishop James Pike, who was critical of Spellman's attempt to stifle artistic expression and impose a strict standard of conduct on Christians who, he thought, should be guided more by their individual consciences. It should be said, however, that Pike did not necessarily disagree with Spellman's second-hand assessment of *Baby Doll* as a film that had been "responsibly judged to be evil in concept." He simply did not concur that it would be certain "to exert an immoral and corrupting influence on those who see it" (qtd. in Walsh 275). In any event, the facts of the film's reception have been well discussed. I will not go further over such well-covered ground in this essay.

¶16 What can be recovered of the film's initial reception, however, raises a question that has not yet been answered in any adequate sense. What exactly was it about *Baby Doll* that was deemed so offensive? The opinion of the Legion of Decency that *Baby Doll* "dwells almost without variation . . . upon carnal suggestiveness" is accurate enough as far as it goes, but too vague to be very helpful. Certainly, many Hollywood films that were certificated without the same furor by the PCA could also fairly be characterized as "suggestive." Somewhat more helpful is the Legion's further comment that the film's theme is "an unmitigated emphasis on lust" (qtd. in Walsh 275). I shall return to this point below.

¶17 Kazan wrote in 1988 that "If you were to look at the film now, you'd see a rather amusing comedy and wonder what all the fuss was about" (Kazan 564). We would probably agree that he is right. *Baby Doll* shows without editing, comment, or warning on television today and elicits no outraged protest from any quarter. Though much has changed in regard to public morals in America since 1956, it is not simply a question of the very different perspective on once forbidden subjects and themes that the abandonment of the code and the installation of the ratings system have inevitably furnished us. The Code was not only proscriptive but prescriptive; it obliged filmmakers not to deal with certain material and also enjoined them to follow an aesthetic of moral uplift, a theory of good art with its roots firmly in the Victorian age. The adoption of the ratings system in the late 60s has turned the attention of cultural critics more toward content than form; today we categorize films on the basis of their "adult" content, not on their disregard for poetic justice and a firm distinction between right and wrong conduct. Thus, we find it easy to understand why Joseph Breen, head of the PCA, considered *Streetcar*, with its startling treatment of sexual violence, and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, with its dark hints about Brick's homosexual attachment to Skipper, as limit cases for the Code. The Code contained specific prohibitions against acts of rape and any mention of "sex perversion."

¶18 But there is no sexual violence in *Baby Doll*. In fact, there isn't even anything approaching the "excessive and lustful kissing, lustful embraces, suggestive postures and gestures, and baser element" specifically prescribed by the code (Leff and Simmons 285, which prints the Code and other relevant documents as an appendix). In 1953, *From Here to Eternity*, that year's Academy Award winner, had featured a passionate adulterous relationship and a good many scenes staged at a thinly disguised brothel. There was nothing comparable in *Baby Doll*. At most, Kazan's film leaves ambiguous whether Vaccaro, when he takes his celebrated nap, is to be construed as having transformed Baby Doll's crib into a lovers' bed. No such ambiguity is to be found in the corresponding seduction scene in *From Here to Eternity* with the "suggestive posture" of Burt Lancaster and Deborah Kerr on the beach leaving little to the imagination. The publicity campaign

featuring the embracing couple awash in Hawaii's surf elicited only the mildest protest from the Legion of Decency. Yet the poster of Baby Doll in her crib sucking her thumb that loomed above Times Square fed the outrage of the Legion of Decency and the prominent Catholics who were convinced that this film, if released without a protest, would undermine PCA's decades-long mission to keep Hollywood movies at least minimally moral. Why?

¶19 A partial answer to this question can be found in the history of the film's production. There is no doubt that Kazan was interested in making a film that would be seen as provocative or naughty. But the poster, like many another in the period, has about as much connection to the film as the covers of Mickey Spillane's paperbacks had to the novels within during the fifties. It is easy to explain the rhetoric of such advertising. Kazan and Warner Brothers were, in contrast to the *Streetcar* project, not working with a pre-sold property with a calculatedly steamy title. Preceded by *The Whip Hand* and *Mississippi Woman*, *Baby Doll* was the last in a trio of more or less suggestive titles that Kazan and Williams invented, each with a somewhat different erotic agenda. It is hard to resist the conclusion that Kazan had much to do with the marketing of the film, especially since he was the producer and is reported to have controlled the rights. Consider his successful attempt a few years later to spike interest in his adaptation of William Inge's *Splendor in the Grass* by revealing that he intended to use a full-length, rear view of a completely nude Natalie Wood. In any event, the director had proved the commercial viability of such an approach. Kazan's success with *Streetcar* had shown the Hollywood establishment that films of this kind, naughty but high cultural in the manner of the European art cinema, might do well at the box office as long as they could pass scrutiny by the PCA.

¶20 Desperate to regain its lost audience by the middle fifties, Hollywood had more or less stumbled upon two strategies to do so. The majors began producing wide-screen color epics featuring a host of stars (Cecil B. DeMille's second version of *The Ten Commandments* appeared on screens the same year as *Baby Doll*), and they contracted to release, sometimes even finance, low-budget independent productions. These were mostly black and white films that treated a social issue, had artistic pretensions, and were "adult" in the sense that they treated sex with greater openness and flexibility than had been the case since 1934. The best of all possible worlds was to combine all three appeals in one irresistible package. This is, I believe, what Kazan had in mind with the project that eventually became *Baby Doll*.

¶21 To be successful, however, such a strategy required that the code be pushed to the limit of what it allowed or that a releasing agreement be signed with theater chains that had not bound themselves to abide by PCA requirements. Otto Preminger's *The Moon is Blue*, based on the Broadway hit comedy, was finally rejected by the PCA despite the producer/director's tireless efforts at revision. Shown without a certificate in 1954, however, the film did well at the box office and was not condemned by the Legion of Decency, whose reviewer found it more humorous than naughty, even though it could hardly be labeled as other than a "bedroom comedy." Kazan likely thought *Baby Doll* would have an even easier passage to commercial success because it was passed without too much difficulty by Geoff Shurlock, who had succeeded the tougher-minded Joseph Breen at the PCA.

¶22 Expressions of distaste for the film's treatment of sex and marriage, however, soon were voiced, and not just by those who found the Times Square poster offensive. Kazan, Williams, and the film had to weather not only the protests from Spellman but a very negative review in *Time* magazine, which judged it "just possibly the dirtiest American-made motion picture that has ever been legally exhibited" (qtd. in Walsh 257). Urged on by

Spellman's call to arms, the Legion of Decency mounted a strong campaign of protest that undoubtedly ruined the film's release and prevented it from having the strong showing at the box office that was initially indicated by good ticket sales and reviews.

¶23 To understand the force and extent of this negative reaction, it is useful to consider the Production Code in some detail. As I have hinted, it was a complex document, containing not just prohibitions against certain kinds of material, but also advocating filmmakers' unambiguous support of conventional social values, among them the sanctity of marriage and a romantic view of sexual desire, which could be presented as positive only if it supported legal heterosexual coupling. On the one hand, the Code governed Hollywood practice and thus forged an implicit contract between producers and consumers about the nature of offered representations. On the other hand, it gave voice to views widely held in middlebrow America about the nature and purpose of art, including the art of the film. These two aspects of the Code needed to connect meaningfully if the PCA were to continue to function as an arbiter of institutional morality and, correspondingly, aesthetics. If the Code no longer expressed a national consensus, it could no longer usefully function as a set of protocols for filmmakers.

¶24 In the 1950s, the moral and aesthetic values at the heart of the Code began to be abandoned by the very public whose indignity at an increasingly permissive cinema some two decades before had prompted its promulgation. This development led eventually to its abandonment and the adoption of the ratings system in the later 1960s, a move that enabled Hollywood to make with relative impunity films that were morally untraditional, sexually permissive, and filled with explicit violence and language. This wider cultural development can be linked to two dialectically opposed elements in Williams's works: melodrama and modernism. *Streetcar*, *Cat*, and *Sweet Bird* are plays that, for reasons I have discussed in this journal, could be and were melodramatized, in the sense that, transferred to the screen, they were brought more in line with standard Hollywood themes as the Code outlined. These were melodramatic in the sense that a clear moral line, enforced by poetic justice, was to be drawn: in an approved film, "the audience feels sure that evil is wrong and good is right" (Leff and Simmons 290).

¶25 Interestingly, *Baby Doll* could well have been melodramatized in such fashion, with Archie Lee transformed into a less ambiguously evil and oppressive husband from whom Baby Doll decisively breaks with the help of a more obviously virtuous Vaccaro. The adultery, and the lust that motivates it, would then be provided with what the PCA promoted as "compensating moral value." The film would thus distinguish clearly between good and bad characters, regardless of what morally ambiguous acts the ostensibly good characters have been forced to commit. In other words, the adultery between Baby Doll and Vacarro would be "redeemed" by their eventual marriage. The sense that a poor innocent had been rescued from her lascivious and conscienceless oppressor would be stronger than their ostensibly illicit behavior. This is precisely the handling that Richard Brooks gives the relationship between Chance and Heavenly in the screen version of *Sweet Bird of Youth*; Chance is redeemed fairly easily because it is right that he rescue Heavenly from the unmitigated evil and manipulation of her father. The Code enjoined filmmakers "to not throw sympathy against marriage as an institution" (Leff and Simmons 291), and certainly Brooks did not, but rather supported it (for by rescuing Heavenly, Chance enables her to marry for love, instead of being forced into a loveless match with George Scudder). Each of his two immensely popular Williams films ends with that hallmark Hollywood ending: the constitution of the romantic, heterosexual couple.

¶26

As Brenda Murphy has detailed, Kazan was extremely sensitive to issues of audience sympathy, yet another way of drawing a line between "good" and "bad" characters, though in his stage work with Williams he never advocated so simplistic a position as poetic justice to mobilize audience involvement. It was Kazan who advocated the revision of *Cat*'s final act to make Maggie and Brick more sympathetic; this optimistic view of the characters' ability to triumph over their situation was more thoroughly orchestrated by Brooks in the film version. Kazan's other films, from the family drama of *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* to the social critique of *A Face in the Crowd* and *On the Waterfront*, are often unabashedly melodramatic, conforming in spirit and letter to the Code.

¶27 Interestingly, however, he approached the mounting of *Baby Doll* in a modernist fashion. Its characters are more complex and interesting than sympathetic. The plot is loosely structured; the tight dramaturgy standard in Hollywood is nowhere in evidence. Boris Kaufman's washed out black and white photography is deglamorizing and thus arty, the perfect correlative to a drama that deals with human essentials rather than a *tranche de vie*. A ruined house is the main playspace, as in Orson Welles's *The Trial*, which uses a wrecked and abandoned Paris train station to provide a similar visual correlative to its existential themes. Affective music, one of Hollywood's most pervasive conventions, is minimally deployed (here the film contrasts starkly with the screen version of *Streetcar*, which often uses the music track to cue the spectator's reactions). Similarly, the archly naturalist acting of the cast, which, as the principals recall, involved a good deal of improvisation, notably lacks the emotional dynamics usually associated with Actors Studio performance. Sound recording of dialogue is at times less than clear, and this, like the use of nonprofessional actors in speaking parts, is strongly reminiscent of Italian Neorealism.

¶28 *Baby Doll*, in brief, is more of an art film than a standard Hollywood entertainment. Kazan's decision to accord Williams's material this kind of treatment is perhaps not so surprising when we recall that *Baby Doll* was released at the height of the popularity of art cinema in America. Emotionally cold, the film thematizes lust, not love, pokes fun at marriage, and plays the venality of its grasping, manipulative characters for laughs even as it hints that their predicament reflects some underlying truths of *la condition humaine*. *Baby Doll*'s black comedy, with its darker view of human nature, eschews the festive antics of screwball comedy, Hollywood's conventionally irreverent presentation of the battle between the sexes. Screwball comedy was essayed with no little success by Williams himself in his *Period of Adjustment*, which was easily transferred to the screen.

¶29 If *Baby Doll*, in the words of *Time*'s reviewer, is the "dirtiest movie" that had yet been made in America, it was not because it featured prohibited themes (no "sex perversion" here), offered the spectacle of the naked female body (Carroll Baker is always more or less fully clothed), or attacked official institutions such as the police, the courts, or the federal government (the film's most provocative political comments is the prominent role given the African-American neighbors of Archie Lee and Baby Doll). As far as sex is concerned, the film is more about what does not happen: neither Archie Lee nor Vacarro gets Baby Doll into bed. There is no serious violence and, despite the nasty implications of the film's title and advertising poster, no exploitation of youthful innocents.

¶30 And yet it is clear that *Baby Doll* violated the general principles of the Code in three ways. First, it does create sympathy for "the side of crime, wrongdoing, [and] sin." Second, "correct standards of life" in the sense of consensus moral values are not upheld. And finally, law, natural and human are "ridiculed" and "sympathy [is] created for its violation" (Leff and Simmons 284). The formulae of the Code made no room for the

antiestablishmentarianism of black comedy, not a common genre on the American stage or screen. It is the unexpectedly amoral laughter that *Baby Doll* provokes, not the film's admittedly steamy, if chaste, representation of seduction, that led both to its being certificated (for there was no objectionable material as such that could be excised) and yet condemned (for the story vigorously opposed the conventional moralism of the Code's theory of art). *Baby Doll*, to put it simply, takes sex too seriously and yet not seriously enough. In this, Kazan's film is certainly faithful to Williams's original, ambiguous vision of the characters and the plight in which they embroil themselves.

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