

Border romance

Charles Boyer is a European national biding his time in Mexico as he tries to figure out how to get into the United States (there is a discussion of fences that remains pointedly relevant) and Olivia de Havilland is an unmarried American schoolteacher who falls for his charms in the 1941 **Hold Back the Dawn**, an Arrow Academy Blu-ray release (UPC#760137254386, \$40). Mitchell Leisen directed the Paramount production, which was written by Billy Wilder and Charles Brackett. Paulette Goddard portrays another European, who has a history with Boyer's character and is not quite ready to let go. Running 116 minutes, the film is a surprisingly effective romance thanks to the performances of the two female leads, who convey not only the depth of their affections for Boyer's character, but the different natures of their own vulnerabilities.

The full screen black-and-white picture is in passable condition. Wear is minimal and contrasts are reasonably sharp. The monophonic sound is fine and there are optional English subtitles. Along with a nice montage of promotional memorabilia, there is an excellent 22-minute analysis of the film and Leisen's largely underappreciated career—going over his beginnings as a costume designer and how he managed to parlay that into directing—as well as exploring the film's nuances and discussing its impact.

The DVD-Laser Disc Newsletter

In a terrific audio-only 87-minute interview from an onstage tribute in 1971, de Havilland talks about how she got started in her career, what it was like working with Errol Flynn, Bette Davis and others, why she managed to break not only her own contract but every contract in Hollywood with a successful court case, the Oscars ("It is an incentive to do good work. It really is. It's that one standard which is so concrete and tangible somehow, it's something we all need very much, and I think it is a very wholesome thing. I do. It's a symbol of excellence, and we all need that in all our fields.") and many other fascinating topics. She is warm and articulate throughout, even when the interviewer drops a reference, oh so briefly, about her sister, Joan Fontaine.

Although he fails to mention the slam-dunk trivia that de Havilland lost her Oscar nomination for **Hold Back the Dawn** to Fontaine in *Suspicion*, film historian Adrian Martin provides a good commentary track. Even though his focus is primarily on guiding the viewer through the story, he does it in such a way that it is always enlightening, drawing on the backgrounds of the artists to explain different moments, using plot turns to explain more general screenwriting strategies, and that sort of thing. "The deeper and more extensive purpose of this part of the film is that we are totally with [Boyer's character]. I mean, we're following the story now, of course, through his narrating frame, his narrational frame of his voiceover, and more than that, it's not simply that we're getting his version of the story or his telling of the story, we also in a sense are entering into his mindset, his style of living, his goals, his particular desires, his particular plans. We're sharing a moment of disappointment with him when that woman turned out to be not a very good victim for his plot, and so we're totally, in that sense, with him. Whether or not we totally like him or not is a whole other question. The film really does play a remarkable game with how we can admire this guy but also take our distance from him as a character, and that has a lot to do with the performance and star image of Charles Boyer."

Boyer and Goddard both reprise their roles in a very good 60-minute *Lux Radio Theatre* adaptation from 1941, with Susan Hayward filling in quite adeptly for de Havilland (and Cecil B. De Mille, the *Lux* host, wittily taking the place of Leisen in the film's intriguing prolog). It captures the film's emotional conflicts and heartstrings effectively, while still conveying a decent sense of the movie's setting and its shifts between humor, drama and romance. There are also commercials for *Lux*, admonishing women, in what would be a marketer's nightmare today, to wash their faces with 'Lux Toilet Soap.'