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DIRECTED BY JOSEPH H. LEWIS

WRITTEN BY MURIEL ROY BOLTON

BASED ON THE NOVEL BY ANTHONY GILBERT

PRODUCED BY WALLACE MACDONALD

CINEMATOGRAPHY BY BURNETT GUFFEY





MY NAME IS JULIA ROSS . . . OR IS IT?

by Adrian Martin

The phenomenal world captured on screen is not as important as people like André Bazin once thought. It does not lend quality or originality either to a specific film, or to cinema in general. Because the phenomenal has to do with the familiar and the original, rather than with renewal and change.

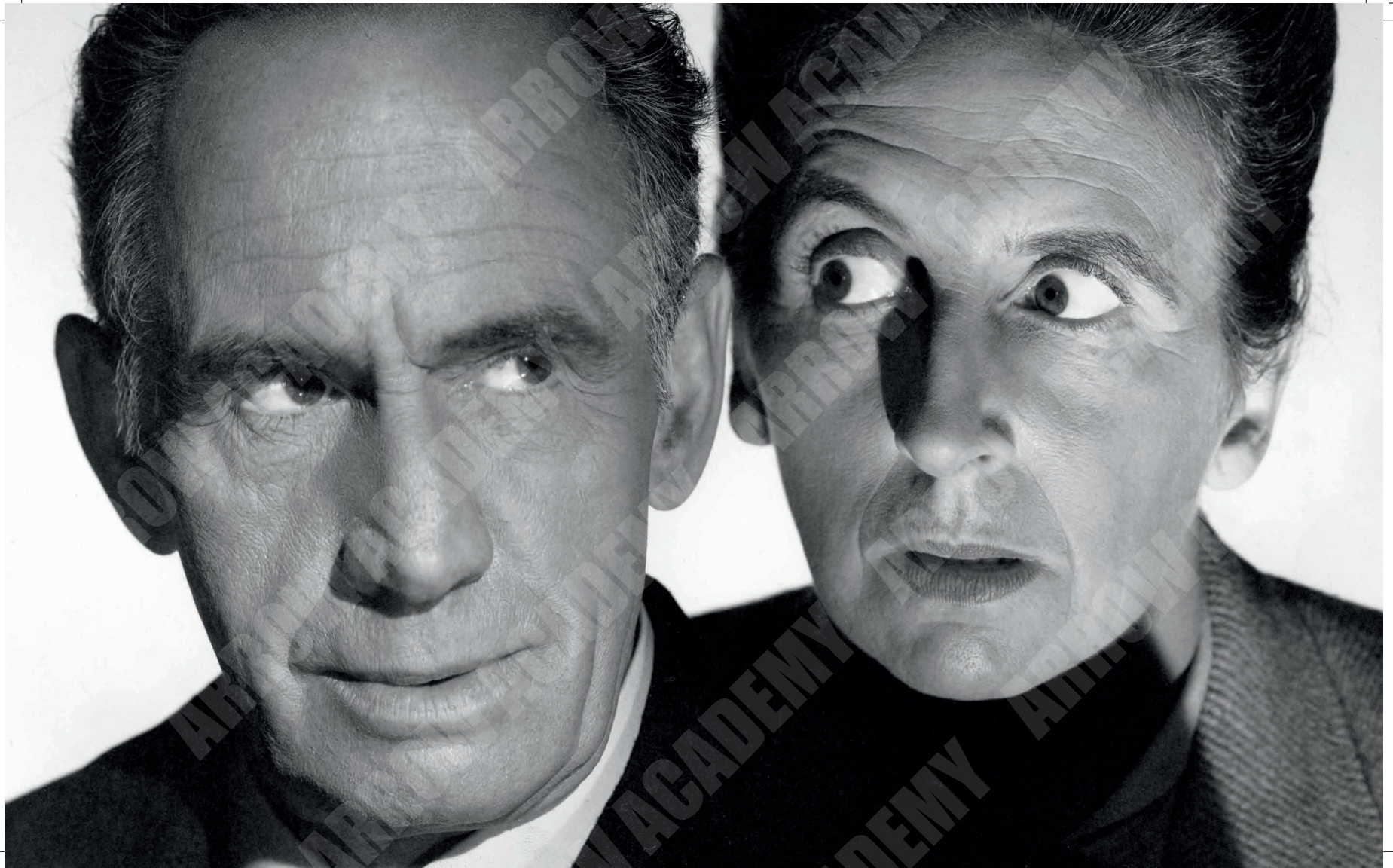
— *Alain Masson, 1988*

What a body doesn't know don't hurt 'em, I always say.

— *My Name Is Julia Ross*

An establishing shot of old London town, but with an added detail that soon becomes apparent once the credits have ended: in the same shot, it starts to rain. This is an odd, pleasing twist – and a sign of many more twists, small and large, to come. From the rain, the film takes us to another water-drenched image: a striking composition, with a prominently foregrounded object, framing a woman walking toward a boarding house. The depth, the angle, the play of textures: everything adds an extra touch of interest to this simple, expository moment. This woman then climbs the front stairs, rings the bell, enters, walks down the corridor . . . but it will be over two minutes before we see her face (it's Nina Foch as Julia) from front on. Every detail – and every way the film has of *showing* that detail – hides an intrigue, a secret, in *My Name Is Julia Ross* (1945).

It is a lesson in pure cinema – and the principal master of this lesson is the film's director, Joseph H. Lewis (1907-2000). In the essay by Alain Masson that I have cited above, it is suggested that some lovers of film place far too much faith in the "imprint of phenomenal reality" caught by the movie camera – for why would we really want to see, doubled on a screen, the everyday world that is already known and familiar to us in all its banal details? Cinema, rather, is the place where mundane places, people and situations are "led astray" from the realm of mere appearance, tricked into revealing another side, another face. And this is precisely what makes a film narrative clever, surprising, exciting: it engineers ways to renew or refresh the overly recognisable elements of reality – it produces originality out of everything that is given, generic, unoriginal.



Working largely in the heavily conventionalised and codified realm of the B-movie, Joseph Lewis was particularly keenly fixed on this awesome responsibility to twist the unoriginal into the original. And in his greatest films, including *Gun Crazy* (1950), *The Big Combo* (1955) and this one, he succeeded beyond all our wildest dreams.

My Name Is Julia Ross covers so much ground in a brisk 65 minutes, it becomes a dizzying experience. (The same cannot be said, alas, for the creaky 1987 remake, running all of 100 minutes, handled by Arthur Penn: *Dead of Winter*.) Within the first two sequences – scarcely ten minutes in screen time – Lewis and screenwriter Muriel Roy Bolton (working from Anthony Gilbert's 1941 novel *The Woman in Red*) complicate the central point-of-view structure of the plot twice over, in two different directions. The embittered cleaning lady, Bertha (Joy Harington), whom Julia encounters upon entering the boarding house, carries a clear symbolic function: she stands for the working class, for all those ordinary folk who are pragmatic, cynical – and understandably resentful of those with elevated social opportunities, such as Julia herself. But Bertha also hijacks the plot for a moment: the second that Julia is out of the frame, she tears up the letter she left behind, and pockets her overdue rent money – planting a spot of complication for our heroine up ahead.

This is only a small kink, however, in comparison with the over-arching knowledge we have already been tipped to, again beyond Julia's perception, in the inaugural interview scene at the fake employment agency: everything about this new job is a set-up (anticipating the elaborate mechanisms of trickery and conspiracy in later films by Alfred Hitchcock and Brian De Palma), a trap into which Julia is going to fall.

Here, what's "given" is duly taken – including Julia Ross herself. When the film does a geographical flip at the 16 minute mark, Julia finds herself not only in a new bed in a new location (Cornwall), but also treated as a new person with a new identity: Marion Hughes, wife of the nervy and clearly pathologically troubled Ralph (George Macready), whose little drawer of assorted knives is a real worry for we spectators. The rain of London has transmuted into a raging sea just beyond the ornate window that is inside a mansion located high atop a cliff.

And the film's genre has itself, in this drugged ellipse, now also shifted: from a mystery-thriller that had just kicked off an investigation (a private one mounted by Dennis [Roland Varno] into Julia's sudden disappearance), we dive into the full, paranoid nightmare of the Female Gothic – that specific "woman's melodrama" inflection of the broader, looser family of movies known today as film noir.

The shadows darken into expressionistic patterns across Julia's face; expensive, antique objects gleam and sparkle with menace; pleasant teacups that may contain hideous poisons loom large in the frame; and the touch of a supposedly loving husband becomes an imprisoning, abusing grip. Understandably, Julia – not yet getting much further than her bed 25 minutes into the film – starts hallucinating strange presences in the dark – or maybe someone, a stealthy prowler, is really getting into her room without her noticing. *My Name Is Julia Ross* here raids elements from contemporaneous Female Gothic success such as Hitchcock's *Rebecca* (1940) or *Suspicion* (1941), as well as anticipating later mutations and hybridisations of the form, such as the tale of Satanic horror spun by Roman Polanski's *Rosemary's Baby* (1968).

Julia has to turn into an investigator, too – the curious Pandora figure trying to figure out the lineaments and determinations of her own cage-like box. Are there any hidden panels or secret doors in her boudoir? It's that kind of world, after all: even that sea, we will later hear, harbours "many secrets". As in Hitchcock's variations on the Female Gothic, all-pervasive threat comes not only from the male representatives of patriarchy, but also from the even more fearsome matriarch seemingly pulling all the strings. "Why doesn't someone believe me for once, instead of listening to her all the time?" pleads Julia to a gaggle of uncomprehending villagers who come politely calling at the Hughes household.

So Julia appeals to the maid, Alice (Queenie Leonard), for help – Alice being (we hope) the more kindly variation on the service-class earlier incarnated by the treacherous Bertha. The screenwriting manuals of today sometimes preach the need for a strong "midway point" more or less exactly halfway through a movie: Joseph H. Lewis didn't need to read any manual to arrive, by his own keen wits and solid intuitions, at a superb mid-film crunch-point: Julia at the closed gate to this mansion, scribbling and tossing out a note that cries for help, so near and yet so far from freedom...

In some Female Gothic stories, women fall prey to the comforting and comfortable illusion that has been custom-built for them, when they should have paid heed to that accursed fate once evoked so well by philosopher Gilles Deleuze: "Beware of the other person's dream, because if you're caught in that other person's dream, you're screwed." But can we entirely blame them? Sometimes, this new life can seem better than the old, banished one... so why not just go with the flow? There is, usually, one very good reason to resist it: beyond the "best alibi" scenario of fake marriage and fake family, there is often the spectre of all-too-real murder lurking as the next, as yet unannounced step in the overall Gothic plot.



Julia, for her part, takes another route. She tries to take back possession of the narrative that was stolen away from her in those opening sequences of the film. She begins to feign her acceptance of the identity thrust upon her, acquiescing in a belief in this state of “sickness” that everybody around her keeps invoking and attributing to her ad nauseam. In a superb pas de deux of bodies staged before a typical backdrop of the Female Gothic Noir – a projected arrangement of sea, sky and rocks – Lewis inverts the usual *Wuthering Heights* or *Jane Eyre* expectation of a possible romantic clinch, as Julia patiently needles and probes her increasingly twitchy “husband”. When one turns away from the camera, the other turns toward it: Lewis can do a lot with a few, small moves of mise en scène.

But when Ralph, in this conversation, turns the screw and gains the upper hand – hinting heavily at the tragic, water-logged fate of Julia’s predecessor – Lewis alters his shot-plan to frame Julia’s face dwarfed by Ralph’s shoulder and silhouette in blurred profile, her speaking voice pictorially erased. “Why not try to remember more pleasant things?”, he darkly advises her. “Like our honeymoon.” Only then does the familiar movie clinch occur: but it’s a kiss that bites into Julia’s lip rather than seducing her, and she flees, in vain.

The cinematic sign that Julia is getting her hands back on the controlling reins of this story is the repeated use that Lewis makes – modest, but telling and effective – of short track-ins to Foch watching, thinking, sizing up, plotting. Who needs a mile of tracking rail when Lewis and his great cinematographer Burnett Guffey (*Bonnie and Clyde*, 1968) are calling the shots and utilising every inch of available space and décor for expressive effect?

Nonetheless, Julia still has several rude shocks and setbacks to endure. A superbly compressed moment within the brief space of a single shot – Ralph, at the bottom of a flight of stairs, exposing his awareness of Julia’s escape scheme, to which she reacts with a short, sharp scream – forecasts the painful humiliations that the domestically-imprisoned heroine of Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s *Martha* (1974) will suffer almost three decades later. And meanwhile, signs of Ralph’s horrid lust keep getting more violent in nature...

So far in this piece, I have been following *My Name Is Julia Ross* more or less as it unfolds on the screen: it’s the type of film that rewards such close, moment-to-moment perusal. But now I will hold off on the final 20 minute rondo of plot revelations, for the sake of any lucky person yet to experience them.

Let’s return, rather, to the sinister charm of the film’s overall milieu – Britain as cleverly imagined and conjured by Hollywood on a small budget, with the usual national stereotypes turned to their best advantage (such as the dapper office landlord who not only lectures Dennis on what “a body doesn’t know”, but also advises him that “night’s for play” –





an ironic line, considering that, the night before, a woman has just been drugged and kidnapped!) And let's ponder the further double-faces that this typically "transvestite" production shelters: like the actors Foch and Varno, both Dutch by birth; or the source-author "Anthony Gilbert" who was really a woman-working-in-a-man's-genre, Lucy Beatrice Malleson (1899-1973). Nobody is who they seem to be in *My Name Is Julia Ross!*

I have suggested that Joseph Lewis' art and skill as a film director lies in leading appearances astray, and always providing a twist on unfolding events. This ingenious method finds its correlative in a recurrent detail of dialogue phrasing – a pattern of casting ambivalence and doubt upon even the simplest utterance. Certain things get said twice: either turned in a different direction in their asserted meaning, or magnified in their essential mystery. "Thanks for nothing ... thanks for something", spits Bertha to herself as she pockets Julia's rent money in the opening minutes of the film. Also early on, Dennis and Julia dance around the subject of their real or potential relationship: "Well, I'm not your young man", comments Dennis. "Or am I?" Julia replies, after a pregnant pause: "I don't know ... are you?"

In the cinema of Joseph H. Lewis, people only get to the bottom of appearances by completely plunging into them – body, mind and soul.

Adrian Martin is a film and arts critic based in Vilassar de Mar (Spain). He is the author of eight books on cinema, including Mysteries of Cinema (Amsterdam University Press, 2018). His ongoing archive website of film reviews, covering 40 years of writing, is at <http://www.filmcritic.com.au>.





ABOUT THE TRANSFER

My Name Is Julia Ross is presented in its original aspect ratio of 1.37:1 with mono audio. The film was transferred in High Definition and supplied to Arrow Films by Sony Pictures Home Entertainment.

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and booklet produced by: **Francesco Simeoni**
Associate Producers: **Liane Cunje & James Flower**

Executive Producer: **Kevin Lambert**

Technical Producer: **James White**

QC: **Nora Mehenni**

Blu-ray authoring: **Visual Data Media Services**

Subtitling: **The Engine House Media Services**

Artist: **Scott Saslow**

Booklet artist: **Tonci Zonjic**

Design: **Obviously Creative**

SPECIAL THANKS

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