



VS.



Brian Light

William O'Farrell's 1942 novel *Repeat Performance* is a tale of competing ambitions, adultery, murder, and a mind-bending time warp that predates sci-fi writer Philip K. Dick by a decade. Centered in New York's theater district, and populated with the requisite playwrights, producers, actors, and unavoidable hangers-on, its strongest supporting player is New York itself. Greenwich Village restaurants and bars serve as a congregational weigh station for the principle players, and the Manhattan streetscape serves as a road map for Barney Page's circumspect odyssey. Right from the get-go, it's clear that Barney has hit rock-bottom as he

slowly emerges from an alcoholic stupor to find he's in a shabby, two-bits-a-night dive.

There was the smell of disinfectant in the room and the cot on which I was lying had no sheet. I didn't have to open my eyes to know that I was back in the HIGHLAND HOTEL, REAL BEDS FOR TWENTY-FIVE CENTS. I knew the place well; I'd been hitting it on and off for four months now, on my good nights. The nights when I had a quarter.

When theatrical producer and long-time friend John Friday shows up at the hotel, he collects Barney and attempts to jump-start his friend's sotted memory. Barney slowly recalls the sordid details of his descent. In the all-

too-recent past, he was a critically acclaimed Broadway actor with a promising future and an invitation to Hollywood. Through the fog and fumes of what's become his daily sustenance—"two-bit shakeup, the stuff they sold in a delicatessen on Twenty-Fourth Street"—he comes to the realization that a lot has happened in the past year...all of it bad. Sheila, his binge-drinking wife, committed suicide; his friend and close confidant William and Mary—a cross-dressing, mildly insane poet—was committed to an asylum, and his co-star, Fern Costello, who he was torching for, was strangled to death... by his hands.

Repeat Performance was acquired by Eagle-Lion Films, which had been founded in September 1946 by British film producer J. Arthur Rank specifically to distribute British films to the American market. Most were



Dressed to kill...Sheila Page (Joan Leslie) dispatches her husband Barney

commercially unsuccessful, with the exception of the ballet-noir masterpiece *The Red Shoes*. In 1947, Eagle-Lion acquired Robert R. Young's Producers Releasing Corporation to make American Bs to accompany the British movies on double bills. It quickly ascended to the top tier of Hollywood's Poverty Row. Bryan Foy, formerly head of the B-movie unit at Warner Bros., was made head of production, and he recruited an A team from the B trenches, with the likes of independent producers Aubrey Schenck, Walter Wanger, and Edward Small, and directors such as Anthony Mann and Alfred Werker.

Initially a package deal, with Franchot Tone headlining and *Gilda* screenwriter Marion Parsonnet to script and produce, *Repeat Performance* went through the usual casting carousel. Constance Dowling was first up for the role of Sheila Page, but following a small part in *The Well Groomed Bride* (1946), and a turn as Dan Durys's murdered wife in *Black Angel* (1946), she became disillusioned

and, after two more modest films on loan-out to Columbia, she moved to Italy. In July 1946, *Variety* reported that Sylvia Sidney had inked a deal with Eagle-Lion for the role, and had come to the studio to do tests and signed

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off on Parsonnet's script. Composer George Antheil had also signed a three-picture deal, and was set to score. The following month, *Variety* reported that Jules Dassin would direct. Even O'Farrell garnered some press as Hollywood's champion transient: "In the last six weeks he has lived in a trailer, three hotels, the office of a polo stable, and is now headed for Lake Arrowhead, where he has a line on a cabin cruiser." In October, Bryan Foy bought out Parsonnet's interest—which eliminated Tone's involvement as well—and, in December, he assigned Aubrey Schenck to produce and replaced Dassin with Alfred Werker.

Only a few months before, Joan Leslie had served notice on Warner Bros. to abrogate her contract, which she'd signed in 1942 when she was seventeen. As a temporary free agent, she signed a contract with Seymour Nebenzal's Nero-Film AG to star opposite Robert Cummings in *The Chase*. But Warner Bros. issued a studio injunction preventing her from going forward with *The Chase* and



Barney's (Louis Hayward) unchecked boozing is becoming a fly in the brandy for all concerned (Joan Leslie, Tom Conway, Richard Basehart)

she was replaced by French actress Michèle Morgan. In 1946, Leslie was released from her contract in a Superior Court decision and signed a two-picture deal with Eagle-Lion, replacing Sylvia Sidney in *Repeat Performance*. Walter Bullock was brought in to re-write the screenplay, recalibrating the focus from Barney to Sheila, making *her* the Broadway star with the bloody hands.

In December, Louis Hayward stepped into the role of Barney Page, having signed a two-picture deal with Eagle-Lion. After knocking around Broadway for six years, Richard Basehart's breakthrough came with 1945's play *The Hasty Heart*. His performance as a dying Scottish soldier scored the New York Drama Critic's Award for most promising newcomer. Hollywood took notice, WB giving him a contract worth \$15,000 a week. He was cast in a supporting role in the Errol Flynn/Barbara Stanwyck thriller *Cry Wolf*, which languished on the shelf awaiting release until August 1947. After some haggling, Basehart was released from his WB contract and signed a two-picture deal (the first being *Repeat Performance*) with Eagle-Lion, with a proviso that he could still do Broadway plays.

REPEAT PERFORMANCE opens with a pan of the New York skyline at night and a voiceover (by John Ireland) setting the stage for a tale of a woman who gets to relive one year of her life. It's clear from the start

that the plot has been rejiggered—not only the characters and their roles, but also the dramatic device that bookends the story. Just before midnight on New Year's Eve, Sheila—smoking revolver in hand—has just shot and killed her husband Barney.

In the book, however, Barney is instructed to take the subway to John Friday's apartment at 11:00 pm sharp. While dining with William and Mary at their favorite Greenwich Village eatery, he spies two plain-clothes detectives eyeballing him. He makes a break for it, his sidekick in tow, the detectives in hot pursuit. They descend into the subway to catch the 42nd Street shuttle. As the police close in, William and Mary throws his body in front of them as they draw their guns and fire. Barney figures it's the end of the line—but there's one final stop: that exact moment, one year earlier.

O'Farrell wisely chose to set this scene on the one subway line in New York with only two stops connecting the west side (Times Square) with the east side (Grand Central).

He was keenly aware of how essential the "iron horse" is to the life-flow of New York:

The subway is Transportation, and Transportation is New York's religion...It's death and burial, dark burial with a raucous, hilarious wake. And it's Life, an eager plunging into the fertile earth, a noisy rutting and a triumphant orgasm of men and women, human beings, at the other end. The subway is all that and more; it's transition and rebirth as well. Take a broker, sleepy-eyed, washed-out, impotent. He's sucked into its morning underground flow at Seventy-Second. In Wall Street he pops up a back-slapping Napoleon of finance. At five in the afternoon a harried little clerk sneaks out of his office in the wholesale clothing district. Half an hour later he's at home in the Bronx beating his wife. He's master in his household and strutting cock in his own chicken run. What did it? The subway. A man goes in at one end, and when he comes out the other, something's happened to him; he's changed.



After the fall...Barney (Louis Hayward) lamps Sheila (Joan Leslie) with a look that could kill



Sheila (Joan Leslie) receives sound counsel from William Williams (Richard Basehart) in an insane asylum

O'Farrell astutely sets up the subway as a *transformative* mode of travel, and it serves as a *deus ex machina* for Barney Page. The movie provides no such creative device for Sheila's time travel. Her transformation takes place enroute to the apartment of John Friday (Tom Conway) as she and William Williams (Basehart, renamed sans the cross-dressing Mary, but still crazy) are ascending the stairway; William, right behind her, suddenly disappears. In proto-*Twilight Zone* style, the narrator creeps back in to intone that Sheila's time travel has begun...she just doesn't know it yet.

From this point forward, in both book and film, Barney/Sheila struggle to make sense of the inexplicable development. They embrace this chance at a "do-over" and both vow to alter the course of events in the previous year. Already knowing its outcome, they reason, should enable them to derail the deadly *denouement*. In book and film, Barney/Sheila take different routes to avoid the tripwires connected to the year's cast of characters. In the book, Barney (having just completed a successful run in the smash Broadway play *Say Goodbye*) turns down a movie offer in Hollywood because that's where he became entangled with Fern Costello. On the screen, Fern becomes Paula Costello (a patrician Virginia Field) and Sheila *takes* Barney to

Hollywood to prevent them from meeting. These scenes—shot at the exclusive Deauville Beach Club in Santa Monica—reveal Barney's (and possibly Bullock's) disdain for the "Golden State." Reflecting upon the foul scent of orange blossoms, he declares the place a "sun-kissed purgatory."

Despite all valiant efforts, the stars still align. Book Barney finds himself co-starring with Fern Costello in *Halfway House*, the Broadway debut of playwright Paul Gort (a character eliminated from the film), soon to become the object of Sheila's affections. On-

screen, Barney and Paula Costello become an item during the production of her play *Say Goodbye*, in which Sheila—believing she'd side-stepped this minefield—has reluctantly agreed to star.

In the book, Sheila hits the bottle hard, determined to drink herself into oblivion. At a bohemian bash in Fern's apartment, Barney locks Sheila in the bedroom to keep her boozing in check. Out of his watchful eye, she consumes a bottle of cologne that contains wood alcohol, rendering her stone blind as a result. In the film, the pivotal party takes place on Thanksgiving in the Broadway Theater where the gossiping harpy, Mrs. Shaw (a pre-*Gilligan's Island* Natalie Schafer) shines a spotlight in the balcony revealing Barney and Paula in a cognac-infused clinch. Startled by the light, Barney defiantly lurches forward, stumbles over the railing, and crashes to the stage below. He suffers brain damage and is partially paralyzed. He's confined to a wheelchair ... but not for long. Barney/Sheila withdraw deep inside themselves and corrosively brood about their maladies.

Time's unyielding force grinds on. All the fateful events of the past year slowly fall into place once again. William and Mary/William Williams is committed to a sanitarium. In the book, Sheila is dealt a final blow when she's rejected by Paul Gort, propelling her

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Sixty newspaper, radio, and magazine people, including twenty from New York, were flown to Zanesville, Ohio by charter airplane to attend the premiere and a dinner in Basehart's honor

to reenact her swan song with an overdose of sleeping pills. Barney looks on helplessly, too sedated by the very same sleeping pills to intervene. It rapidly goes downhill for him; he becomes a somnambulist in the final chapter, resigned to the inevitable climax, applying a clinical caress to Fern Costello's throat, choking the life out of her. Fern even lovingly accepts his mortal embrace, for it has been foretold, and hence unavoidable.

As it did with the central plotline, the movie streamlines the climax, eliminating the murder of Fern Costello and circling back to the New Year's Eve showdown between Sheila and Barney that opens the film. Louis Hayward's

form of William Williams—who had escaped from the mental institution—to serve as the instrument of inescapable Fate. The novel, however, tightens the shackles on Barney as he stumbles through the haze of memory—the Highland Hotel, John Friday's benevolent resuscitation, dinner with William and Mary, the mad dash for the subway, the muzzle flash of the cop's gun, then finally, resignation.

I opened my eyes and found I was looking at the feet of a crowd of people...I struggled to my feet and saw the people in the car shrink back from me. I didn't mind. I supported myself

performance as Barney was excoriated by the *New York Times* as "...a luscious display of boiled ham not seen in these regions since Charles Laughton was on the loose." On-screen, Barney attempts to join Paula on her return cruise to England, but, like Sheila in the book, he's rejected. Hayward hits his stride, literally, displaying a marvelous emotional transition as he exits Paula's stateroom, now walking with steely resolve, his face slowly twisting into homicidal rage. This final white-knuckle sequence—as good as any in Werker's *He Walked by Night*—crackles with drum-tight cross-cutting, from a wide-eyed Sheila watching the hands of the clock creep toward midnight to vengeful Barney limping through the celebratory crowd, sidestepping taxis and drunken revelers. Antheil's jagged score ratchets up the tension as Barney slips into Sheila's apartment as the clock strikes midnight. Veteran cameraman L.W. O'Connell—who lensed *Decoy* the year before, and whose prodigious output includes over 60 films in the 1930s alone, *Scarface* most eminently—drapes this gripping tableau in lush black velvet. But as this climatic showdown unfolds, the film contrives to provide its own (and none-too-successful) *deus ex machina* for Sheila in the

against an upright and felt warm, tangible blood where the bullet creased my forehead, and I was glad. The date was April the eleventh, nineteen forty-four again, and maybe it had never been anything else. That didn't matter. It was all over, anyway, and I was glad. When the shuttle slid to a stop and the doors opened, I was the first one on the platform. I looked through the blood streaming over my eyes and saw them down at the other end. Two of them, both in uniforms. I called, "There's no hurry. I'm coming," and walked to meet them as I would have gone to meet a couple of friends.

After early previews in Santa Barbara in February 1947, Basehart was brought back from New York to shoot extra scenes with Leslie, building up his role. (Production notes don't indicate which scenes may have been added or expanded.) *Repeat Performance*, released three months before *Cry Wolf*, is considered his film debut, but it was a role he did not recall fondly: "My first role was nearly my swan song. I played a weak neurotic poet...After it nobody would cast me in a good romantic part." Adding insult to perceived injury, Basehart was the reluctant center of attention in a "local boy makes good celebration" when his hometown of Zanesville, Ohio (where his father was once the town's newspaper editor) hosted the film's world premiere on May 22, 1947.

Joan Leslie was dealt a professional blow a year later when the California State Supreme Court overturned a previous ruling, deeming her contract with Warner Bros. to be binding. But, in a fit of studio muscle-flexing, WB tore up her contract soon afterwards.

1947 was predicted as a banner year for *Eagle-Lion*, with a 22-picture studio schedule and a production budget in excess of \$25 million. But when tickets were tallied, the studio lost over \$2 million. By reshuffling the studio slate and adjusting production budgets, *Eagle-Lion* rebounded in 1948-49 with four "Dark City" entries bringing in the green: *T-Men*, *Raw Deal*, *Canon City*, and, having explored the dark side of the thespian milieu with requisite aplomb in *Repeat Performance*, Werker (with help from an uncredited Anthony Mann) re-teamed with Basehart, taking him from the New York stage to the storm tunnels of Los Angeles in *He Walked by Night*. ■