

Review #23 : *The Blue Dahlia* (2008-2012)

Alan Ladd and Veronica Lake

SYNOPSIS

The Blue Dahlia is about a U.S. NAVY Pilot Lieutenant-Commander Johnny Morrison, who returns home to Los Angeles with his buddies and medically discharged crewmates, Buzz Wanchek and George Copeland. Buzz is prone to memory lapses and headaches, and is often short tempered, all likely due to his head wound. Johnny finds his wife Helen living and partying in a hotel bungalow. He also spots her kissing a lover Eddie Harwood, the owner of the *Blue Dahlia* nightclub. After punching Eddie, Johnny lets Helen know that he is willing to try to salvage their marriage. However, Helen is not willing to do so and informs him that their son did not die of diphtheria as she had written, but from a car accident caused by her when she was drunk. Johnny momentarily threatens her with a gun, but decides she is not worth the trouble. He leaves her, taking a framed photograph of their son. Helen meets both Buzz and Eddie before she is mysteriously shot to death a few hours afterwards...



REVIEW

The Blue Dahlia is a pretty solid murder mystery featuring strong and interesting characters, including the smarmy **Eddie Harwood**, who seems very adept at seducing married wives like Helen Morrison and hiring others to do his dirty work. As far as she is concerned, **Helen Morrison** is a curious mixture of a bitchy wife and a grieving mother. The solid **Johnny Morrison**, who manages to radiate an aura of menace even when crossed, also appears to be a kind and good man. The nosy and sharp-tongued hotel detective is a colourful character as well. But Chandler's best creation turns out to be Johnny's best friend **Buzz**, the loyal Navy veteran with a short temper, whose dislike of jazz music gives way to some very funny scenes.

Chandler's story proves to be pretty solid. His skillful setup of Helen Morrison's murder made it easy for many of the characters to become suspects. Johnny's discovery of her affair with Eddie Harwood and their subsequent violent quarrel made him an easy suspect...

Johnny also meets Eddie's estranged wife Joyce, who had become weary of her husband's infidelity. Chandler had intended the mystery to evolve into a message about the difficulties faced by veterans returning home from the war. The movie also features some brutal fight scenes between the hero and Eddie Harwood's thugs. In fact, I have noticed that a good number of brutal fights always seem to pop up in Alan Ladd's movies. Director George Marshall certainly did try to rival here with those found in other crime dramas featuring Alan Ladd.

If there is one thing that *The Blue Dahlia* benefits is from its cast. Chandler had compared Alan Ladd to Warner star Humphrey Bogart, to the former's detriment. Well, I have no idea why Chandler even bothered to compare the two actors. Both had their own styles as leading men in a crime drama. Alan Ladd certainly gave a top-notch performance as returning veteran Johnny Morrison. His best scenes include the one he shares with **Doris Dowling** featuring the bitter argument and marital breakup of the Morrises; another with Howard Da Silva, in which Morrison reveals his knowledge of Harwood's past as a wanted fugitive; and finally the fight scene between Johnny and Harwood's thugs. Not only does he handle the fight scenes very well, but he also proves to be a first-rate dramatic performer, who knows how to act in front of a camera.



Alan Ladd of course received solid support from **Veronica Lake**, who gave a charming performance as the compassionate and perhaps slightly manipulative Joyce Harwood. I was also very impressed by Doris Dowling's portrayal of the morally conflicted Helen Morrison. Not only did she convey the woman's bitchy personality with great effect, but also her lingering grief over her son's death. Howard Da Silva is superb as nightclub owner Eddie Harwood. The actor did justice to Chandler's portrayal of a man ruthless enough to deal with any threat to his livelihood, yet compassionate enough to feel remorse over his killing of an innocent man during a bank robbery. Will Wright also gave a humorous and complex portrayal of the nosy and slimy house detective 'Dad' Newell. Last but not least, William Bendix's portrayal of the slightly disturbed Buzz is both funny, caustic and a bit frightening at times. He is very effective in conveying the aftereffects of a man who has not only been trained to kill, but whose war wound (which resulted in a metal plate in the head) also led him to suffer from a great deal of mental stress. A must-see – and a good final twist +++