

# SEPARATE TABLES



## The Lowdown

***Separate Tables* is a shining example of what happens when good writing meets talented actors and a director with a remarkable affinity for the source material.** Based on the acclaimed London and Broadway stage productions, **Terence Rattigan's** highly regarded play made a smooth transition to film in 1958 under the astute direction of **Delbert Mann**. The film opened to positive critical reviews and landed on the Top Ten lists of many major film critics that year. Equipped with a formidable ensemble of British and American actors, it renders a touching depiction of loneliness and isolation at a remote hotel on the southern coast of England. The screenplay by Rattigan and **John Gay** (with an uncredited assist from **John Michael Hays**) gives each character sufficient depth to stand out in a crowded field of accomplished players.

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*The Cast (L to R):*

*David Niven, May Hallatt, Gladys Cooper, Deborah Kerr,  
Rita Hayworth, Cathleen Nesbitt and Burt Lancaster.*

**Mann was a savvy collaborator when it came to transitioning the stage play to film.** He faced a number of significant challenges going in, foremost among them, how to inject a cinematic feel to a densely packed two-act play. To his credit, he leveraged the talents of production designer **Harry Horner** and cinematographer **Charles Lang** to overcome the stage bound nature of the screenplay. Horner's set design makes effective use of bevelled window panes and glass doors by infusing with them light to project a sense of life going on -- happening -- throughout the hotel. Shooting in black and white, cinematographer Lang adds visual interest to the dialog driven scenes with a striking balance of light and dark. Every shadow, camera angle and lighting source serves the dramatic arc of the screenplay. None of it is distracting or obvious to the viewer. Each component enhances the other to form a cohesive story that engenders interest and empathy with the characters as it progresses. Put another way, the film retains the intimacy and emotional resonance of the play on its own cinematic terms.

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*^ David Niven as the secretive major and Deborah Kerr as Sibyl may have more in common than they realize.*

*< Rita Hayworth and Burt Lancaster as former lovers with conflicting memories of the past.*

### The Backstory

***The original play by Terence Rattigan made its debut on the London stage in September 1954 to critical acclaim and enthusiastic audiences.*** It was written with **Sir Laurence Olivier** and **Vivien Leigh** in mind for the leading roles, but scheduling conflicts caused them to bow out of the production. They were replaced by **Margaret Leighton** and **Eric Portman**. The play enjoyed a successful run on Broadway at the **Music Box** theater for 332 performances beginning in October 1956. The leading roles were again played by **Leighton** and **Portman**. British stage actress **May Hallatt** played the role of Miss Meacham in both productions and was recruited by **Delbert Mann** to recreate her role in the film as well. The stage production consisted of two separate one-act plays with the two leading actors playing different characters in each act. When **Rattigan** and **John Gay** began work on the screenplay, they rewrote it with four different actors playing the leading roles throughout one continuous storyline.

**References: Wikipedia and IMDB.**

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## In The Words of the Director

**Delbert Mann started his professional career as a stage actor and later moved into producing and directing plays.** His greatest artistic achievement prior to this film was his award winning work as director of **Paddy Chayefsky's Marty** starring **Ernest Borgnine**. The 1955 film brought Borgnine his only Best Actor Oscar under Mann's impressive direction. Mann also won the Best Director Oscar for **Marty** and became the first person in Oscar history to take the Best Director award for a debut film. His record remained intact until 1981 when **Robert Redford** took home the Best Director Oscar for **Ordinary People**.



**Mann stated that his biggest challenge with *Separate Tables* was to open up the stage production without losing the emotional impact and intimacy of the play.** He also had to figure out how to make it cinematic when most of the story unfolds inside the walls of an ordinary hotel. On the DVD commentary, Mann freely acknowledges the contributions of production designer **Harry Horner**, who shared his desire to honor the



source material without merely filming the play. He says that Horner and his production crew disassembled parts from an old mansion and incorporated them into the set to expand the visual space and recreate the architectural style of the period. Horner's team built sets that featured rows of tall beveled windows, glass doors and high archways that enhanced the visual impact.

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*Lighting, camera placement and music play important roles in this pivotal scene with Rita Hayworth and Burt Lancaster.*

***Mann's partnership with Horner and cinematographer Lang resulted in some visually rich moments.*** When Hayworth and Lancaster confront each other on the patio, they are filmed in darkly lit silhouettes with a gallery of windows behind them. Streaming through the windows is a beam of light that casts imposing shadows on both actors as they grapple with their contentious relationship. Mann alternates between over the shoulder two-shots and close-ups throughout the scene. Lang's camera frames the close-ups of Lancaster with the windows behind him and he uses the vertical lines of the patio railing to frame Hayworth in hers. Equally important is the subtle dissonance of **David Raskin's** musical score, which adds another layer of emotion to their interactions. Every element heightens the line of tension between the two characters.



*Malcolm (Lancaster) to Ann (Hayworth):*

*"Are you afraid of the light? People who hate the light usually hate the truth."*

**References: Wikipedia and the DVD commentary by Delbert Mann.**

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## Casting, Preparation and Rehearsals

*Delbert Mann: "I cherish the rehearsal process."*



*Mann (in the light colored shirt) standing behind his stellar cast.*

**Mann stressed the value of thorough advance preparation and rehearsal to do full justice to the material.** He led the cast in an intense three week period of roundtable readings, rehearsals and character analysis before they began filming. He found that all of the actors were fully committed to giving their best and to helping their fellow actors. There were no reports of ego clashes or self-serving agendas during production. Mann particularly respected the degree of craft and commitment the British actors brought with them. Most of them had many years of stage experience under their belts and, in fact, a few of them had appeared in the London and Broadway stage productions before the film was made. Mann shared equal enthusiasm for the only American actors in the cast, the lovely Rita Hayworth and the stalwart Burt Lancaster. He observed that Rita was grateful to be part of the talented ensemble and that Lancaster refrained from making any star demands while they were filming. Only once, during an intense scene with Wendy Hiller, did Mann have to steer Lancaster away from stock mannerisms and gestures.

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*Wendy Hiller confronts Burt Lancaster about his interest in Rita Hayworth. Lancaster fell into some familiar mannerisms to the dismay of Delbert Mann.*

***The entire film was shot on an MGM Soundstage without any location filming whatsoever.*** It is a credit to Mann and his production team that the film evokes a strong sense of time and place without one scene being shot on English soil.

***Mann's extensive background in the theater is evident in every frame.*** He was rare in his ability to revere the theater without bringing his predisposition to the film set. He was also secure enough in his own talent to listen to others in the interest of making the best film possible. Mann explained that he loved shooting the beginnings of longer scenes at a distance and he gradually moved the camera closer with "soft over the shoulder two-shots and close-ups" in step with the escalating intensity of the dialog. This demonstrates Mann's aptitude for tapping his stage experience as a film director. Even with upfront preparation and mastery of the script, he remained opened to whatever the actors brought to the project after the camera starting rolling. Mann consistently placed his respect for the material and the actors above his ego.

***Mann directing Lancaster and Hayworth in a dramatic scene on the hotel staircase.***



**Source: Separate Tables DVD commentary by Delbert Mann.**

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### *The Actors*



*Deborah Kerr as Sibyl-Railton Bell*

***Kerr, a highly respected stage and film actress of Scottish descent, played the role of Sibyl, a painfully withdrawn young woman who allows her domineering mother (Gladys Cooper) to rule her life.***

Sybil is the female counterpart to the hapless major played by David Niven. In the hands of a lesser actress, Sibyl's chronic submissiveness could have quickly become grating. Kerr, however, imbues the character with a desperate need to be loved and respected. Just watch her silent torment as she endures her mother's self-righteous tirade to oust the disgraced major from the hotel. Without speaking a word, Kerr gives this pathetic character an inner life of repressed passion and feeling that is heartbreaking.



*Rita Hayworth as Ann Shankland*

***Unlike other breathtaking screen goddesses from the golden era of Hollywood, Hayworth seemed willing to concede the inevitable decline of her physical beauty.***

She did it with becoming grace and an appealing lack of vanity with each successive film after the mid-1950's. The role of film star Ann Shankland must have hit close to the bone because she speaks every line as if she lived it. Mann said she was "frightened to death" of the stage-trained actors in the cast and that she put her trust entirely in him as her director. Hayworth was very smart that way.



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*David Niven as Major Angus Pollock*

***Niven was cast against type as a former army major trying to avoid the unsavory details of his past by living in seclusion at the hotel.***

There is nothing dashing or debonair about this troubled character. When his transgressions are revealed to the other residents, their reactions may strike contemporary audiences as much ado about nothing. The screenplay and Niven's carefully modulated performance, however, make the major's sense of shame entirely convincing. His dignified exchange with his peers at the end of the film, when he reclaims his separate table in the dining room, is still powerful. With only sixteen minutes of screen time, Niven created an indelible character and won the Best Actor Oscar for his work.



*Burt Lancaster as John Malcolm*

***The hiring of Burt Lancaster to play John Malcolm, the brutish former husband of Ann Shankland (Hayworth), fell at the opposite end of the casting spectrum.***

Lancaster was a natural to play a tough guy who has retreated from life and taken refuge in the bottle. He has palpable chemistry with Hayworth and their verbal sparring never grows tiresome, although their storyline doesn't deliver the same dramatic punch as the Kerr / Niven thread. Lancaster was one of three executive producers on the film. This did not become a problem until they moved into post-production and Lancaster insisted on recutting the film to favor his character.

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*Gladys Cooper pressures Deborah Kerr to join her crusade against the disgraced major (David Niven).*



***Esteemed British stage and screen actress Wendy Hiller took the thankless role of hotel proprietor Pat Cooper, who is in love with John Malcolm (Lancaster) and acutely aware that Ann (Hayworth) has the power to take him away from her.*** Hiller won the Best Supporting Actress Oscar for this role. She managed to make the character interesting and sympathetic,

although the writing favors the sexual chemistry and verbal tug-of-war between Hayworth and Lancaster. Hiller found Hayworth to be "a lovely creature" who was "so delicately boned she made me feel like a camel."

**SOURCE: IMDB**

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**Two wonderful British actresses, Gladys Cooper and Cathleen Nesbitt, played the supporting roles of Mrs. Railton-Bell and her loyal friend, Lady Matheson.** Cooper has the flashier part and invests it with a fiery blend of class snobbery and mean spirited resolve. Her unchecked crusade against the major results in a loss of power over her timid daughter.

**Nesbitt's Lady Matheson is a gentle yet self-reliant dowager who ultimately places human compassion above social hierarchy.** The crackling repartee between these two venerable actresses is a joy to behold.

**Cathleen Nesbitt (L) and Gladys Cooper as Lady Matheson and Mrs. Railton-Bell**



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***Gladys Cooper (R) as Mrs. Railton-Bell:  
"I have no curiosity about the working classes."***

## Post-Production Fallout

***Mann's recollection of this film can be divided into two distinctly different parts. He was thrilled to work with a talented cast of actors and a first rate production team to bring the stage play to film.*** Mann placed tremendous importance on casting, rehearsals and becoming familiar with every nuance of the script. He found the actors receptive to his direction and thoroughly professional in all of his encounters with them.

***However, once the production team of Hecht, Hill and Lancaster (as in Burt Lancaster) took over the editing process, Mann's satisfaction with the final product took a steep nosedive.*** He was incensed to learn that Lancaster insisted on cutting a number of early scenes with Deborah Kerr and David Niven in the interest of introducing his character earlier into the film. Just for the record, Lancaster makes his first appearance in the final cut around the twenty minute mark. Mann felt this decision weakened the dramatic intensity of the Kerr / Niven storyline and ultimately cost Kerr a Best Actress Oscar.

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*Lancaster made an appearance in the trailer extolling the boldness of the subject matter.*

***Mann was also distressed over the insertion of a title song that was added to the musical score after he submitted his final cut to the producers.*** Against his strong objections, the producers forced musical composer **David Raskin** to write lyrics to the score and hired **Vic Damone** to record a title track that plays underneath the opening credits. Mann considered this a calculated ploy to market the film and thought the song was “cheap and shoddy.”

***Rita Hayworth, who was married to one of the film’s producers, was equally upset about the tampering.*** She was so distraught after attending a pre-release screening in LA that she called **Delbert Mann** over to her house late that evening for moral support. Ever the gentleman and good husband, Mann took his wife with him to comfort Rita after the screening. This story demonstrates the degree of loyalty and respect the actors felt for Mann and how much they believed in his vision of the film.

***All of this culminated in a sufficient amount of rancor that Mann went to his agent and asked him to sever his contractual commitment to the Hecht, Hill & Lancaster production company.*** While Mann observed “no exerting of executive authority” from Lancaster during filming, he was deeply disappointed that Lancaster re-cut the film to favor his performance over the other actors during post-production.

**Reference: Separate Tables DVD Commentary by Delbert Mann**

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*A stunning shot of Hayworth and Lancaster.*



*Kerr and Niven make an unforgettable odd couple.*

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*David Niven won the Best Actor Academy Award for his performance in **Separate Tables**. Here, Best Actress winner Susan Hayward for “I Want To Live!” wipes his forehead. Delbert Mann felt that Deborah Kerr deserved to win the Best Actress Oscar for her performance as Sibyl.*



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## MAJOR AWARDS

<p><b>Academy Awards</b></p> <p><b><u>Seven Nominations</u></b>          Best Actor in a Leading Role - David Niven          Best Actress in a Leading Role - Deborah Kerr          Best Actress in a Supporting Role - Wendy Hiller          Best Cinematography - BW - Charles Lang          Best Musical Score - David Raskin          Best Film - Harold Hecht          Best Screenplay Based on Material From Another Medium - Terence Rattigan and John Gay</p> <p><b>Won</b>          Best Actor in a Leading Role - <b>David Niven</b>          Best Actress in a Supporting Role - <b>Wendy Hiller</b></p>	<p><b>National Board of Review:</b></p> <p><b>Top Ten Films</b></p>
<p><b>Golden Globe Awards</b></p> <p><b>Five Nominations</b>          Best Motion Picture: Drama          Best Motion Picture Actor: Drama - David Niven          Best Motion Picture Actress: Drama - Deborah Kerr          Best Motion Picture Director - Delbert Mann          Best Supporting Actress - Wendy Hiller</p> <p><b>Won</b>          Best Motion Picture Actor - Drama: <b>David Niven</b></p>	<p><b>Writers Guild of America</b></p> <p><b>One Nomination: Best Written American Drama</b>          Terence Rattigan and John Gay</p>
<p><b>New York Film Critics Circle Awards</b></p> <p><b>Won</b></p> <p>Best Actor - <b>David Niven</b></p>	

WRITTEN AND RESEARCHED BY  
 MICHAEL HADLEY