

**Ralph Meeker – accomplished actor**

Ralph Meeker was an accomplished stage, screen and television actor. Meeker starred as “Hal” in the original stage production of *Picnic* by William Inge, which opened on Broadway on February 19, 1953, and ran for 477 performances. *Picnic*, which won the 1953 Pulitzer Prize for Drama and the 1953 New York Drama Critics Circle Award, was directed by Joshua Logan, who later would direct several major Hollywood musicals and dramas. Meeker was part of the original cast that featured Kim Stanley, Janice Rule, Eileen Heckart, Paul Newman, Arthur O’Connell and Elizabeth Wilson.<sup>1</sup> As “Hal,” Meeker originated a role that William Holden would later perform in a screen adaptation of the play. Meeker also starred in the feature motion pictures *Four in a Jeep* (1951), directed by Austrian director Leopold Lindtberg and co-starring Viveca Lindfors, and *Paths of Glory* (1957), directed by Stanley Kubrick and co-starring Kirk Douglas, Adolph Menjou, George Macready and Wayne Morris.

However, the role for which Meeker is most well-known is that of Mike Hammer in *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955), directed by Robert Aldrich and co-starring Albert Dekker, Paul Stewart, Maxine Cooper and Strother Martin. Over the years Meeker’s performance has earned wide praise. *San Francisco Chronicle* film critic Mike LaSalle says: “Like other *film noir* heroes, Meeker is smooth and good-looking, and his attractiveness seduces the audience into seeing him as the good guy.”<sup>2</sup> *Hollywood Gothique*’s Steve Biodrowski writes: “Meeker is by far the best of many screen incarnations of Spillaine’s violent private eye. He captures the physicality of the character; more importantly, he conveys the brutal enthusiasm.”<sup>3</sup> *Screenfanatic.com* reviewer David O’Connell states: “Meeker is the perfect embodiment of Hammer; with a voice one might attribute to a soused-up Ed Harris, he’s suave enough to draw the beauties like bees to honey whilst suitably mean and flinty when the prospect of a scrap arrives. The smirk on his face as he bowls a would-be killer down a flight of stairs or jams a money-hungry coroner’s fingers in a drawer for the key they cling to is golden.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Inge, William. *Four Plays*. New York: Grove Press, 1958. p.73

<sup>2</sup> LaSalle, Mick, “‘Kiss Me Deadly’ Still Packs Punch / Ralph Meeker stars in 1955 film noir,” 10/4/95, *SFGate.com* - online

<sup>3</sup> Biodrowski, Steve, “Kiss Me, Deadly,” *Hollywoodgothique.com* – online

<sup>4</sup> O’Connell, David, “Kiss Me Deadly,” *screenfanatic.com* – online

However, some of the reviews about Meeker's performance are less complimentary. *Daily Film Dose* writes: "Ralph Meeker is a tough gumshoe but he's missing the wit and charisma of a Humphrey Bogart, or the confidence of a Fred MacMurray. As a character actor (i.e. "Paths of Glory") he's effective but doesn't have the chops to fully carry a film (though I have to give him credit for the best-ever cinematic 'bitch-slapping')."<sup>5</sup> *Ruthless Review's* Hondo says (of the entire cast): "The performances of its cast of strictly B-level actors are laughable at best, but all for the better to deliver the nonsensical lines given to them."<sup>6</sup> Yet, even these negative reviews are qualified and include praise.

These comments, as well as his overall stage, screen and television resume, which includes over 100 productions,<sup>7</sup> prove that although he never quite achieved the status of major star, Ralph Meeker was an accomplished actor whose work is worthy of serious consideration.

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<sup>5</sup> "Kiss Me Deadly," 8/22/07, *Dailyfilmdose.com* - online

<sup>6</sup> Hondo, "Kiss Me Deadly," 12/19/11, *ruthlessviews.com* - online

<sup>7</sup> "Ralph Meeker," *IMDb.com* - online