

## EUROPEAN EXILES **Part Six**

# BERNHARDT, LITVAK, NEGULESCO

## THE FORGOTTEN FILM NOIR DIRECTORS

by Marc Svetov

Special to the *Sentinel*

Shortly after the takeover of power by the Nazis in 1933, propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels held a now famous meeting with the staff of Ufa film studios. The executive staff as well as those who actually made the films—directors, producers, actors—attended. In his speech, Goebbels declared that the talents at the studio would henceforth be obligated to follow certain guidelines. He named five examples of the type of films he wanted the Germans to make: a Greta Garbo film; Fritz Lang's *Nibelungen*; *Battleship Potemkin*, directed by Sergei Eisenstein (Goebbels praised it for its filmmaking, not for its "communistic poison") and *The Last Company* and *The Rebel*, two films by Kurt Bernhardt—as he was then known. "None of these films could have been conceived," Goebbels explained, "in the degenerate brain of a Jewish director."

A baffling comment, at best. Sergei Eisenstein was Russian-Jewish, and Fritz Lang, even if he'd wanted to, could never be a pure-blooded German as his mother was Jewish.

Kurt Bernhardt was also a Jew. His film *The Rebel* deals with a highly cherished narrative of German chauvinism: the blood-and-soil fight of the Tyrolean people against Napoleonic France. It was produced by Paul Kohner, later a famed Hollywood agent—a Jew; Actor Ludwig Stoessel, also Jewish, played a key role in the film. He later emigrated to America and became a Hollywood character actor.

The Nazis' segregation of Jews, starting in 1933, essentially amputated the of the German film industry. France and England first benefited from a number of émigré filmmakers who, due either to their ethnicity or their anti-Nazi stance, renewed their careers in those countries. Hollywood soon gained great advantage from those who had to flee—and film noir, in no



Alexis Smith is lusted after by Humphrey Bogart in Bernhardt's 1945 noir *Conflict*, based on a story by fellow émigré Robert Siodmak

small measure, reaped perhaps the biggest benefit.

Curtis Bernhardt, Anatole Litvak and Jean Negulesco were all exiled European directors who took root in Hollywood. The crime films and psychological studies they directed are all classics of the noir canon. What the three have in common is an interest in psychology and psychoanalysis, whether it be about the disintegration of the human soul, destructive forces of rage and possessiveness, or the frightening aspects of institutionalization and curing of those suffering from intense psychic distress.

England until his arrival in America in 1939.

Bernhardt's three noir films are notable for their stylishness and tight plots. *Conflict* (1945) starred Humphrey Bogart as a murdering husband, with Sydney Greenstreet in the role of the psychoanalyst turned sleuth, who uncovers Bogart's crime. Throughout the film, Bernhardt makes the viewer wonder if what we see is only what Bogart *thinks* is going on; Bernhardt employed this subjective camera method in all three of his noirs. A memorable effect, akin to horror, is achieved as Bogart hides on a mountain road, in fog and mist, waiting to kill his wife: he hides in the deep shadows of a tree, his dark automobile seeming like a beast poised to ambush. Cameraman Merritt Gerstad helped Bernhardt create a magnificently threatening scene.

*Possessed* (1947) is the story of a woman's descent into madness. She harbors an all-encompassing, possessive love for an engineer (Van Heflin) with whom she has had an affair. After Heflin jilts her, Joan Crawford, in the title role, in her turn marries the man employing Heflin, in order to stay near him. It is rather pathetic for her husband (Raymond Massey), for he loves her and has to watch how she increasingly loses her grip on reality. The film is primarily effective due to Crawford, in a showcase role, entirely convincing, utterly shameless in her acting, in her ability to expose an aberrant soul before a camera.

"I remember," Bernhardt later reminisced, "one thing I always disagreed with [Billy] Wilder about. He thinks the important thing is that a character deliver his lines once he enters a scene. I always thought the camera was the most important element, not the



Curtis Bernhardt (right) discusses a scene with Joan Crawford on the set of *Possessed*

Curtis Bernhardt (1899-1981) was born in Worms, Germany, and worked as an actor on provincial German stages during the early twenties before he came to Berlin, where he acted and later directed a couple of plays. He turned to film directing by the mid-1920s and by the end of the decade was working at Ufa, the largest German film studio. He directed one of the first films Marlene Dietrich starred in: *The Woman One Longs For* (1929). He also made a couple of nationalistic pieces: *The Last Company* (1930), with Conrad Veidt in the title role; and another, same tendency, shot with much bravura, *The Rebel* (1932). He claimed he could make films with any political slant, and did so, during his German years: he directed films funded by the Catholic church, by the German Communist party, by rabid German nationalists and revanchists. Bernhardt left his homeland in 1933, following the rise of the Nazis. He spent the intervening years directing films in France and



Audrey Totter is expressionistic herself in Bernhardt's *The High Wall*

story. The story was always important to me, too. But the camera is just as important. [...] I remember, too, the set-ups in *Possessed* where the camera was placed way below the actors. It distorts the face, always in a mysterious and shocking manner. The proportions are changed, and that causes the distortion [...] I shot Crawford from below."

*High Wall* (1947) deals again with psychology. Robert Taylor, suffering a brain injury that he received in the war, has been framed for the murder of his wife. His wound causes fits of brutal aggression during which he blacks out and becomes violent. He certainly appears to be the murderer. Yet doubts arise, and aided by Audrey Totter, cast against type as a psychiatrist, Taylor tries to clear himself. Bernhardt again employs subjective camerawork (by Paul Vogel) to view the world through Taylor's eyes as he reels under burdensome headaches and confused memories. When the camera's view returns to objectivity during Taylor's fits of rage, one suddenly doubts his innocence.

Bernhardt is in the lineage of Hitchcock with his painstaking dramaturgy, preferring not to deal deeply with his characters as human beings, but more as

chess pieces in a cinematic puzzle. His three noir films are all photographed in the German Expressionist *cum* noir style; they are perfectly composed films, translating psychoanalytical speculation into harrowing images while never quite losing their distance from the suffering protagonists. Bernhardt later admitted that he never believed in psychoanalysis or any other psychological theory. Looking back on his forties' films, he observed: "Films in those days [...] derived their 'dense,' 'crowded' visual texture, their extraordinarily rich surface look, largely from the fact that most of them were in black-and-white and not in color. Also, today's wide screen systems like Cinemascope and Todd-AO diffuse the image. I think the conventional square 35mm ratio was ideal. Nowadays the image is not as concentrated as it was then; directors and cameramen have to cope with a vast expanse of space on either side of people photographed at close quarters and they don't know what to do with it."

Anatole Litvak (1902-1974) remained perhaps the most dyed-in-the-wool European of the noir émigré directors. He had two bona fide noirs to his credit, and several contenders. Litvak was born and raised in Russia. He worked as a stage director under Vsevolod Meyerhold in the early twenties and began directing films then. In 1925 he moved from Russia to Berlin and began working as a film director there. Henri-Georges Clouzot was also in the German capital in 1932 and worked on a French version of one of Litvak's films. Litvak, a Jew, fled to Paris upon the Nazi takeover in 1933. In 1936 he directed *Mayerling*, an internationally successful tear-jerking melodrama, that proved to be his ticket to Hollywood. By the following year, Litvak was directing films in America.

*Out of the Fog* (1941) is barely a noir, saved from wooden cominess mainly through the nastiness oozing from John Garfield's character. The bulk of the film is set on the Brooklyn waterfront, with its wobbly boats, waves lapping against the quay wall, stairs descending

to the landing stage—all a studio set ingeniously photographed by Litvak's cameraman, James Wong Howe. Special praise goes to art director Carl Jules Weyl, responsible for such films as *Casablanca*, *Kings Row* and *The Big Sleep*. Litvak never acclimated himself entirely to his new country, to its way of life and people.

His discomfort with American subject matter is proven by the clichéd portrayal of the big city's human flotsam and jetsam in *Out of the Fog*.

Showing the same weakness for hokum in American settings and characterization are *City for Conquest* (1940) and *The Long Night* (1947), a remake of *Le jour se lève* (1939), with Henry Fonda in the title role. Both are listed as noirs—*City for Conquest* is a stretch—but what is notable is that despite the presence of crime film stalwarts such as James Cagney and Fonda, Litvak can barely get these stories off the ground.

In 1956, Litvak returned to his beloved Europe and turned another grandiose, pseudo-historical subject matter—like *Mayerling*—into a magnificent movie: *Anastasia* (1956), starring Ingrid Bergman and Yul Brynner: moving, truthful characters in an extraordinary, yet convincing environment where Litvak moves with familiarity and certainty, despite its fairy tale-like quality.

Litvak's best American film is *The Snake Pit* (1948), with Olivia de Havilland in the starring role. Though often listed as a film noir, it is more a "social problem" film, with a wrenching portrayal of madness in mental health institutions. It is well-nigh Russian in its dramatic tenor, reminiscent of Chekhov and Gorky; its belief in the basic worth of people and their capability for change is almost religious. The conclusion, as the inmates are singing "Goin' Home," is an emotional tour de force. *The Snake Pit* does not sentimentalize or romanticize insanity and does not pretend, as some recently popular films have, that schizophrenia is a higher form of consciousness.

*Sorry, Wrong Number* (1948) is the story of a woman (Barbara Stanwyck), on the telephone throughout the film, learning she is marked for murder. The frantic connection between a woman and a telephone was also depicted that same year in *L'Amore* (1948, directed by Roberto Rossellini, with Anna Magnani); but while everything that transpires in the Italian film is registered by Anna Magnani's face and in her voice, *Sorry, Wrong Number* tells of the ill-fated marriage between Stanwyck and her husband (Burt Lancaster) in detailed flashbacks.

Originally made famous on the radio, *Sorry, Wrong Number* proved wildly successful in building hair-pulling, nail-biting tension. One lives through every minute of fear, horror and false hope for the piteous woman, despite the fact that she is largely unlikely. One can even find sympathy for Lancaster, in wanting to be rid of her. He's not a cold-blooded murderer, however; he has been "forced" into the murderous scheme to repay a debt he owed to gangster partners in his black market side business. His regret comes too late to save his doomed wife.

There is an amusing touch where Lancaster is meeting ex-love Ann Richards in a restaurant. As Lancaster surveys the setting, checking if he has been followed, he looks twice at a white-haired gentleman in sunglasses at a table behind him. It's Litvak, making a Hitchcock-like cameo.



Half-sheet for Anatole Litvak's *Sorry, Wrong Number*

Trained as a draughtsman and painter, Romanian Jean Negulesco (1900-1993) continued to practice his earlier profession throughout his life. He lived in Paris from around 1914 through the 1920s, and knew many famous artists in the French capital. He emigrated to America—accounts differ—either in 1927 or 1929. His desire was to work in film. Arriving in Los



Jean Negulesco at the Deauville film festival, 1986

Angeles, he put his reputation as a portrait painter to use, leading to acquaintances with many film people who commissioned portraits.

Negulesco was hired for second-unit projects at Paramount and Universal, mostly, he later said, “working mainly on camera angles because of my painter’s pictorial sense.” He was hired by Warner Bros. in 1940 to do a series of shorts; he made fifty of them from 1940 to 1944. Negulesco’s first feature, a noir set in the Balkans, was *The Mask of Dimitrios* (1944), an adaptation of author Eric Ambler’s popular *A Coffin for Dimitrios*, starring Peter Lorre and Sydney Greenstreet and featuring Zachary Scott in his film debut. The film benefits from the authentic and darkly European art direction, and Negulesco’s use of bit players. His knowledge of the region served him well in translating it to Warner’s studio sets. Negulesco’s attention to the smallest details, in both casting and atmosphere, would be a hallmark of his style, especially his films noir.

After *Dimitrios*, Negulesco directed *Nobody Lives Forever* (1946), a good vehicle for John Garfield, even if it was originally meant for Humphrey Bogart. Writer W. R. Burnett (*High Sierra*, *The Asphalt Jungle*) offers an inside look at the sorry life of confidence tricksters and

two-bit gangsters and Negulesco filmed much of it in stifling back rooms, lit by a single overhead bulb cutting the smoke fumes. The same year Negulesco directed Garfield again, opposite Joan Crawford, in *Humoresque*. It’s not really noir, despite a similarity in visual style. Clifford Odets’ over-the-top story at times veers toward the ridiculous, and despite the sincerity of his performance, it is difficult to believe John Garfield as a classical violinist.

Far better is *Three Strangers* (1946), featuring Geraldine Fitzgerald in a stunning portrait of a deranged, possessive and irredeemably selfish *femme fatale* who plays with other people’s lives. Her mean streak is second only to Gene Tierney’s in *Leave Her to Heaven* (1945). Although pretty as a picture, she is utterly evil. Peter Lorre is one victim, a lost soul, an upper-class drunk allied with criminals without actually being one himself. Sydney Greenstreet is the other, a lawyer who’s embezzled trust funds from a lonely widow and needs to make a big score to cover his tracks. [For more on this film, see “Noir Couples” in this issue.]

*Road House* (1948) is Negulesco’s noir masterpiece. Perfectly cast, with Cornel Wilde, Richard Widmark and Ida Lupino in the lead roles and Celeste Holm in support, it is the story of a *menage à trois* gone wildly wrong. Widmark, with his maniacal giggle, and Lupino, as a world-weary wisegirl who proves herself decent in the end, carry the picture.

But Negulesco cares for all his characters, handling complex emotional situations skillfully and paying even more-than-usual attention to the details and the back-grounds that generated intense atmosphere in his noirs.

Negulesco finesses the Lupino-Wilde relationship, turning initially repellent reactions into lustful attraction. Before the love affair between Lupino and Wilde commences, her suitor Jeffrey (Widmark) brings Lupino break-



Jean Negulesco (center) directing Bette Davis and Gary Merrill in *Phone Call from a Stranger*

fast in bed, breaking into her hotel room uninvited. We are finally certain that Jeffrey’s sense of reality is askew. He is so used to getting what he wants that he can’t conceive that Lupino might not fall for him. It’s only after Wilde and Lupino elope that Jeffrey proves to be mad as a March hare.

Negulesco deftly builds tension toward the inevitable confrontation. As Widmark hunts Lupino and Wilde through the woods at the film’s climax, the director features extreme close-ups of the three protagonists—a surprising and effective change from conventional chase scenes filmed in long and medium shots.

“I established a somber, low-key mood,” said Negulesco, “that I followed in a number of subsequent films. I learned that the public loves to share the actor’s situation, to be a vicarious part of the action. It’s curious that when you see actors moving and talking in semi-darkness, it’s always more exciting than seeing them plainly, because you identify with them more.”

Ida Lupino reunited with the director for *Deep Valley* (1947), in which she played a lonely farm girl suffering from a stutter caused by her hateful parents. Dane Clark is the escaped convict she protects and falls in love with. The film feels much like *They Live By Night*, made the same year but not released until 1949; the theme must have been in the air. *Under My Skin* (1950) is not a film noir as such, yet Luther Adler, as gangster Louis Bork, is a wonderful heavy, chasing crooked jockey John Garfield throughout Europe. He lends the rather bland father-son story more gravity, while pilfering every scene he is in. *Phone Call from a Stranger* (1952), starring Gary Merrill, Shelley Winters, Keenan Wynn and Michael Rennie, and featuring Bette Davis in a pivotal supporting role, sticks to Negulesco’s strengths: great empathy for the characters, and the ability suggest back stories without the need for long explanations.

In his mid-eighties, Negulesco wrote his autobiography, *Things I Did and Things I Think I Did* (1984), complete with his own illustrations. It a strange amalgam of gossip from Hollywood and Paris, yet it offers sound insights amongst the vain listings of meetings with the famous and not-so-famous. In it, Negulesco says he was struck by Samuel Goldwyn’s advice on how to make a good picture. “In his high-pitched voice,” Negulesco wrote, “[Goldwyn] used to tell me, ‘You get yourself a great story, the best writer available, a first-class cast—the right cast—a great cameraman and you have the chance to make a great picture.’ The first time I heard this, I laughed. He looked surprised and serious. ‘I mean it. It is the only way.’”

Goldwyn was no intellectual, nor was he the most agreeable man on earth, although there were worse specimens in terms of producers. But, as Negulesco realized, often he was right. ■



Ida Lupino and Richard Widmark in Negulesco’s *Road House*