

9th Year for SoCal Fest

NOIR CITY BACK IN HOLLYWOOD

By Chris D
Special to the Sentinel

What is it about the dark worldview, especially as personified in the classic 1940 – 1960 period of film noir, that holds many of us so fascinated? The spectacle of lost souls trying to navigate the downward spirals in their personal or professional lives, the plight of an Everyman (or woman) as they are sucked into a whirlpool of dismal circumstance beyond their control—these scenarios enrapture us and hold us spellbound.

Are we watching as voyeurs, simply glad to see someone else with worse luck than our own? Or are we perhaps hoping to find a key how to deal with our own existential plights, turmoil that may not be as violent or as dramatic but nevertheless just as traumatizing, at least to us?

All one has to do is listen to the news to see very plainly that, hey, it's a noir world, baby! Today, with unparalleled global access through the internet, we witness it, all pervasive, on a worldwide scale. Here, to help you with a road map to vicariously chart your path through a perilously dark universe, the American Cinematheque and the Film Noir Foundation have assembled another grand gathering of noir gems.

A few of these classics are encore presentations, but the majority are masterpieces we've never shown before. We'll also be screening such ultra-rare titles as the Dick Powell double shot of *Cornered* and *To the Ends of the Earth*, the James Mason bill of Carol Reed's *The Man Between* and *One Way Street*, plus *Hell's Five Hours*, *Cry of the Hunted*, *Lure of the Swamp*, *The Red House*, Richard Fleischer's *The Clay Pigeon* and Don Siegel's *Count the Hours*.

There'll be brand new 35mm prints, as well, of such rarities as *Night Has 1000 Eyes*, *The Night Holds Terror*, *Face Behind the Mask*, *The Story of Molly X* and *Woman In Hiding*, many of these brought to the screen through the untiring efforts of The Film Noir Foundation. And the vast majority? Yes, still not on DVD!

Last but not least, Noir City bon-vivant and co-programmer Eddie Muller will be presenting the LA Premiere of his directorial debut, a stunning, suspenseful short film *The Grand Inquisitor*, with 90 year old star Marsha Hunt (*Raw Deal*) in attendance! Don't (Cont'd on p. 10)

Emigres in Noir

BILLY WILDER

By Marc Svetov
Special to the Sentinel

During an interview thirty years after he made *Double Indemnity*, Billy Wilder claimed that the pessimism in film noir was not due to the European or Jewish backgrounds of many of those involved in making the films. Rather, it was America itself. From the perspective of our day, it is not easy to interpret what he meant. Film noir emerged as a burgeoning style with World War II, slipping into full gear when the war's accumulating pressures demanded a new, synthesized sense of realism in film.

There was a sea change happening in the United States in the early 1940s, gathering momentum from the prior decade of deep Depression-related woes and hard times. By late 1942 and on into 1944, the year of *Double Indemnity*'s release, Americans in their local movie theaters were viewing wartime documentaries that depicted graphic violence, mayhem, prisoners of war, a mounting death count—real-life narratives with sons, fathers, and uncles

as the protagonists.

This, it has been claimed, undermined official Hays Office censorship of film violence. After all, with Americans dying overseas, and the government itself approving the display of war and releasing such images, it seemed absurd to be squeamish.

Regardless of who it was—GIs or private eyes, saboteurs or working women—a new sense of realism took hold. People seemed to want real people and real things on-screen. And from this a new, dressed-up version of crime emerged: films about normal people who got into trouble, whose fateful decisions and desperate ploys to escape the consequences might have been yours, if you had turned down the wrong street.

Unquestionably, Wilder's own experience greatly encouraged his own pessimism. He lived in Europe during its darkest moments: the horror and depravity of Nazism, and the resultant

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Ella Raines

HEROINES IN NOIR

Beyond the Femme Fatale

by Don Malcolm
Sentinel Managing Editor

As noir continues to rise in prominence some sixty years after its heyday, a greater understanding of its range is evolving. We are at last getting beyond a core set of defining stereotypes (private eyes, femme fatales) as more of the noir canon becomes accessible.

Two of the San Francisco NOIR CITY festivals (in 2004 and again in 2008) shone a deliberate light on the

many noirs that feature women as protagonists. It turns out that heroines in noir are much more than an exception to the rule. Some play roles much like that of a private investigator (though none of them wear trench coats). Others are akin to the "woman in distress" that was prominent first in Victorian melodrama, a genre that as it evolved into the 1940s showed strong affinities with noir. Others are unique unto themselves.

Here we examine eleven noir heroines who reveal the nuances in gender roles and relationships that flow seamlessly into the dark side of the screen.

FEMALE REDEEMERS

Carol "Kansas" Richman (*Phantom Lady*)

Kathleen (*The Dark Corner*)
Lucia Harper (*The Reckless Moment*)

These women protect and defend loved ones, even when the odds are stacked against them.

Carol "Kansas" Richman (Ella Raines) turns female sleuth in order to find a missing woman who is the only person capable of clearing her boss (Alan Curtis) from false murder charges.

Kathleen (Lucille Ball) is a feisty secretary in love with her woozy, wavering, private-eye boss (Mark Stevens) who intercedes to keep him from being framed in a nasty case involving a deadly art dealer, his unfaithful young

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A NOIR CITY 6 JOURNAL

Rain Can't Deter Record Crowds from a "Dark Ten-Day Frolic"

by Haggai Elitzur
Special to the Sentinel

It was exhausting. It was exhilarating. It was rain-drenched. And we loved it! Here's a day-by-day recap of San Francisco's sixth annual "descent into darkness."

Friday, January 25

NOIR CITY 6 opened with a tribute to Joan Leslie, best known for her early launch into stardom at Warner Bros., where she appeared opposite Bogart, Cooper, and Cagney in three of their signature films—*High Sierra*, *Sergeant York*, and *Yankee Doodle Dandy*—all by the tender age of 17!

Repeat Performance features a *Twilight Zone*-like premise where Joan gets a second chance at the previous year after killing her husband (Louis Hayward) on New Year's Eve. She tries desperately to ward off the events endangering her marriage and her



Author James Elroy joined Leah Dashe and Marsha Hunt at Noir City for the world premiere of *The Grand Inquisitor*, in which the actresses costarred.

friends—among them mad poet Richard Basehart, making his film debut—but finds herself increasingly helpless to prevent any of it (trapped by destiny

itself: *that* sounds like noir). It's frankly an odd idea, which the script doesn't even try to explain—slipping it out via a John Ireland voiceover—but it works,

thanks to a compellingly emotional performance from Leslie, glamorous

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thoughts and discussions among artists and intellectuals. At the terrible turning point in 1939, he traveled from Hollywood to Vienna to urge his mother to leave the city, to "come back" with her son to America, but Genia Wilder did not go with him.

Billy Wilder never actually knew what happened to Genia, or to other members of his immediate family—only that they certainly perished in Auschwitz. He was not somebody who wore his heart on his sleeve and he never spoke about the genocide committed by the Nazis and their European collaborators. Although he tended to provide journalists with frequent, often unprintable copy on a good many subjects, this area remained off limits.

Genia had been a molding influence upon Wilder's attitudes, the reason why he was such an exception among the émigrés who fled Europe. In a sense, he was coming home. He was born in Galicia, grew up in Vienna, and lived in Berlin during his last years before emigrating, but Wilder (unlike Fritz Lang and Max Ophüls) harbored no sentimentality about the Old World. He never felt like much of a stranger in the States.

His mother, who had spent several years in New York as a young woman before returning to Vienna, had pumped him full of stories about America and

its various glories. He had been named Samuel, but his mother called him Billy after Buffalo Bill. In Vienna and Berlin, Billy loved all things American, from clothing styles and Hollywood films to the idea of the country itself: its promise, its brashness, its newness, and most of all its adventurous, uncaring attitude toward tradition. Like Billy, America was always in a hurry, busily throwing detritus overboard as fast as it could.

As a young man, Wilder worked in the two largest German-speaking metropolises. He was active as a journalist, doing court reporting among other things, writing first for some Viennese papers and, after 1926, for various Berlin newspapers. While in Berlin he wrote and attempted to hawk original screenplays to movie studios. He sold some to smaller studios and eventually worked for UFA, the most prominent of them all.

Even in Berlin, Billy Wilder seemed to be an anomaly—a man who belonged in another place. He evinced no nostalgia for the city later. He scoffed at the idea, subsequently generated by scholars and nostalgic émigrés, that Berlin in its Weimar heyday had been a cultural paradise. He claimed he hated Vienna and its syrupy rococo ambience, hated its waltzes, even hated Mozart.

He left Germany in early 1933, immediately upon Hitler's ascent to power. He spent a year in exile in Paris, where he directed and wrote one film, and arrived in America in 1934. He



initially worked in Hollywood as a screenwriter and landed a writer's job at Paramount working for Ernst Lubitsch.

Before he became a director, he was co-responsible for a few classic scripts,

always working in collaboration with another writer: at first, for more than a dozen years, with Charles Brackett, and in his later years with I.A.L.

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Diamond. His scripts included *Ball of Fire*, for director Howard Hawks, and *Ninotchka*, for Lubitsch. His decision in 1942 to leave the screenwriting ranks and direct his own movies at Paramount was motivated by a desire to have full control over what was being made from his screenplays. His camera shots, scene setups, cues, all the constituent details were contained in the scripts he wrote once he started directing; he never wrote merely lines of dialogue and action.

Biographer Ed Sikov has stated that the house of the émigré writer-socialite Salka Viertel, on Mabery Road near the beach in Santa Monica, was where the Central European exiles, including Wilder, met during the late 1930s and early '40s and "the sieve through which the subtle filtration of refugee sensibilities into American popular culture took place." In this atmosphere of exchanging ideas and trying out new forms, Billy Wilder thrived. After all, both in Vienna and Berlin he'd already proven himself a master on the subject of popular culture, whether it be 1920s jazz, film, or popular songs.

As a result, he never conceived of himself as anything but a commercial filmmaker. In the early '40s he recognized the potential value of "cheap crime" novels. It was a powerful literature whose connection to the film noir style was rather umbilical. Among these crime writers—here we are speaking of a golden era—were noir heroes James M. Cain and Raymond Chandler. For *Double Indemnity*, Wilder

brilliantly united them, hiring Chandler as a co-scenarist, specifically to add his gift for savvy speech patterns to Cain's duplicitous characters.



Salka Viertel

Wilder's screenplays were structured and carefully balanced so that what one expects of a classic Hollywood film happens, with a great payoff. He paid close attention to the crafting of narrative, construction, and plot. But for all his appreciation of crime writers, Wilder did not believe plot was everything. Working from Cain's flat but florid style, he filtered Chandler's contributions (a rare kind of comic malice) into a new hybrid of his own making, seamlessly fashioning a tone that was simultaneously haunted and acerbic. He would return to this voice a few years later in *Sunset Boulevard*, giving it greater nuance and a boundlessly lacerating irony.

In *Double Indemnity*, Wilder had selected a story about the corrupt instincts and capacity for violence in an average insurance agent turned man-on-the-make. It has been claimed that anyone can identify with Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray) without too much effort. I, for one, would like to think



Raymond Chandler and Billy Wilder were combative collaborators on the script of *Double Indemnity*.

that the majority of us average guys would not take the life of somebody who has not done us any harm just to lay our hands on some money and a woman, as Neff breathlessly intones into his dictaphone as the film begins.

Neff might be average, but surely it takes an empty soul to carry out, so ruthlessly, such tawdry and hollow dreams—and quite an empty head to make yourself believe you could ever succeed. In the film his criminal cohort Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck) is bewigged with a patently false platinum blond hairpiece. Wilder

later claimed to have had initial misgivings about the wig; when he viewed the daily rushes, she looked cheap, fake. But considering to the cost of reshooting all the scenes in which the blond Stanwyck had already appeared, he gave up on the idea of returning her to brunette normality. He later realized that the blond wig was somehow the glue that held everything in place. It worked because the film was about phony, cut-rate dreams.

One detail that I've always found remarkable about *Double Indemnity* (Cont'd on p. 8)

Upcoming DVD Releases for Spring 2008

FOX, CRITERION FORK OVER RARE NOIR



March 11 brings three more volumes in the Fox Film Noir series, though some diehard noir purists may scratch their heads at the titles involved.

Meanwhile, the folks at the Criterion Collection are stepping up with two notable rarities that will make Eliot's famous line about April ("the cruelest month") seem like a misnomer for noir fans.

Fox is releasing *Daisy Kenyon* (Joan Crawford, Dana Andrews, Henry Fonda), a soapy love-triangle noir directed by Otto Preminger (though some, including Foster Hirsch, are a bit hesitant to claim it for the canon), along with the shipboard thriller *Dangerous Crossing* (Jeanne Crain, Michael



Rennie) and the Technicolor noir *Black Widow* (Ginger Rogers, Gene Tierney, Van Heflin, George Raft).

Noir czar Eddie Muller smiled wanly at the news. "I like the folks at Fox a lot," he said, "but we really want to see *Boomerang* reissued, and the legal issues resolved for *The Brasher Doubloon*. And there are some good

Hubert Cornfield films that are genuine noir. But mainly we are still wondering when Fox's *Cry of the City*, purportedly licensed to Criterion (as were *Thieves' Highway* and *Night and the City*) will finally appear.

Criterion will release in April release Allen Baron's 1961 cult noir *Blast of Silence*. This is an upgrade from a restored print used in a 2006 German DVD, with additional extra features not included in that Region 2 release.

Lionel Stander's puckish, gravelly narration will, as always, create a significant point of contention among noir fans.

Criterion is also unearthing a taut Spanish noir from 1955, *Death of a Cyclist*, directed by Juan Antonio Bardem (grandfather of Javier Bardem, whose devilish turn in *No Country for Old Men* won him an Oscar) and featuring 1950s Euro-babe Lucia Bosé (best known as the disenchanting wife in Antonioni's 1950 Italian neo-realist noir *Story of a Love Affair*).



Barbara Stanwyck (with John Lund and Lyle Bettger) will stop at nothing to maintain her new life in *No Man of Her Own*.

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herself faced with such a compromising choice, but she has a more immediate problem: She has shot and killed her husband. Her extreme case of killer's



remorse is "rewarded" when she gets the chance to relive the previous year's events, perhaps reversing the tides of fate that brought her to that murderous moment. Can she redeem herself, and her husband, thanks to this supernatural intervention?

THE LONG-SUFFERING TYPE Mildred Pierce (*Mildred Pierce*)

Mildred (Joan Crawford) is a woman driven to achievement because of a continuing displacement of love. We relive the events of her life in a set of flashbacks seamlessly integrating film noir with the classic "women's film." Mildred is clearly a long-suffering type who buries herself in her work. Her smothering form of love is more paternal than motherly, and the objects of her affection (daughter Veda and second husband Monty) ultimately team up to betray her, but with a murderous twist that leaves Mildred in grief-stricken distress.

WRINKLES IN DISTRESS 1: AMBITION

Ethel Whitehead / Lorna Hansen Forbes (*The Damned Don't Cry*)

Ethel's transformation into socialite Lorna Forbes echoes Joan Crawford's own real-life makeover from Texas tramp to Hollywood's gorgeous hussy. Driving it all is an overweening ambition that raises the stakes for Ethel as she wins the cold, calculating love

of a syndicate boss (David Brian) who ultimately forces to her choose between being a hood ornament and becoming a full-fledged member of his hoodlum empire. The peril that women face from ties to ruthless male power is fully on display here, and makes for a riveting cautionary tale.

WRINKLES IN DISTRESS 2: DESPERATION

Helen Ferguson / Patrice Harkness (*No Man of Her Own*)

In a highly implausible Woolrichian plot twist, Helen (Barbara Stanwyck) finds herself impersonating Patrice, a just-married woman killed in a train wreck. Helen is desperate for a place to land after an abusive affair with an oily big-city grifter (Lyle Bettger). Her attempt to escape into small-town domesticity is imperiled, however, when Bettger gets wind that she's still alive and comes calling with blackmail on his mind.

One of noir's most electrifying moments occurs here, when Bettger forces Stanwyck to marry him, thus ensuring that whatever family fortune she receives will be accessible to him. When Stanwyck realizes that she must kill Bettger in a desperate plan to retain her new life, the glint in her eye shows more cold-eyed resolve than we might find in any comparable male hero. It's a moment that redeems any and all plot contrivances and brings all of us into contact with the primal state of desperation.

WRINKLES IN DISTRESS 3: THE WISE-CRACKING DAME

Lily Stevens (*Road House*)

Worldly-wise, cynical Lily Stevens (Ida Lupino) is a singer who "does more without a voice" and secretly hungers for a straight-arrow man. (After all, they do say that opposites attract.) But she's being eyed by slumbering psychopath Jeffy (Richard Widmark), who comes roaring out of the closet once she rejects

him and takes up with his best friend (Cornel Wilde). There is an odd link between Lily's bloodless *sprechstimme*



and her *sangfroid* as she tries to flee from Jeffy's increasingly unhinged grasp. And there's a remarkable sexual transference of power when Lily takes matters—and Jeffy's gun—into her own hands. Jeffy says it all as he falls to the ground: "I told you she was different."

A MIXTURE OF THE TWO

Pat Cameron and Ann Martin (*Raw Deal*)

So how can a film seemingly dominated by ruthless, violent men really be the full-blooded embodiment of the warring factions within the female psyche? When you have Pat Cameron (Claire Trevor) and Ann Martin (Marsha Hunt) competing for the soul of Joe Sullivan (Dennis O'Keefe), that's how.

Narrating the film is the haunted voice of Pat, almost clairvoyantly aware that her brand of nurture, with its too-easy acceptance of the aura of the deadly male, is imperiled by the more spirited redemption offered by Ann. They are allies and rivals simultaneously, each forced to shift their ground toward the other as they try to protect Joe, shielding him from the effects of his murderous male instincts. Their interaction gives the film an unbeatable resonance that can only come from depth of feminine feeling as it confronts the fate-tinged fragility of love.

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is its gothic grace note. Witness stepdaughter Lola snitching on her hated stepmother with a tale about how, while she was a nurse to Lola's ailing mother, Phyllis intentionally opened the window to give the woman pneumonia. And that murderous, satisfied look on Phyllis's face! A touch straight out of Daphne du Maurier. And it remains unclear whether Lola's story is true or born out of resentment.

Another irony is that Nino Zachetti, Lola's hard-boiled hoodlum boyfriend, might be just another dupe for Phyllis and the only decent guy in the film—



the only one, that is, aside from Barton Keyes (Edward G. Robinson), Neff's insurance colleague and mentor.

Keyes and Neff have the key relationship in the film, the only one invested with emotion and warmth. Their depth of feeling is far more substantial than the Walter-Phyllis "conspiracy of coition." And it has an element of Greek tragedy: For all his brilliance and intuition, Keyes does not know he is investigating the man he loves. The running gag between Keyes and Neff—"I love you, too"—is not just a joke. Barton Keyes is Neff's better self. Phyllis Dietrichson, as she admits just before she dies, has no better self.

Wilder knew that he'd found

dynamite in the crackpot zeal that comes from a festering pessimism, and that he'd found a new way to portray it on-screen. He had found cheapness and desperation and dressed it up in hapless dreams of respectability. It became a template for the seductive strain of noir that soon exploded, nipping at America's heels. He'd also dressed up Cain and Chandler, whom he later characterized as weak on story but strong on atmosphere. He would revisit all this in later films, but it is in *Double Indemnity* that he first grasped it whole: an ambience that meshed character, décor, and mood, translated by lighting and camerawork into the seamless style we now call "noir."