

**SPOTLIGHT ON
SUNSET BLVD.**

By Don Malcolm
Sentinel Managing Editor

The recent deluxe DVD edition of *Double Indemnity* got me thinking about Billy Wilder and his contribution to film noir.

And that got me thinking about *Sunset Blvd.*

No, not the thoroughfare itself, though some of my fondest memories from youth revolve around that legendary, serpentine journey from the Pacific Coast Highway to downtown LA, a drive more tortuous today than ever before.

No, I mean Wilder's savage-yet-tender send-up of the grim, bizarre facts of life in Tinseltown.

These two noirs bookend the classic "dark film" era, which really comes to its Rubicon in 1950-51, as Hollywood's purge reaches its final fadeout. While *Double Indemnity* ushered in the hard-boiled crime caper, raising Cain (as in James M.) to a new level of estimable nastiness, *Sunset Blvd.* shined a shadowy, sinister beam of light into the underbelly of the movies, with a panache that is still amazing today.

One interesting fact about this film is that Wilder's mordantly witty dialogue and carefully crafted camp leads some people to the conclusion that we're not really in noir territory at all. Let me debunk that notion by quoting a higher authority, the Czar of Noir himself, Eddie Muller, who tells it like it is at his web site:

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**Film Noir Featured at
Hollywood 3-D Expo**

By Alan Rode
Sentinel Senior Editor

THE WORLD 3-D EXPO FILM FESTIVAL II, after a three-year hiatus, returned to the Egyptian Theatre in Hollywood September 8-17, featuring a collection of classics and oddities that, in some cases, hadn't been screened in half a century.

Fortunately for pop culture enthusiasts and 3-D film buffs, Jeff Joseph, producer of the 3-D Expo, reneged on the vow of 3-D abstinence he took immediately after the previous Expo, back in 2003. The first festival had taken an exhausting year to prepare.

"Although Expo I was wildly successful, we swore we never do one again," said Joseph. "But then some film elements were discovered, some studios started to be very helpful, one thing led to another ... and here we are."

The 3-D classic films shown during the festival were all 35 mm prints screened using the 'double interlock' Polaroid system. This system uses two cameras filming left-eye and right-eye images that are projected using two polarized filtered projectors that operate in synchronization. When the images are projected on a screen that maintains the polarization, 3-D glasses permit each eye to perceive the correct image. This system was used to theatrically screen the classic 3-D films during initial release back in the early 1950's and is vastly superior to the anaglyph method that uses red and blue glasses to view like-colored images.



Mitchum and Darnell dangle in the 3-D melodrama *Second Chance*.

The 35 features, screened over ten days, included several film noirs, including *The Diamond Wizard*, *Inferno*, *The Glass Web*, *I, the Jury*, and *Second Chance*. The first two films were exceptional and merit special comment.

As the 'right-eye' negative for *The Diamond Wizard* had never been exposed prior to the festival, the screening of this film was a genuine 3-D first!

The game was clearly afoot in *The Diamond Wizard* and there are few better practitioners of the noir crime drama than ace scribe John C. Higgins (*T-Men*, *Railroaded*, *Raw Deal*, *Border Incident*, and *He Walked by Night*).

The underrated Dennis O'Keefe is an American agent working in the UK, tracking down diamond thieves that killed his friend and fellow agent. It turns out that his erstwhile girl friend (Margaret Sheridan) has a foreign-born Dad who looks nothing like her and is an atomic scientist who also happens to have disappeared before some authentic-looking but artificial diamonds arrive on the underworld scene and threaten to flood the legitimate diamond market. When the clues start piling up, then Sheridan disappears, all hell starts breaking loose.

Even better was *Inferno* (1953), a top notch film that proved once again that movies don't have to have complex story lines or be laden with special effects to be richly entertaining.

Robert Ryan plays an eccentric and ruthless tycoon (a probable screenwriting nod towards Howard Hughes) who is abandoned in the California desert by his beautifully lethal wife (Rhonda Fleming) and her amoral lover (William Lundigan). As Ryan struggles to survive in the Mojave with a broken leg, the nefarious duo who left him to die cover their tracks and send the tortoise-like search effort in opposite directions.

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UNSUNG HEROES OF NOIR

CLIFFORD ODETS

By Marc Svetov

Clifford Odets (1906-1963) was the American dramatist with the greatest influence on film noir. In terms of dialogue and character portrayal he was at least the equal of the pre-eminent hard-boiled American crime writers of that era (Hammett and Chandler) who created a tough, urban, uniquely American language.

Odets listened to the streets—but he invented a language; he had to pull it out of a hat. At the point he arrives on the scene, there were no clichés to lean on—only an inner voice.

Odets could listen, hear it and write it. He fashioned the tough, witty, painfully honest and ultra-sarcastic talk we now associate with novelists like Saul Bellow and Philip Roth. In addition, he fashioned a certain cynical, wily Hollywood chatter—the banter of the wiseguys, with words and phrases that ensnare, go straight to the heart and wound, heightening drama, starkly illuminating his characters' inner workings.

His stories are shot through with aspiring actresses, small-time hoods, megalomaniacal producers, sacrificing agents, abused and tragic wives, go-get-a-buck-at-any-price wheeler-dealers and businessmen—all the elements defining troubled, tortured humanity in the big city.



Clifford Odets

His work became more and more self-referential over time—later, the palette expands to include ruined, drunken actors, the hopeless and the doomed, dwellers in tinsel, cheap movie whores—anyone whose integrity has been bartered away, a sweaty, breathless pantheon of the wracked and wounded.

He showed the underbelly of the go-after-it ethic—success, which tastes bitter, and then its myriad of indignities, the shame of prostitution to gain it, those who have sacrificed everything to get the golden ring—its worship in America, and its holowness.

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CHANDLER SANS MARLOWE

**GRAPHIC NOVEL IS
BASED ON '40s
SCRIPT, NOT BOOK**

Let's celebrate the American release of an interesting "graphic novel" version of Raymond Chandler's original screenplay version of *Playback*, which did not feature Philip Marlowe. (It was only after the screenplay was shelved by Universal—after shelling out \$100,000 to Chandler for writing it—that it was transformed into the seventh Marlowe novel.)

This screenplay was published previously (*The Mysterious Press' Raymond Chandler's Unknown Thriller*), but it's taken twenty years for graphic novelists to pick up on it as a source of inspiration.

As is often the case, we see the French deriving fresh inspiration in noir themes: Paris-based graphic artists Ted Benoit and Francois Ayroles collaborated to produce a rough-hewn, shadow-laden exercise in black-and-white that does justice to the visual elements clearly present in Chandler's screenplay.



The story has a classic flashback sequence early on, where the mysterious woman, Betty Mayfield, is shown to have a serious burden from the past. Her murder conviction is overturned by a judge, and it is a most unpopular decision, forcing her to go on the run. Her travels take her to Vancouver, where she winds up mixed up in another murder. In yet another plot element borrowed from *Laura*, the policeman assigned to the

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Clifford Odets (cont'd from pg. 1)

In a sense, he boosted failure—he saw human dignity was contained in the struggle, in a series of humiliations and contradictions, which formed depth and led often to a moment of truth when there comes a side-stepping of the hectic pursuit of status and what is termed success; well, his was a vote for the losers. It remains, if you take him seriously, something revolutionary.

Odets was a politically aware writer who nevertheless shunned even his own politics when writing about living human beings. There was something in what he portrayed that said things were simultaneously doomed, yet one could still have hope; something fundamentally pessimistic in tone and at the same time erupting in hope for—us? We all die, we fail in the end—but he made it make human sense because what he created was a drama showing it to be like that. And, moreover, there was some dignity.

He started out in the Great Depression as a dramatist with the Group Theater in New York. “The Group” was a geysier of major talents; Lee J. Cobb, John Garfield, Frances Farmer, Luther Adler, Art

of J.J. Hunsecker was modeled on Walter Winchell, because there were other columnists at that time wielding such power; it was a final handful of nails in the coffin, and the day when these types of columnists could define what the public thought was gone for good. Odets’ concise, threatening banter, ever drawing blood, is unbeatable here. “Making it” à la film noir is defined as going to hell down a sordid, increasingly slippery slope.

Clash By Night (1952), directed by Fritz Lang, is notable for its malicious dysfunctional groupings of sad couples, with Paul Douglas dominating the picture, begging Barbara Stanwyck to stoop to love a poor slob like him, was true Odets fare.

His penchant for pointed, hysterical dialogue was perhaps best epitomized in *The Big Knife* (1955), directed by Robert Aldrich, with Jack Palance, Rod Steiger, Ida Lupino, Shelley Winters—and Wendell Corey in an unforgettable supporting role as an utterly ruthless corporate henchman burying the bodies for a dictatorial, histrionic Hollywood mogul. This is Odets’ ultimate statement about Hollywood, as seen through the lens of one man’s moral decline and self-destruction. The over-the-top dialogue and melodrama heated to the



A tense supper-club seminar in *Sweet Smell of Success*; Odets adapted the screenplay from Ernest Lehman’s novella *Tell Me About It Tomorrow*.

Smith, Franchot Tone, Howard Da Silva, Roman Bohnen, Morris Carnovsky, Karl Malden, Leif Erikson, Elia Kazan. Individually and collectively, these artists laid the foundation of the toughly urban, true-to-life, tragically bittersweet style, which would later inform Film Noir. The Group and Odets, their greatest dramatist, epitomized a naturalistic American stage with an urban setting—and Hollywood used them all.

Odets’ key screenplays include: *The Sweet Smell of Success* (1957), with Burt Lancaster and Tony Curtis, a devastating movie whose knife-wielding dialogue fairly stabs a hole in the audience’s head. What an array of pathetic, monstrous, fetching double-dealers, street-wise innocents, including the faux naïf sister of the all-powerful J.J. Hunsecker, who actually knows how to defend herself against her big brother and the complete cynic Sidney Falco: she will either throw herself off the balcony or deflate and defang her big brother’s attempts to ruin her prospects for an independent happiness by leaving him flat.

How empathetic Odets could be about Hunsecker, however, still knowing him to be a louse! I don’t go for the idea that Lancaster’s vicious, pathetic portrayal

boiling point seem to confirm Odets’ claim of being inspired by opera. It is similar to a feeling I always got with early Scorsese films set in New York—a melodrama translated into filmed opera.

Odets wrote the screenplay for a Cornell Woolrich novel for *Deadline at Dawn* (1947), with Susan Hayward, Bill Williams, and Paul Lukas in an unusual role done so amiably and smoothly, leading to a finish with its still surprising but typically Woolrich twist.

Odets wrote the most muscular, concisely self-searching words in all of film noir; he was its poet. Published work consists of: *Six Plays*, *Sweet Smell of Success* (screenplay) and *The Time Is Ripe: The 1940 Journal of Clifford Odets*, all still in print. Other key dramas, almost all of which became screenplays/films, were published in the following order: *Night Music* (1940), *Clash By Night* (1942), *The Big Knife* (1949), *The Country Girl* (1951).

While some feel his use of language is dated and over-wrought, Clifford Odets clearly cut a swath through his own times, casting a significant shadow over the evolution of “urban film” for half a century. His work remains credible and, in many cases, enthralling. You won’t get it anywhere else.



Playback (cont'd from pg. 1)

case falls in love with Betty and tries to find ways of exonerating her, but finds himself conflicted by his feelings and his sense of duty as pieces of evidence emerge that appear to put her in a damaging light.

The final sequence, where Betty is being spirited away on a boat, possibly by the real culprit, is quite affecting; it would have made for a visually arresting *denouement*, one that could have approached the level of expansive intensity that pervades *Double Indemnity*. The above panels give an idea of how gripping this final sequence would have been if filmed in the “high forties” noir style that was in vogue at the time Chandler originally worked on the script (1947-48).

The original *Playback*, as rendered here, really shows that Chandler was no one-trick pony when it came to noir. Here is another script that validates his ability to bring off an intricate mystery without resort-

ing to the voice and persona of Philip Marlowe.

The American edition, recently made available after having been published in France in 2005, features an excellent introductory essay by film historian/noir aficionado Philippe Garnier, whom some of you will remember from his commentary in the recently-released A.I. Bezzerides documentary.

There’s no question that this version of *Playback* is preferable to the reworked Marlowe title that was published a year before Chandler’s death. It’s readily available at low prices, so be sure to snap one up. In the wake of our disappointment with recent neo-noir releases, it would be sensational if someone would be inspired by the work of Benoit and Ayroles and take the next logical step, which would be to produce a full-blown “period neo-noir” from Chandler’s top-notch but long-overlooked effort.

—Don Malcolm

Marlowe (cont'd from pg. 2)

In one sense, this is interesting in that it gives us an informal ranking of Chandler’s novels in terms of their quality and style. But from another perspective, it just doesn’t seem right that those two books should be left holding the bag.

Descriptions of Los Angeles are rather skimpy in this volume, and while some of that may stem from Asher’s attempt to avoid retracing the steps taken by Silver and Ward, it does tend to make the book seem incomplete. *The High Window* has many evocative descriptions of specific Los Angeles places; how hard would it have been to utilize at least one quote from the book? For example:

Bunker Hill is old town, lost town, shabby town, crook town. Once, very long

Tornatore Returns with “Noirish” *Stranger*

ROME — Five years after his sensual Sicily-set *Malena*, Giuseppe Tornatore returns to the screen with a psychological thriller featuring an enigmatic Eastern European *au pair*, played by Margherita Buy.

“It’s a tale of mystery revolving around the emotional life of a strange woman,” the Sicilian director has said.

La Sconosciuta, to be entitled *The Stranger* for U.S. audiences, is budgeted at roughly E8 million (\$9.4 million), and produced by Medusa, which co-produced *Malena* with Miramax.

“Though there are no killers hiding in the shadows or investigators hot on their heels,” *La Sconosciuta* may become labeled a noir,” said Tornatore. The film was shot in Trieste, the melancholy windswept Eastern Italian seaport where James Joyce wrote *Ulysses*.

ago, it was the choice residential district of the city, and there are still standing a few of the jigsaw Gothic mansions with wide porches and walls covered with round-end shingles and full corner bay windows with spindle turrets. They are all rooming houses now, their parquet floors are scratched and worn through the once glossy finish, and wide sweeping staircases are dark with time and with cheap varnish laid over generations of dirt. In the tall rooms haggard landladies bicker with shifty tenants. On the wide cool front porches, reaching their cracked shoes into the sun, and staring at nothing, sit the old men with faces like lost battles.

So while *The Long Goodbye* is arguably Chandler’s greatest literary achievement, it’s clear that he had his word mojo working back in those early days, too. And there are analogous passages in *Playback* that deserve a place in such a collection.

These are minor quibbles, however. The seductive power of Chandler’s prose will win you over, and you will be glad to have this tiny volume available to tuck into a coat pocket or a purse and keep on hand to get a daily dose of Marlowe—something that no one venturing out onto the mean streets should be without.

—Don Malcolm

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