

ANN SAVAGE TRIBUTE



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IN MEMORIAM

ANN SAVAGE



By Eddie Muller
Special to the *Sentinel*

ANN SAVAGE CHANGED MY LIFE . . . TWICE.

The first time was in the dead of night more than 35 years ago, when she snuck into my room via a small portable black-and-white TV and scared the living daylights out of me.

I was in high school, in the early stages of film geek-dom. A wise old cinema sage—he was maybe 30—told me that I'd seen nothing until I'd watched a little B picture from 1945 called *Detour*. "Wait'll you get a load of Vera," he said. "The meanest woman in the history of movies, bar none."

Vera did not disappoint. She was unlike anything I'd ever seen before, and I fell instantly in love. For me (and for many others, as I'd come to learn), she was the Circe of

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BLACK AND WHITE AND READ ALL OVER

DAHL, DEADLINES DOMINATE NC7

By Haggai Elitzur
Special to the *Sentinel*

For January, San Francisco's weather was unusually warm and sunny, but the atmosphere was dark and desperate indoors at the Castro Theatre, as it always is for the NOIR CITY film festival. On this, the festival's seventh outing, most of the selections fell into the theme of newspaper noir.

Arlene Dahl: Down-to-Earth Diva

This year's special guest was the still-beautiful redhead Arlene Dahl, whose two 1956 features screened as a double bill. *Wicked as They Come* was a British production featuring Dahl as a social climber seducing her way across Europe. *Slightly Scarlet*, a Technicolor noir filmed by John Alton, paired Dahl with Rhonda Fleming as bad-girl / good-girl sisters, a tantalizing twosome of flame-haired stunners who were surely born to costar in exactly this kind of a movie.

In her onstage interview with festival host Eddie Muller, following a compilation of her film clips from the 1940s through the 1960s, Dahl entertained everyone with her sharp memories and warm recollections of the film business. While appearing in a musical in New York, on her first trip east from her home state of Minnesota, she was discovered by Jack Warner. He threw her right into the spotlight, costarring her with Dennis Morgan in Technicolor for her first appearance in front of the camera. She switched to the more apprecia-



Eddie Muller and Arlene Dahl onstage at the Castro

David M. Allen

tive MGM when Warner Bros. was tardy in renewing her contract.

Dahl described meeting a large group of friendly stars, including Gary Cooper, on her very first day on the Warner Bros. lot. She also offered some brief details about her two-year involvement with JFK, which was set up by Joe Kennedy himself. It was a spellbinding interview with a great star; Dahl made it clear that she loved the huge crowd that turned out that night, and the feeling was definitely mutual.

Newspaper Noir: Reactions from the Audience

NOIR CITY 7's media theme covered nearly two-thirds of the films shown, and proved very popular. "We couldn't find everything that should have been shown," noted Muller. "Even though the Film Noir Foundation has made great strides, there's still a lot of work to be done." He cited two films—Joseph Losey's *The Lawless* (1950) and Cy Endfield's *The Underworld Story* (1950)—as examples of films still needing rescue. "If we'd been able to screen those in this festival, it would

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FUNNY GAMES AND THE HISTORY OF HOSTAGE NOIR

By Marc Svetov
Sentinel Contributing Editor

German writer-director Michael Haneke's *Funny Games* (2007) follows a simple plot: Two prep school-aged louts in short pants and white gloves (Michael Pitt, Brady Corbet) invade a middle-class family sanctum inhabited by a father (Tim Roth), mother (Naomi Watts), and son vacationing in upstate New York. They proceed to humiliate and torment the family. No reason is shown. The violence occurs off-screen throughout the film, but the special effects are acoustically omnipresent and unambiguous as the violence is perpetrated.

Funny Games is a Hollywood remake of Haneke's 1997 German film of the

same title. It is not clear why he remade it, since it is shot-for-shot identical aside from the different, English-speaking actors and the American setting. Perhaps the reason had something to do with Ms. Watts, whom Haneke admires and who returned the compliment by acting as his producer.

There are two models for Haneke's film. The 1924 murders perpetrated by Leopold and Loeb provide the *ur*-model for the "inexplicable" killers. Alfred Hitchcock's dissection of vaguely brilliant preppy killers in *Rope* (1948) is, of course, also a benchmark. In addition, Richard Fleischer (*Compulsion* [1959]) and Tom Kalin (*Swoon* [1992]) provide contrasting but equally iconic versions of real-life botched kidnappings.

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Naomi Watts in *Funny Games*

HOSTAGE (cont'd from pg. 1)

But there is also a choice list of noirs dealing with families taken hostage.

Storm Fear (1955), produced and directed by Cornel Wilde, starred Wilde alongside Dan Duryea and Jean Wallace (Wilde's real-life wife). It portrays a not-very-wholesome family disintegrating rapidly under the duress of an invasion by a bank-robbing brother (Wilde), wounded during a robbery. He arrives at his brother's mountain cabin home with his two accomplices to hide from the police during a seemingly endless winter snowstorm. The "good" brother (Duryea) is actually the bad brother, however: a bitter, sickly, failed writer. The strange twist [spoiler alert!] is that the wife is Wilde's former lover and still in love with him, and that Wilde is the real father of the couple's son.

The Night Holds Terror (1955), written and directed by Andrew L. Stone with Jack Kelly as the husband and father and Hilda Parks as the wife, deals with a family at the mercy of invading criminals John Cassavetes, Vince Edwards, and David Cross.

In *Suddenly* (1954), directed by Lewis Allen, Sterling Hayden is a cop in a small California town, and Frank Sinatra is an ex-Army sharpshooter who passes through and holds a family hostage in order to assassinate the President.

Cry Terror! (1958), also written and directed by Stone and starring Rod Steiger, James Mason, Neville Brand, and Inger Stevens, is a strange blend of terrorist tactics and traditional hostage-taking on the part of a criminal gang.

The convicted killer (Marshall Thompson) in *Dial 1119* (1950) has escaped from an insane asylum and quickly proceeds to steal a gun from a

bus driver, kill him, and take five people hostage in a bar.

The finest of all hostage noirs is *The Desperate Hours* (1955), directed by William Wyler, with Fredric March and Humphrey Bogart as its two dueling protagonists.

Why were so many hostage noirs released in the 1950s, the decade of middle-class dreams of suburban peace and harmony? Recovering from the not-too-distant national traumas of World War II and the Depression, America took to heart a triad of wholesome, moralistic received beliefs: raising a family, being a decent neighbor, respecting the law. Yet filmmakers in those years were obsessed with nightmarish portrayals of the violent invasion of this world by criminals.

What is interesting, however, is that the family is usually shown to be capable of defending itself, often resorting to violence to escape its captors and save the lives of loved ones. This can culminate in rather gruesome and sadistic scenes, as in *Suddenly*, when one of the criminals is literally fried to death via a massive electric shock contrived by granddad with the assistance of the TV repairman.

In *The Desperate Hours*, Fredric March is Bogart's doppelgänger. Bogart even acknowledges it, remarking on how he sees the wheels whirring in March's mind as the family father schemes against him. The escaped convict sees his own ruthlessness reflected in March, but this mirror image is also the man Bogart never became, the man

who went right. Bogart also embodies March's selflessness. But while March's extends to his entire family, Bogart's extends only to his kid brother. Ultimately, each man displays a mirrored appetite for destruction.

Jack Kelly in *The Night Holds Terror* intends to do as much harm as he can to his family's tormenters, holding back only to spare his wife and two children, since at least two of the three criminals are homicidally unpredictable. But the bad blood between Kelly and Vince Edwards threatens to unhinge things, and Kelly is barely pulled back from primal vigilantism.

There is a deep ambiguity in these hostage noirs. While the family's right to defend itself is not questioned, there is an ever-present knowledge that its wealthy idyll has been gained at the expense of those cast out by society. The narratives hold up a mirror to America, showing that the American dream is not created equal and leaves many out in the cold.

Our feelings toward the hostage takers consistently veer toward empathy. Bogart in *The Desperate Hours* is ultimately a truly pathetic man, while kid brother Dewey Martin becomes an inadvertent victim—the true victim in the film, in fact. The pitiable loneliness of a loser hovers about Sinatra's character in *Suddenly*, while Cornel Wilde's portrayal of the criminal in *Storm Fear* is outright sympathetic. While Marshall Thompson in *Dial 1119* and Neville Brand in *Cry Terror!* are clearly psychopaths, they are also lamentable persons for whom one feels pity.

Nor are the "good guys" always angels. Even Jack Klugman, an accomplice of terrorist mastermind Rod Steiger in *Cry Terror!*, gets to display signs of having moral scruples about killing kids in cold blood, thus hinting at the possibility of redemption, morality, and the limits of evil, even for bad guys such as he.

The filmmakers of an older era who made hostage noirs were not naive. In *The Desperate Hours*, director Wyler shows a clear understanding of what drives people to do evil, to



Marshall Thompson holds bar patrons hostage in *Dial 1119* (top); Humphrey Bogart terrorizes Martha Scott in *The Desperate Hours* (center); Vince Edwards threatens Hilda Parks as cohort David Cross watches in *The Night Holds Terror* (bottom left); and Naomi Watts is confronted by homicidal teens Michael Pitt and Brady Corbett in *Funny Games*



inflict sadistic acts on "nice folks." He knew what it was that had to be defended, too.

Funny Games is a spawn of this tradition, but the ambiguity has been tossed out with the bathwater. In an interview, Haneke claimed, "[I wanted to] show real people who suffer real pain." But, like all directors of fiction, he employs actors who are only actors; thus what he shows is actually not too different from what any Hollywood action film shows: actors pretending to suffer pain.

Others who have tackled this fundamental dilemma of bringing more realism to their art, such the Italian neorealists or Robert Bresson (one of Haneke's role models as a filmmaker), found more convincing solutions. Comparing *Funny Games* with Bresson's pessimistic-but-moral masterpiece *Au hazard Balthasar* (1966) reveals that Haneke shares his mentor's dispassionate technique, but none of his compassion.

Even more here than elsewhere in his oeuvre, Haneke is didactic. He seems to be lecturing to the audience through his characters, in the form of a harangue directed at present-day America. It seems that he wishes to sting them for their viewing habits, their voyeurism and taste for violence. Among his devices is the breaking down of the so-called fourth wall. The two young killers talk directly to the camera, and one of them uses a remote-control reverse-action device to erase the death of the other young killer, presumably to frustrate the audience's expectations.

Haneke's "alienation effects" are anything but new; they've been a staple of the avant-garde since the birth of modernism. The film's intentions are painfully obvious. Goethe had an apt quote for this: "One infers the intention and one is annoyed." Carrying Haneke's stated goals to a new level of extremity, *Funny Games* defiantly denies the audience its catharsis—ironic, given Haneke's credo that film is catharsis! What remains is an unpleasant taste, and the feeling that *Funny Games* is trying to say that the victims—the family members, in their splendid, obliviously privileged isolation—deserve what is happening to them.

Such a stance may seem edgy in its now-timely anti-Americanism, but the real result is to rob the film of any tension or ambiguity. Nothing in the story keeps you waiting to see what will happen next, since the plot is predictable. Its protagonists, killers and family alike, make little sense as people and less than that in terms of what they do. They remain flat and abstract. Haneke's film tries to kidnap the concept of humanism itself—a quality that was never discarded in the 1950s hostage noirs, even at their most unseemly—and botches the job. ■

NOIR CITY 7 (cont'd from pg. 1)

have made for a pretty definitive examination of the theme."

As it was, viewers still got to enjoy quite an array of features. Well-known titles (*Ace in the Hole* [1951], *Sweet Smell of Success* [1957], *While the City Sleeps* [1956], *The Big Clock* [1948]) mixed with some rarities (*Shakedown* [1950], *Blind Spot* [1947], *Chicago Deadline* [1949], *Night Editor* [1946]) to both captivate and baffle audiences, who found an interesting historical resonance in the media theme.

Two that evoked especially positive responses were *Shakedown* (thanks to the shameless antics of Howard Duff's character) and *The Unsuspected* (1947, with its scintillating cinematography and a great performance by Claude Rains). "I was surprised to find that Wednesday night's double-feature of *While the City Sleeps* and *Shakedown* was the best-attended night of the entire festival," Muller commented. "It says everything about the San Francisco filmgoing audience. They are the savviest fan base anywhere, and they love noirs (*Shakedown*) set in their hometown."

And then there's Humphrey Bogart. "The affection for Bogie is timeless," noted Alan Rode, Film Noir Foundation board member. "He

puts a smile on everyone's face."

Both Bogart films—*Deadline-U.S.A.* (1952) and *The Harder They Fall* (1956)—received extremely enthusiastic responses.

S.F.—NOIR CITY Bond Continues

Huge audiences, frequently reaching into four figures, packed the seats night after night. The collective experience of seeing these often-obscure films in high-quality prints with large, appreciative audiences is unmatched. The pleasure is, certainly, largely attributable to the combination of San Francisco filmgoers' love of noir and the top-notch venue, the Castro Theatre.

NOIR CITY's radius has already expanded to Los Angeles, Seattle, and Washington DC, with Chicago coming in summer 2009. Plans are also in motion for a transatlantic festival in France, ground zero for the first identification and celebration of film noir as a genre.

No matter how far-flung the circuit becomes, however, there's no question that San Francisco has earned the title Muller bestowed on it during the very first NOIR CITY in 2003. "This is noir city. Not New York. Not L.A. My hometown, San Francisco." ■



Images of NOIR CITY 7: Ms. Noir City 2009, Alycia Tumlin, stops traffic in front of the Castro Theatre (top left); a full house watches the Wednesday-night double feature (middle left); Bill Arney, the "voice" of NOIR CITY, in the booth (above); shipping cans filled with brand-new prints from Universal (left)
All photos by David M. Allen