LATEST DVD NEWS

Noir City Sentinel

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MARK THOSE CALENDARS

DATES SET FOR NOIR CITY 6

Frisco Fest Shaping Up As Biggest Yet

NOIR CITY 6, the latest edition of the most popular film noir festival in the world, will be held January 25 - February 3, 2008 in San Francisco, California. Once again, the historic Castro Theatre, one of the nation's few remaining movie palaces (built in 1922), will serve as the host venue.

Producer Eddie Muller and programmer Anita Monga maintain the program will again feature a number of films that haven't been screened in 35mm for decades. "The studios are more responsive than ever to our search for obscure but worthwhile titles," says Monga. "Which means we'll again be able to surprise audiences with some movies not available anywhere else at this time."

It is also expected that the Film Noir Foundation's first full restoration project, the 1950 classic *The Prowler*, will have its debut screening at NOIR CITY. Work on the film is currently underway at the UCLA Film and Television Archive.

"We'll soon announce the lineup of films," says Muller. "Expect an eclectic assortment. Ten days, 21 films. That's the plan. Plus lots of additional surprises."

PSYCHIATRISTS IN FILM NOIR

SINISTER SHRINKS

A Quick Taxonomy of the "Couch Trip"

By Don Malcolm
Sentinel Managing Editor

Psychoanalysis and film noir? A natural combination. With so much aberrant behavior abounding in its reels, noir has a direct pipeline to all matters of character deterioration.

There's a broader cultural context for the infiltration of Freudian ideas into American film, of course, and there is a wealth of academic literature showing how film is a medium most suited for displaying psychological concepts.

But it is clear that film noir made the most consistent use of these ideas, and often employed the psychiatrist as a central character. We're going to focus on those films within the noir canon that made the psychiatrist a pivotal portion of the story and theme.

And, yes, an entire film festival can be constructed from this sub-genre of noir: more than two dozen noirs have a psychological specialist, often distinguished from the rest of the cast by his pipe-smoking habit, either solving a crime, caring for a troubled patient, failing to cure a patient (sometimes with fatal results), or using their powers of mind for self-serving (and often downright malevolent) purposes.

Let's look at the categories:

SURROGATE-DETECTIVES:*Blind Alley, Conflict, The Dark Mirror, The Dark Past, Experiment Perilous, Possessed*

Not every one of these surrogate Sherlock Holmeses is a pipe-smoker (Lew Ayres, in *The Dark Mirror*, prefers lemon drops), but you get the idea.

Every one of these psychiatrists is engaged in some kind of cat-and-mouse game with a troubled, often violent person.

Blind Alley is the template here; made in 1939, it's not quite noir, but has lots of locked-room tension between pipe-chomping Ralph Bellamy (in a surprisingly nuanced performance) and gun-toting Chester Morris, who has a dark secret from his childhood that the doctor must reveal in order to neutralize him. (*The Dark Past*, in the post-WWII wave of noir, is a very close remake).

The most offbeat of these films is the period "melo-noir" *Experiment Perilous*, which boasts one of the earliest historical

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FNF Opens MySpace "Hideout"

Announcing the launch of the Film Noir Foundation on Myspace! We have taken up residence in a dark alley in the vast metropolis that is Myspace.com and you're invited to come on by and knock back a few. If you aren't already on Myspace it's easy to set up an account, then you can join the fellow noirheads and FNF members out there in cyberspace. We will feature a weekly rotating trailer of the week showcasing a classic Noir film trailer, tons of pictures, posters and most importantly - you! The whole idea behind Myspace is social networking so it will be a forum for discussion with a weekly topic or opinion poll but mostly it is a place to gather like a digital local watering hole. We're just the bartenders, you're the skirts, molls, gunsels, henchmen, goons, brutes, pretty boys and dames who make it what it is. So sign up, chat away, and invite your friends for a dark ol' time. It only works if you spread the word. Just this once, we encourage you to sing like a bird and give away the address to our little hideout:

www.myspace.com/filmnoirfoundation

Emigrés In Noir

MAX OPHULS

NOIR'S STEALTHY MODERNIST

By Marc Svetov
Special to the Sentinel

MAX OPHULS WAS A DIRECTOR who had to be a sneak. To make the films he wanted—and to put in what was initially disapproved by the studio brass—was a matter of the director being, as Martin Scorsese termed it, a "smuggler."

James Mason remarked on the ways of dealing with front office constraints on maverick directors, citing the examples of Max Ophuls and Orson Welles: "Ophuls was sufficiently sophisticated to know what Fier [Jack Fier, Columbia production office representative for *The Reckless Moment*] stood for, to understand his job, to know he was a hatchet-man, whereas Welles was too immature, really, to give people credit for trying to do their jobs conscientiously." Welles had just finished *The Lady from Shanghai* at Columbia, where he had coined the public complaint issued against the studio and front office encompassed in the protest: "We have nothing to fear but Fier himself." Whereas Ophuls, despite studio interference, managed original concepts of art and filmmaking, albeit often through charm and stealth.

Among the émigrés, however, he appears to be the one who was most recalcitrant in adapting to the United States. His acclimation was worse than even Fritz Lang's , and certainly worlds apart from younger émigré directors like Robert Siodmak and Billy Wilder, who quickly felt comfortable and established. Ophuls' habits and tastes remained European, even old-fashioned; despite this, he proved to be a filmmaking revolutionary—perhaps against his will.

Max Ophuls (1902-1957) was born in Saarbrücken on the French-German border. While he was more than a little contemptuous of Hollywood, he succeeded in doing his best work there. His best films—two noirs: *Caught* (1949) and *The Reckless Moment* (1949)—were done while working under tight studio-dictated budget and time constraints, demands Ophuls always managed to

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OPHULS *(cont'd from pg. 1)*

meet, albeit by his own methods. By story and modern urban setting, shadows-and-light camerawork, both films rate as full-blooded noirs. Consider those key scenes in *The Reckless Moment* where a visual chorus of quivering shadows is commenting on the psychological state of the protagonists, as the silhouettes of every branch of pine needles—indeed, each leaf, shaken by the wind through the trees—flits across the walls and their faces. It is a striking image. Max Ophuls was a strange fish—you might say one out-of-water. He was a man of the theater; he had been the director of countless plays on the provincial German stage and advanced to Berlin in the early thirties. His mind and aesthetics were molded, in Europe, by the German and French classics; he had a literary bent, clearly seen in his choice of film subjects while on the Continent.

Yet Ophuls evolved into a supreme film modernist.

His theatrical foundation was manifest in a lifelong preference for ensemble work; in his use of lengthy tracking shots; in his practice of long rehearsals alone with actors, in the absence of the film crew, before cameras rolled. He once remarked how he abhorred cuts in movies.

Those long shots were Ophuls' trademark: he thought in terms of a mobile *mise en scène*. In addition to the traveling shots, there was the crab dolly—it could move the camera up and down as well as sideways, go above and follow behind. His avoidance of close-ups and the stretched traveling shots set him apart and made him subversive in relation to Hollywood classicism, which tended toward short takes, covering shots, close-ups of the stars. His words: "Moving pictures should move." At the wrap party for *The Reckless Moment*, the crew presented Ophuls with a pair of roller skates, "to keep up with the camera" on his next film.

Ophuls' theatrical predilections were both his greatest strength and greatest weakness. His editor on *Caught*, Robert Parrish, noted: "With Max, first of all, you couldn't cut these shots, because they were designed; they were moving. And this sharp, clever man knew that's what would have to be the picture." Ophuls thought and conceived his films in these dolly and tracking shots, with prolonged takes—not as separate, individual images. His visual thought formed itself in dramatic scenes, like in the theater.

Yet this style proved astonishingly modern in mid-twentieth century film.

Above: Max Ophuls on the set in Hollywood, 1948.

Right: Barbara Bel Geddes and Robert Ryan in *Caught*.

Consider one famous scene in *Caught*, an extended and idiosyncratic shot where Dr. Quinada (Mason) is pacing about, talking to his partner Dr. Hoffman (Frank Ferguson) while going back and forth between adjoining doorways, from his office to his partner's office, paying no attention to any camera, leaving the room and disappearing. This scene made the studio tear its hair out: what a way of shooting a scene, with a star like Mason! It went against all current ideas for a star, without a close-up in sight. But Mason was in agreement with Ophuls, and wanted to do it that way. At the same time, Ophuls did away with rules for shooting a master scene—it looks as though the camera were eavesdropping, not shooting.

Ophuls was the exception proving the rule on women in film noir. He made two "feminist" films. In film noir, ladies in lead roles ended up being, more often than not, either femmes fatales or hapless victims. Yet in this director's imagination, his two main female protagonists—Barbara Bel Geddes as Leonora and Joan Bennett as Lucia Harper—are strong dames. Ophuls rendered them as active players in their lives without being evil witches; this artistic and ethical choice was in notable contrast to many of his male contemporaries.

In his European films, before and after his stint in America, women in his movies appeared concerned with their sexual life alone. Joan Bennett in *The Reckless Moment* is light years removed from that; look how tough and hardboiled she is in addressing Darby during their first meeting. Leonora in *Caught* learns not to rely on her sexy figure and girlish charm: once she is confronted by a selfish, sadistic and possessive "dream husband," she finds herself a job and a new meaning in life.

Nor would Ophuls allow any of the figures in his two noirs to be parodies either. We never see what amounts to a denunciation of a human being, something done more often in movies and literature than is generally acknowledged (the sole exception: Bea's loutish boyfriend Darby in *The Reckless Moment*). Robert Ryan's portrayal of the driven, egotistical and psychopathic multi-millionaire Smith Ohlrig in *Caught* is a villain if there ever was one—yet it is a portrayal far surpassing parody. Ophuls' conscious fantasies here, at the time, were set on satirizing Howard Hughes and Preston Sturges. When Smith Ohlrig orders Leonora to play hostess to his businessmen-guests well after midnight, taunting and humiliating her, the director claimed that this was identical to how he'd seen Sturges act with his own wife.

Sturges was a disaster: Ophuls' disappointment in the wartime comedy director/writer was complete. After he'd languished in Hollywood for four years since arriving in 1941, his first directing job came through Sturges' independent company, Cal-Pix, whose financial backer was Hughes. Soon after, however, Sturges took away the film from him. No reason was given. He not only took it away, he actively humiliated the émigré director. Hilde Ophuls later claimed it was because Sturges could not allow another director to do a picture without interfering and eventually taking it over.

Ophuls' longing for the Old World and its culture overcame him eventually. Late in 1949, he left America for France. At the time, he was still under contract with Walter Wanger and fully intended to return. Soon after, in Europe, he wished he was back and said so many times. But he would never return to America.

His Hollywood work had been accomplished under budget, under deadline. Great films entailed getting away from visual convention: due to serendipity, something unexpected like a delay, for instance, Ophuls would get in another of his beloved tracking shots, especially when he had temporarily fallen behind schedule. Squeezed into a lengthy tracking shot were several condensed script-pages from a few scenes. The only extra costs involved were in cutting open three walls of an interior in order to move the camera around, a crane needed to film at 180 or 360 degrees, or laying down track. The front office would request covering shots from alternative angles; Ophuls dispensed with these, thus using up little film. As a result, production bosses and editors found themselves helpless to alter his work. In effect, the studio was forced to accept how Ophuls filmed because he was so economical with time and money.

If the director did not exactly become another person as a filmmaker in America, he did become a more modern and focused one. America must have cleared his mind. The film noirs appear *sui generis* when seen next to his European work. Here, by virtue of his stealth, he became a modernist master, striking out in new directions. "He [Ophuls] was steadily gaining in stature, I think," said Douglas Sirk, "and developed fully only in America. There's a different handwriting … and I do think the American period, though not especially rewarding to him, helped him to arrive at his most personal style."

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SHRINKS *(cont'd from pg. 6)*

getting his feet wet. Most memorable here, perhaps, is Carlson's definition of insanity: "It's just like a nightmare, only you have it in the waking hours."

Finally, there's the evil Dr. Amthor (Otto Kruger) in *Murder, My Sweet*, whose psychological skills are part of a nasty little blackmail racket. Not too much emphasis on psychiatry here, but the effects of psychoactive drugs get an interesting treatment as we witness Dick Powell's "crazy, coked-up dream."

SUBSTITUTES: *Hollow Triumph (aka The Scar), The Lineup*

There are two types of "stand-in psychiatrists" here. The first is Paul Henreid as a ruthless crook who impersonates a psychiatrist in *Hollow Triumph*, one of noir's most cynical entries, featuring Joan Bennett at the peak of her beauty and her *weltschmerz*. Henreid discovers that psychiatry is easy, but that the man whose place he's taken has far more pressing real-life problems than he bargained for.

The second type is what we might call a "handler." This type is superbly embodied by Robert Keith in *The Lineup* as Julian, an aging crook who tries to regulate the raging aggressions of the unhinged mobster Dancer (a great performance by Eli Wallach). Julian tries to use a home-brewed mantra of stoical misogyny and soothing exhortations to keep things in hand, but it's all to no avail.

What is especially noteworthy here is the subtext: a late-50s America clearly headed for its present-day incarnation as a self-help culture, where the homeless person you bump into on the street may well be a "street healer"—or a down-on-his-luck psychiatrist!