



In this latest installment of his ongoing series “Emigrés and Noir,” **MARC SVETOV** explores the character and career of Robert Siodmak, often called “The Master of Noir.” His previous profiles of European exiles who had a major impact on the film noir movement focused on Fritz Lang, Billy Wilder, and Max Ophuls

Dresden, the childhood home of Robert Siodmak, was once called “Florence on the Elbe.” It was renowned for its baroque architecture, churches, and museums, all built under the absolutist kings of Saxony. The carpet bombing of the city in 1945 by Britain’s Royal Air Force is still viewed as a war crime by many Germans. In 1933 its thriving Jewish community numbered more than 6,000. After the fall of Hitler, only a handful of those who had survived the Holocaust returned to Dresden, which was soon to come under Communist rule.

Robert Siodmak was born in Dresden on August 8, 1900,* to a Jewish family descended from Polish rabbis—something of which *no Jecke* (German Jew) at the time would have been proud. The Siodmaks, in fact, belonged to the upper crust of Dresden’s Jewish community. His father, Ignatz, was a well-to-do businessman, and his young mother, Rosa, was a cultured and popular socialite who hosted a renowned salon in her home for people in the arts. She played an important social role for creative spirits living in, and traveling through, the Saxon capital. Robert, first born of four brothers, was his mother’s favorite.

Despite their affluence and social standing, Ignatz and Rosa Siodmak had a volatile, unhappy union. Robert was devoted to his mother but estranged from his father, who sent his eldest son to a series of boarding schools where, by his own account, he was miserable. He finally left the family fold at 18 and made his way in Berlin. His parents divorced; Rosa returned to her family in Leipzig (where she died of cancer at the early age of 39) and Ignatz sank into alcoholism.

Berlin was a center of art, film, and journalism, and one of the most exciting cities in Europe. Accompanied by his brother Curt, a fledgling writer, Siodmak arrived there in the early 1920s. He had already tried his hand as an actor in the Saxon state theater,

but, not being particularly good-looking, he’d always gotten roles as old codgers. He quickly gave up the idea of an acting career.

He resided in rooming houses and worked in a bank. He made a small fortune during the period of German hyperinflation, but lost it just as quickly. His interest in arts and culture led him to start an illustrated magazine, which he sold when he grew bored with it. Soon after, he began working as a translator, providing title cards for American silent films. Cinema quickly captured his imagination.

In the years before Hitler’s seizure of power, Berlin was the film capital of Europe; its film industry rivaled Hollywood’s in every respect. Names like Lubitsch, Murnau, Pabst, and Lang were synonymous with this heyday of creativity. One of the landmark productions from that period was *People on Sunday*



Top: a scene from the landmark 1930 Siodmak-directed *People on Sunday*. Bottom: a striking shot from his 1931 drama *Inquest*

(1930), an experimental silent film made over the course of two years on a shoestring budget with amateur actors. Siodmak directed it; Edgar G. Ulmer was his occasional codirector. It was written by Curt Siodmak and a young journalist named Billie (not yet Billy) Wilder. Eugen Schufftan was the cameraman, Fred Zinnemann an assistant. Perhaps the greatest assemblage of young talent on a single film, ever. It featured a group of “common” people and how they spent their precious Sunday. It was a huge success with the public and a forerunner of future film trends, such as the Italian Neo-Realist movement of the late 1940s and the French Nouvelle Vague a decade after that.

Siodmak was subsequently hired by Ufa, the German film conglomerate, to direct feature films. His journeyman’s piece, which has not been preserved, was a 12-minute grotesque comedy starring Felix Bressart. His first feature for Ufa was *Farewell* (1930), which critics praised for its skillful deployment of sound and voices, heightening the banal everyday realism of a drama set in a rooming house.

In his subsequent early films, Siodmak showed a predilection for subjects that could, in hindsight, be described as noir. *Looking for His Murderer* (1931), written by Curt Siodmak and Billy Wilder and based on a Jules Verne short story, concerns a suicidal man who hires an assassin to kill him but then falls in love, changes his mind, and desperately attempts to rescind the killer’s orders. The premise has been used many times since, from classics such as *The Whistler* (1944) and (in an extended sense) *D.O.A.* (1950) to modern variations such as Aki Kaurismäki’s *I Hired a Contract Killer* (1990). *Inquest* (1931) features Albert Bassermann as a magistrate who, to protect his own son, relentlessly prosecutes an innocent man . . . and later learns the man he railroaded is his son’s best friend and his daughter’s lover. *Storms of Passion* (1932), starring Emil Jannings, trolls the same Berlin hustler-and-hoodlum underworld milieu as Fritz Lang’s *M* (1931) and Phil Jutzi’s *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1931) as it relates the story of an ex-con who just can’t seem to go straight.

All these films feature enormous attention to detail in their mise-en-scène, a finely realistic observation of social milieu bordering on Naturalist aesthetics, a tearing-away of the veil of decency and respectability in middle-class life, and lying and

* Virtually all texts on Siodmak list his birthplace as Memphis. Although his father had traveled extensively in the United States during the late 1800s, his mother never set foot in America. This misinformation, perhaps created by Siodmak himself to gain a visa more easily, was perpetuated both by studio publicity flaks and by Siodmak himself to facilitate his acceptance in his adopted country during World War II.

deceit among lovers and family members, all presented with marvelously adventurous camerawork and Expressionist lighting. There is an unsparing contemplation of the tragic, unbridgeable chasms that can suddenly come between people, like unavoidable destinies. The films showed Berlin from the bottom up, from under the skin, as it were: reports of tortured human beings, but reports that avoided admonitory finger pointing.

His next film attracted unwanted attention. "Universal has just shot a film made from the unpleasant novella of [Stefan] Zweig," reported Joseph Goebbels's propaganda rag *Der Angriff* (The Attack) regarding the premiere of Siodmak's *Burning Secret* in Berlin, March 21, 1933. "In relation to its original [the film] lacks nothing in terms of sick sultriness and airless muddle-headedness. One ought to consider actually whether this sort of film should be forbidden. . . . Today more than ever one ought to demand that erotic, decent films be made and we be spared such erotic aberrations, in which even children are implicated. . . . We recommend banning it."

Following the appearance of that review, the name of every Jew—including director, producer, two film composers, and five collaborating screenwriters—was excised from the credits; only the actors' names remained. The Nazis had been in power only two months, but Siodmak was not the type to misread their intentions. His days as a film director in Germany were over. Within weeks, he left the New Germany to its "clean and decent films." Like many other self-exiled German film people he moved to Paris, with his younger brother Rolf, and proceeded to make six films in as many years. His final work there, *Pièges* (Snares, 1939), in which Maurice Chevalier plays an apparent serial murderer of lonely young women, was quite a popular and critical success. Rolf, however, shared none of his brother's good fortune. In 1933 he suffered the crueler fate of many exiles: suicide.

The day before the start of World War II, Siodmak and his wife, Bertha Odenheimer, whom he'd married in 1933, sailed for America. Curt Siodmak had already ensconced himself in Hollywood, struggling to publish science fiction but successfully working as a screenwriter on horror films. Later Curt would be a tireless promoter of his brother's directing career.

Siodmak adapted well to Hollywood's studio system. Like Fritz Lang, he loved working within the easily controlled confines of a sound stage (although he shot much of *Cry of the City* [1948] on the streets of New York in the Louis de Rochemont semidocumentary style that was popular that year). Perhaps it was Siodmak's comfort with the studio style that accounts for his work often being overlooked by later critics, who routinely denigrated studio-employed directors as merely technicians, not artists.

But in the opinion of Hervé Dumont, the foremost authority on the director, Siodmak was unsurpassed as an artist when working with subjects he favored. Far from a workman, he often crafted films using intuition and spontaneous inspiration. He actively contributed to scripts, sometimes altering them extensively. He strived to maintain an atmosphere of ambiguity in his film treatments, not at all common in studio product of the time.

It says much about his approach that he rejected producer Mark Hellinger's frequent interference in *The Killers* (1946): "Hellinger was a very sensible producer but owing to his training as a journalist, he



Top: Burt Lancaster eavesdrops as Siodmak and Mark Hellinger make on-set script revisions to *The Killers*

Middle: Siodmak relaxes with Victor Mature during the filming of *Cry of the City*

Bottom: Tony Curtis and Siodmak share a laugh on the *Criss Cross* set—one not shared by star Burt Lancaster

Opposite, left to right: Elisha Cook Jr. and Franchot Tone in *Phantom Lady*; Olivia de Havilland in a dual role in *The Dark Mirror*; Yvonne De Carlo and Burt Lancaster in *Criss Cross*

insisted that every scene had to end with a line of dialogue with a point, had to have a punch; each character became defined, in his opinion, by a revealing remark. In my view, these "tricks of the trade" kill the film's realism, and I discarded them every time he turned his back. It infuriated him, but he finally understood in the end."

Siodmak preferred his narratives to be elliptical. His thrillers were often complex to a degree that seemed positively baroque, containing flashback after flashback, a technique that clearly placed a thematic emphasis on Fate. This is especially true of *Christmas Holiday* (1944), *The Killers*, and *Criss Cross* (1949). In that last, Burt Lancaster's haunting voice-over says, "But then from the start, it all went one way. It was in the cards or it was fate or a jinx or whatever you want to call it. But right from the start . . . it was in the cards, and there was no way of stopping it."

There are three recurring, interwoven themes that run through all of Siodmak's American noirs: totalitarian, manipulative, paranoid thinking; gangsters; and the troubled family.

The elements of Nazi ideology that seep into *Phantom Lady* (1944) go far beyond the Cornell Woolrich story upon which it was based. Alan Curtis portrays a man falsely accused of murdering his wife; Ella Raines is his secretary, whose secret love for him leads her to search for evidence that will prove his innocence, and Franchot Tone is the true culprit, a serial killer of women. Tone portrays a type the Western world was coming to recognize as the SS man: a cultivated, educated intellectual, an artistic type spouting a *Herrenmensch* philosophy to justify eradicating people.

This same character type (and ideology) reappears in *The Spiral Staircase* (1945). George Brent seems to be a benign zoologist, but he is actually a serial murderer of handicapped young women who



wants to remove from the world all that is weak and imperfect. This wasn't coincidence on Siodmak's part, nor could audiences at that time miss the reference to a paranoid and murderous ideology. Such psychopathology extends into his portraits of warped family relations, too, for instance in *The Dark Mirror* (1946), where Terry, the bad sister, acknowledges no limit to her manipulative powers.

Siodmak's fascination with gangsters and the underworld often led him to treat them with sympathy, never overtly moralizing. In some films they are the heroes: from Emil Jannings in *Storms of Passion* to the operatic performance of Richard Conte in *Cry of the City* (1948) to (faricically, perhaps thanks to Wilder's input) *Looking for His Murderer*. During his peak Hollywood years, a memorable gallery of villains paraded through his films: Big Jim Colfax (Albert Dekker) and his two hit men (William Conrad and Charles McGraw) in *The Killers*, genial gambler-murderer Robert Manette (Gene Kelly) in *Christmas*



Holiday, patient-but-deadly Slim Dundee (Dan Duryea) in *Criss Cross*, smarmy swindler Tony Laredo (Richard Rober) in *The File on Thelma Jordan* (1950), exiled Lucky Luciano–styled mobster Vic Smith (Jeff Chandler) in *Deported* (1950).

Inferring facts about an artist's own psyche from the tortured, tormented souls he reveals in his films risks oversimplification, but Siodmak's treatment of families in distress could well have stemmed from his own troubled childhood. This is how he may have chosen to express intuitively what he wouldn't, or couldn't, verbalize. In every interview Siodmak gave, he presented himself as a witty, happy-go-lucky man who stayed on the surface of things, never talking about himself and all he had gone through, always ready with a diverting anecdote when things got personal. In his films, however, he reveals an abyss of hatred and raging jealousy between husband and wife (*The Suspect*, 1944) and brother and sister (*The Strange Affair of Uncle Harry*, 1945), and relationships ostentatiously built on love but suffocating with possessiveness and abuse (*Christmas Holiday*, *The Dark Mirror*)—all very disturbed and destructive. In *Christmas Holiday*, we see Deanna Durbin embracing husband Gene Kelly, her arms clasped around his neck as she sings a sweet ditty. The audience knows Kelly is a psychopath, as does his mother (Gale Sondergaard) sitting nearby, knitting and smiling. The mother-son relationship is *so* wrong, it makes an egregious farce of this domestic idyll.

To translate his thematic preoccupations into cinematic expression and imagery, Siodmak had a broad range of artistic means at his command. He deployed them expertly with his breakthrough film as an A-list director, *Phantom Lady*. With the style of lighting and camerawork that was the house standard for Universal horror pictures (courtesy of Woody Bredell), he rediscovered his Expressionist heritage, combining it with an adherence to seedy pictorial realism that fit his characters to a T and revealed, acutely, their behaviors. The camerawork heightened everyday details into a realm of dreams via shadows and pools of light, exaggerating the oneiric qualities of the story while never abandoning realism. As Dumont noted, it became "a symbiosis of the grotesque, the bizarre, the excessive, evoked by a baroque photography." As a filmmaker Siodmak was, above all, a supreme creator of atmosphere, whether he was depicting Edwardian English environs in *The Suspect* or seductive urban American nightscapes in *Criss Cross*.

Hollywood did not give me up. I gave it up. I saw what was coming," Siodmak explained in an interview in 1959. "I did not want to be caught in the transition that is going on there now. What is going on is a sort of anarchy. . . . Most of the big studios are little more than leasing organizations. The stars are in charge. These egomaniacs who want to direct and write and produce." One can only

"I did not want to be caught in the transition ... What is going on is a sort of anarchy ... Most of the big studios are little more than leasing organizations. The stars are in charge. These egomaniacs who want to direct and write and produce."

—Robert Siodmak, 1959

assume he was referring to men like Burt Lancaster, whom Siodmak had helped guide to stardom in *The Killers*, only to see the actor assume virtually total control over the production of *The Crimson Pirate* (1952), Siodmak's final American film, shot in Italy.

Hollywood studios were often shooting in Europe by then, since it was cheaper than shooting in the States; Siodmak had returned to the continent in 1950 to direct *Deported*. He mentioned in an interview at that time that he wanted to shoot a German film again. It took a couple years—and first a film in France, *Le grand jeu* (1954)—before a German film producer, Artur Brauner, brought Siodmak "home."

Robert Siodmak, "the unspoiled and agile man of the world and globetrotter . . . the original Berliner . . . just like the guy we all knew before . . . is making his Berlin comeback." This was how German newspapers in the mid-1950s commented on the director's return. In postwar Germany, the reaction to the reimmigration of émigrés called for circumscribed language that avoided any mention of expulsion or forced exile. Those who had fled persecution and run for their lives became "adventurers," who out of pure whimsy had made glamorous careers elsewhere. Likewise, Siodmak's Jewishness was never mentioned, nor did he make a point of it himself. (If Siodmak kept quiet on these subjects, his brother Curt, who remained an American citizen, did not. He wrote eloquently, and bitterly, about the postwar German mindset in his 1948 book *Epistles to the Germans*.)

The German film industry to which Siodmak returned was in the doldrums: not even second, but third-rate. Nazism had done a thorough job of destroying what had been the world's most creative film industry. German films of the 1950s—with the exceptions of Wolfgang Staudte's and Helmut Käutner's in the early years—steered clear of serious subjects, and that was how the domestic audience liked it. It was a bizarre cinematic world, characterized by escapist *Heimat* films in which wholesome, mostly blond native protagonists frolic in rural landscapes.

The last thing Germans wanted to deal with was Nazism and the war, which led to another peculiarity: American films dubbed into German bore new and uncanny fruit where the recent past was concerned. In *Notorious* (1946), the Nazis in South America are transformed into a ring of cocaine dealers, and in *Stalag 17* (1953) the German-American Bund spy (Peter Graves) is a Pole! *Casablanca* (1943) is 25 minutes shorter, with all references to Nazis and the war eliminated. Victor László is a Norwegian nuclear physicist named Victor Larsen who has made a discovery of mysterious "Delta rays," and Claude Rains, as Captain Lapont, works for Interpol.

Siodmak never actually lived in the Federal Republic. He spent his last two decades of activity in Switzerland. If he displayed great flexibility as a director, he was just as extraordinarily chameleonic in his life, adjusting to three different countries and film cultures without missing a step. He made himself well liked wherever he landed and claimed he welcomed change. Whenever he was offered work, he grabbed it.

His second German sojourn, however, marked a decline for him. There were still highlights. He made an internationally acclaimed thriller, *The Devil Strikes at Night* (1957), a film noir set in Nazi Germany with Mario Adorf as a mentally impaired serial killer. It was nominated for an Oscar for best foreign film the following year. Another—perhaps lesser—classic is *My School Chum* (1960), starring Heinz Rühmann, an actor whose public persona was too dominant for the subject of the film. He plays a post office employee, a former schoolmate of Hermann Göring, who writes a letter to the Reich Marshall asking him to end the "senseless war." Göring rushes to protect his school friend against the Gestapo . . . by having him declared insane. The film is about how a man, declared insane in a world gone mad, remains the only sane man who can tell the truth.

In Siodmak's new-old homeland, his Hollywood noirs were misunderstood and misinterpreted until a new generation of young German filmmakers came of age in the early 1960s. But even among them, he didn't get much recognition. He was seen as a "functionary," a representative of the "old-style film industry." There was no native German film criticism that encompassed the breadth of the man's career. This was in marked contrast to France, where his films were viewed as classics and a cult formed around him and other American noir directors, celebrated in the pages of *Cahiers du cinéma*.

In these last years, Siodmak collaborated with producer Artur Brauner, a native of Lodz who had survived the Holocaust and had come to Berlin after the war, to create several colossal-scale films—films in which Siodmak was not at his best. They were never truly bad, since Siodmak was incapable of making a poor film. He was a superior craftsman, but the material he had to work with was substandard. One notable, final artistic success was *Custer of the West* (1967), with Robert Shaw portraying General



A still from Siodmak's German noir *The Devil Strikes at Night* (1957), which was nominated for an Oscar for best foreign film. He was previously nominated for best director for *The Killers*

Custer. Lawrence Tierney and Marc Lawrence, old noir favorites, had supporting roles in the film, which was shot in Cinerama.

Prior to this Siodmak had shot three consecutive films based on novels by Karl May: *The Shoot* (1964), *The Treasure of the Aztecs* (1965), and *Pyramid of the Sun God* (1965)—all starring ex-Tarzan Lex Barker, an American actor in exile. These films have a bizarre, almost campy quality. In some ways they represented for the director a return to his Dresden roots, and his lost childhood.

Fifty-eight years before Siodmak's birth, Karl May was born in the town of Ernstthal, although Dresden still claims him as one of its great sons. May was—to put it mildly—an eccentric, who claimed his fantastic adventure stories were based on his own experiences, although he left Germany only twice, and that was late in his life when he was already famous. His novels featured fiery-eyed young natives (American Indians, bedouins) in faraway countries who fight the good fight against the white man (mainly the British), often with the help of a stalwart German. May was homosexual; considering the time in which he lived, he remained in the closet (he married twice), which might account for some of his erratic behavior. Being gay did not stop May from becoming the favorite author of the Führer, nor did Hitler's endorsement prevent May's books from being devoured by generations of German boys after the war. In both West and East Germany, his novels were printed in countless editions "for the youth." Karl May was the *Praeceptor Germaniae*: the teacher of Germany.

Siodmak's Karl May adaptations are seen by many critics as the low point in his creative output, and there's a lot to be said for this view. But by then, he had an extensive and prolific career behind him. He had already entered the directors' pantheon for his powerful and complex American film noirs of the 1940s. He died in Switzerland in 1973. His oeuvre encompassed 60 films. There is something to admire in each; for the noir fan, there is much to treasure. ■

UNSUNG HEROES OF NOIR

DON BEDDOE



By Eric Beetner
Special to the *Sentinel*

Noir thrives on the everyman. It loves to abuse him, pointing out the existential hopelessness of being an average guy. Don Beddoe fit the bill perfectly. Portly and balding with a bushy mustache, Beddoe could be your uncle or your neighbor and he did everything from comedy to drama to the darkest of crime films. As a noir actor his roles were typically small and featured him getting falling-down drunk, being duped by a woman half his age, putting the finger on a killer, getting hogtied and left for dead. Sometimes he was killed. Occasionally he served well as a nondescript cop or shopkeeper. Beddoe's greatest gift was his ability to be completely effective, but largely unnoticed.

Born July 1, 1903, in Pittsburgh, he was raised primarily in New York and Cincinnati where his father, a well-respected tenor, headed the local conservatories of music. He came to acting after getting two degrees in English from the University of Cincinnati, graduating Phi Beta Kappa. Active in the theater since high school, he had an idyllic picture of the business before he entered it. "When I was at the University of Cincinnati, taking part in school plays, I got the notion that an actor's life is a bed of roses. That isn't true and I quickly found that out. But then it was too late. The stage bug had bitten me."

Beddoe had made a solid reputation as a stage actor, appearing alongside such stars as Spencer Tracy, when a Columbia Pictures scout signed him to a four-year contract. In that time Beddoe made 71 pictures and became one of the go-to everymen of Hollywood. He genre-hopped throughout his career, often venturing into the darker side of the screen. Crime series? Of course: *Lone Wolf*, *Charlie Chan*, *Crime Doctor*. He also pops up in B crime pictures such as *The Big Boss* (1941), *Unholy Partners* (1941), and *Crime Inc.* (1945).

His noir appearances started with *They Won't Believe Me* (1947), in which he plays a friendly ("Howdy Mr. Ballentine!") and clueless shopkeeper who unwittingly blows the whistle on Robert Young, who is trying to hide a murderous secret. He's another oblivious everyman in *Gun Crazy* (1950), getting more trouble than he bargained for when he picks up Annie and Bart in the middle of their pistol-packing spree. He winds up bound and gagged on the side of the road, watching his car get stolen. Other crime roles included *Hideout* (1949), *Woman in Hiding* (1950), *Caged*

(1950), and *The Racket* (1951). In 1951, while filming *The Enforcer*, he was chatting with costar Humphrey Bogart when they realized they'd attended the same prep school in New York. In the movie Beddoe arranges hit men for boss Ted de Corsia. He hardly looks like a hood, which is exactly why he is able to get away with it. But this is noir, and no one gets away with it forever. Most of his story is presented as a flashback as he lies in a hospital bed, plugged full of lead.

Beddoe continued to crank them out in *The Unknown Man* (1951), *Hoodlum Empire* (1952), and *Don't Bother to Knock* (1952). In the last he plays another classic Hollywood variation on the everyman: the henpecked husband. He got the chance to play a hard, jaded cop in *The Narrow Margin* (1952), although it's hard to come off genuinely tough when playing opposite Charles McGraw. Charged with transporting witness Marie Windsor, Beddoe shows his range. (Had it not been for a script change, Beddoe could have added "bad cop" to his list of characters.)

The chance to play a bigger role came in *Loop-hole* (1954). Here he's the noir version of the everyman—the one suckered by a beautiful blonde. He doesn't willingly ruin Barry Sullivan's life, but it happens anyway as a result of his greed and his blindness to the black heart of his mistress. Once he hands over \$49,000

of bank loot to Vera (Mary Beth Hughes), her use for the pot-bellied old man disappears. It's a pitch-perfect rendition of the pathetic milquetoast. Beddoe is also memorable in *The Night of the Hunter* (1955), Charles Laughton's brilliant Gothic noir. Once again, he's masterfully oblivious.

After 1955 he tapered off his work schedule and settled down to a quieter life with his wife, Joyce. Off-screen his life truly was that of an everyman. He had a stable marriage, a daughter, and no hint of scandal in a career that spanned more than four decades. He continued to work sporadically in television and movies until he retired officially in the mid-1980s. He died in 1991 of natural causes.

Save this one for the next time you need to break out some noir trivia: Don Beddoe had the curious experience of being in three films with the same title over a span of 21 years: *Scandal Sheet* (1931), *Scandal Sheet* (1939), and *Scandal Sheet* (1952). All different films with different plots, unified only by that face you're certain you know from somewhere. . . . Is he your uncle? Your neighbor? His name is on the tip of your tongue. . . . ■

Essential Viewing:

They Won't Believe Me (1947)
The Narrow Margin (1952)
Loop-hole (1954)



In *The Narrow Margin* Beddoe (left) more than holds his own with a pair of film noir heavyweights, Marie Windsor and Charles McGraw