

RACISM AND RAGE

ROBERT RYAN IN

Crossfire

ODDS AGAINST TOMORROW

Marc Svetov

Robert Ryan is a master at rage—unfathomable, bottomless, inexorable, indomitable wrath, pent up within the character he plays, let loose in violent outbursts, unforgettable in their fury and finality. Ryan was a very tall man, six foot three, a former intercollegiate heavyweight boxing champion, whose powerful build, threatening demeanor and glowering stare spoke volumes on screen—and in his violent acts, Ryan was a ballet of mayhem when in action, showing himself just as versatile as Lee Marvin could be in this regard.

His portrayal of Earle Slater in *Odds Against Tomorrow* (1959), directed by Robert Wise, is a masterpiece of barely controllable rage: a stuttering, repressed toughness that feeds a vicious racism that has not a trace of a hope to be mitigated. The film provides some explanations and insight into the source of this fury. Earle has a suspicion he is a loser—of course, he is indeed—washed up at the age of fifty. He sees his “manhood” threatened by having to take money from his common-law wife Lorry (Shelley Winters). And, certainly, there’s the threat that his last bastion of self-assurance and identity—that he, as a white man, is superior to black people—might fall.

The mastermind behind the heist, ex-cop Dave Burke (Ed Begley), puts it to him: There will be equality between him and his African-



Ryan with costar and friend Harry Belafonte on *Odds Against Tomorrow* location



Vulnerable under the venom: with Shelley Winters in *Odds Against Tomorrow*

American fellow robber Johnny Ingram (Harry Belafonte). “We’re all in this together, each man equal. We’ll take care of each other.” Earle’s worst nightmare is coming true: if he is equal to the black man, he is nothing. Dave also hints at another dimension of Earle’s racist fury: “I don’t want to hear what your grandpappy thought on the old farm in Oklahoma. Got it?” An insecure, uneducated country boy behind the tough façade, Earle gropes for the certitudes he has always known that separate him from those of a different, “inferior” skin color. Earle cannot cope.

This sets the framework for what, fifty years late, seems to be a somewhat formulaic pairing-up of the stupid white racist and the cool black musician. Johnny Ingram is a good guy, a loving father. Not a real gangster, he agrees to take part in the robbery because he has to pay back gambling debts to a loan shark. To show racism is a foul and immoral concept, even if the person subjected to it is a thief and criminal, was probably too much to ask of a film of the time. The problem of how to link Johnny to Earle and the skin-color phobia is cleverly and smoothly solved; since the regular guy who delivers coffee to the bank is a black restaurant employee, he has to be replaced by Johnny, linking him to the integral logic of the heist and the film’s plot: chaining the hate-filled racist together to the angry black man revolting against this personified evil legacy of American history, America’s Original Sin.

Despite an explosive but didactic denouement, the simmering rage portrayed so convincingly by Ryan still sends a chill down one’s spine.

THE anti-Semitism of Ryan’s “Monty” in *Crossfire* (1947), directed by Edward Dmytryk, differs from the vicious racism against blacks in *Odds Against Tomorrow*. It is not the cherished, ludicrous sentiment of superiority of one’s “race” but the envy inherent in another form passionate hatred: the suspicion that the Jews have their own clandestine ways of controlling the banks, starting wars, revolutions and manipulating nations in order to advance the agenda of their own people.

Monty (Ryan) is questioned by Captain Findlay (Robert Young) about the murder victim Samuels (Sam Levene) early in the film, after Monty has hinted at “those kind of guys” in reference to the victim: “What kind of guys?” asks Findlay. “You know the kind,” explains Ryan. “Played it safe during the war, keepin’ themselves in civvies, nice apartments, swell dames ... you know the kind.” We learn later that Samuels had served in the war and had been wounded at Okinawa. Facts didn’t matter. Just as people still today believe that all the Jews working in the World Trade Center were warned of the September 11 attacks and didn’t show up at work when the planes crashed into the buildings.

Crossfire, however, leaves no doubt about the fact it is not about “discrimination” here, not about “I have nothing against Jews, but...” “This business of hating Jews comes in a lot of different sizes,” Captain Finlay describes. “There’s the ‘you can’t join our country club’ kind and ‘you can’t live around here’ kind. Yes, and the ‘you can’t work around here’ kind. And because we stand for all of these, we get Monty’s kind.”

In contrast to Ryan’s portrayal of a white racist in *Odds Against Tomorrow*, the rage of the anti-Semitic Monty is shown in full action. Consumed by his hatred, he kills two people not with a gun or a bomb or even a knife but with his bare hands: initially, at the beginning of the film in a flashback, when he beats to death his “enemy,”





Ryan menaces Steve Brodie in a tense scene from *Crossfire* ...

the Jew Samuels. (“Some of ’em named Samuels,” as Monty has explained to Captain Finlay, “some of ’em have funnier names.”) In a second scene, when he feels cornered he resorts to violence and finishes off his “friend” Floyd (Steve Brodie).

Monty personalizes the cold and hot underbelly of polite, societal anti-Semitism. He is the one who’s despised by good citizens but needed at the same time—the solid, pious German anti-Semites who would never have dirtied their hands themselves needed the brutes, “racial scientists” and sadists who reigned in the extermination camps, just to be oh! so shocked at the end of the day about the evil they had let loose.

The anti-Semite Monty is duplicitous, conniving and murderous all at once, not what he seems on the outside at all. Those who know him—like Sergeant Keeley (Robert Mitchum)—know how full of tricks he is in order to cover up his true motives. When in action, he is “all the man” and goes for the jugular vein; not anything can provoke him—just Jews, by their being. All the while, when not provoked, he is a slimy, sycophantic, servile, lying creep. Ryan is pretty good with that,

too. We see how oleaginous and ingratiating he is, how subtle he is in blaming—in framing—his fellow soldier Mitchell (George Cooper) for the murder he himself committed. (What is ridiculous, in terms of when this film was made, is that when Robert Young gives his famous speech about the murder of innocents owing to hate and “prejudice,” he doesn’t let a single word drop about racism against blacks. Hollywood had to serve the Southern audience in 1947, so apparently that was left out.)

As for *Crossfire*’s “message”: the skillful use of different camera lenses aids Ryan’s astonishing performance. A 50mm camera lens captures Ryan at the start of the film, showing him full face, in a rather sympathetic way; later, in the middle of the film, his character’s telling transition is shot with a 40mm camera. Finally, cinematographer Roy Hunt shoots him with a 25mm lens in the last scene, shrinking and distorting Ryan’s features so he looks nightmarish, twisted, a throwback to Weimar-style expressionism. Ultimately, he is so diminished that his final “shooting” (at the hands of Robert Young) occurs off-screen. ■



... and later counts the hours he has left