

Richard Widmark (1914-2008)

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American actor Richard Widmark, a veteran of more than 70 films as well as numerous theater and radio productions, died March 24 at his Connecticut home after a long illness. He was 93. Widmark was a serious and talented performer and one of the few surviving members of a group of actors including John Garfield, Robert Mitchum, William Holden, Burt Lancaster, Robert Ryan and Sterling Hayden, all of whom emerged in the post-war period and were substantially shaped by the events of the Great Depression and the Second World War. Together they were responsible for some of the most engaging performances of the post-war American cinema.

Widmark was born December 26, 1914, in Sunrise, Minnesota. His father, a salesman, later settled the family in Princeton, Illinois, where the future actor was raised. Widmark credited his grandmother, who began taking him to movies when he was just three years old, with inspiring his lifelong love of the cinema. While attending Lake Forest College in Illinois, where he majored in political science, Widmark began performing in plays.

His talents earned him a job in the school's drama department as an instructor following his graduation in 1936. After two years of teaching, Widmark next set his sights on becoming a professional actor. He went to New York where he worked in theater and radio soap operas like *Aunt Jenny's Real Life Stories*. He also appeared on the popular *Gang Busters* program. By the mid-1940s, he had attracted the attention of Hollywood and went to California for his debut in pictures.

Widmark's first film, *Kiss of Death*, appeared in 1947, "a year in which," as film critic Andrew Sarris once put it, "pain and torture and paranoia had finally overwhelmed the film noir." Widmark played Tommy Udo, a psychopathic killer whom we first meet in a holding cell complaining of his latest arrest: "Picked up just for shovin' a guy's ears off his head!" It's a startling performance and one that has become infamous for a scene in which Udo pushes the wheelchair-bound mother of a stool pigeon down a flight of stairs.

There is also Udo's iconic laugh. Often described as a "giggle," that hardly does it justice. It's truly unsettling

laughter, every bit as menacing as the rattling of a rattlesnake. Widmark received his only Oscar nomination for his performance as Tommy Udo. He lost, improbably enough, to Edmund Gwenn for the latter's performance as Santa Claus in *Miracle on 34th Street*.

Following *Kiss of Death*, Widmark was cast as a villain in several more minor but not uninteresting films such as William Wellman's dry-as-a-bone western *Yellow Sky* (1948) and *Road House* (1948) from director Jean Negulesco. After making several films of this kind, performing variations on what was essentially the same limiting role, Widmark reached a turning point in 1950, beginning what was the most important and fruitful period of his career.

No longer playing a villain, the actor reestablished himself as a kind of specialist in desperation. In Elia Kazan's *Panic in the Streets*, he took on the role of a doctor in the US Public Health Service who breathlessly tries to convince a reluctant and unprepared mayoral bureaucracy and police force of the seriousness of a plague epidemic. He finally takes to the streets himself in search of a gangster who may be infected with the disease. While the thriller plot line falls flat for the most part, the movie is interesting for its tour of a rather bleak New Orleans at night. Nearly everyone that Widmark's character meets is suspicious of authorities and reluctant to talk. There is the sense that they all have good reason for such mistrust. It was only the first time Widmark would lead us on a tour of a demoralized city at night.

In *Night and the City*, recently discussed in our comment on the death of director Jules Dassin, Widmark gave us one of his most significant creations. His Harry Fabian, running through the streets of London in the dark trying to avoid the hired thugs of a big-shot wrestling promoter, is an unforgettable portrait. Fabian is a dreamer, always running from one get-rich-quick scheme to another, always with disastrous results. Widmark invests his performance with all the urgency of a last-ditch chance. At times it's almost painful to watch him as he begs and pleads with his friends to believe in his latest schemes and, of course, to loan him money to finance them.

The blacklist, as we have noted, finally caught up with

Jules Dassin after *Night and the City*. Widmark, however, who was politically on the left to one degree or another his entire life, was able to avoid it. When asked by Adrian Wooton in a 2002 interview for the British Film Institute if he had been personally affected by McCarthyism, Widmark said, “I wasn’t, because I wasn’t a joiner. But that period is a low-point in American history, it never should have happened in a free society. People listened to a crazy demagogue and it was a terrible time. Many of my friends were blacklisted. America should be ashamed of it forever.”

In *Pickup on South Street* (1953), one of writer-director Samuel Fuller’s most provocative works and the next major film in Widmark’s career, one catches a glimpse at the hysterical anticommunism of the times. The plot concerns Skip McCoy, a pickpocket who steals a wallet from a woman’s purse on the subway. Unbeknownst to the thief, the wallet contains several frames of microfilm on which are recorded US military secrets about to be delivered to a “red agent.” Having discovered the microfilm, Skip must decide whether to sell the secrets to the “commies” for thousands of dollars, or turn them over to authorities risking an arrest that would lead to a life sentence.

But like *Panic in the Streets*, it is not the plot (which, in this case, is often preposterous) that draws one to *Pickup on South Street*. It is the characters and the world they inhabit. One is struck by Skip’s straightforward manner as he explains his lack of anger at being ratted out by a friend for money. She has to make a buck, he says; he doesn’t hold it against her. They have an understanding. His only complaint is that she doesn’t charge more for the information. There is the feeling throughout the film, and it is best embodied in the performances of Widmark and co-star Thelma Ritter, that even the most intimate aspects of human relationships have been corrupted under extreme social pressures.

The 1960s brought less interesting roles for the actor, a testament to the overall decline of Hollywood filmmaking by that time, but there were starring roles in two films by the great director John Ford: *Two Rode Together* (1961), which gave Widmark an opportunity to act alongside James Stewart, whom he idolized, and *Cheyenne Autumn* (1964), a uniquely pro-Native American western and a project apparently brought to Ford’s attention by Widmark himself. Neither film could be considered among Ford’s finest, but both have their strong moments and Widmark performs admirably.

Madigan (1968) is among the actor’s most popular films from this time. Directed by Don Siegel (*Hell is for Heroes*, *Dirty Harry*), the film has been greatly overrated by its defenders. The story concerns two reckless cops whose guns are stolen by a suspect; the embarrassed detectives have 72 hours to find the man. The most memorable thing about it is

the weariness written across Widmark’s face.

Among the films he made in the 1960s that were perhaps most meaningful to the actor himself was *Judgment at Nuremberg* (1961), in which he portrayed an American prosecutor. Widmark told Adrian Wooton in the previously cited BFI interview, “I like *Nuremberg* because I majored in political science in college, and I had a professor who was very interested in the German problem. When Hitler got in, I was at school in 1933. My professor got all steamed up, and got me steamed up, about the Nazis. In 1937, when I was teaching, a friend of mine and I went on a bicycle trip to Germany. Through some influence we got a letter that allowed us to film a little documentary about German youth camps.

“For two weeks we filmed Hitler Youth camps. At the time it seemed slightly dull, but now it’s very interesting. So I’ve been interested in that period all my life. The film had a great cast. I’m proud of that movie, because I think it has some meaning.”

(Along with the coincidence of Dassin and Widmark, associated through one significant film, dying within a week of each other, there is the further irony that Abby Mann, writer of *Judgment at Nuremberg*, along with other films and many television shows, passed away a day after Widmark.)

There is little in Widmark’s career from the 1970s onward to speak of. The actor was stuck in films like *The Swarm*, in which he played a general fighting killer bees. But the actor maintained a sense of humor about some of these later films, calling them “winners” and joking in interviews about the poor receptions they got from audiences.

Widmark would eventually retire from filmmaking in the early 1990s, but the actor always maintained a love for his art form, and a critical attitude toward it as well. Speaking with the *Guardian* in 1995, he offered his opinion of the film industry at that time: “The businessmen who run Hollywood today have no self-respect. What interests them is not movies but the bottom line. Look at *Dumb and Dumber*, which turns idiocy into something positive, or *Forrest Gump*, a hymn to stupidity. ‘Intellectual’ has become a dirty word.”

It’s hard not to note, once again, the scarcity of such artists as Richard Widmark or Jules Dassin in the cinema today. Their passing will be sorely felt among serious film lovers everywhere.



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