

Dark Crimes: Film Noir Thrillers, Volume Two: Surprises from Fritz Lang and William Castle

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Turner Classic Movies and Universal Studio's *Dark Crimes: Film Noir Thrillers, Volume Two* contains two movies each by Fritz Lang, *You and Me* (1938) and *Ministry of Fear* (1944), and William Castle, *Undertow* (1949) and *Hollywood Story* (1951), that reveal different, sometimes surprising sides of each director's canon.

You and Me fulfilled the German-born Lang's three-film contract with Paramount Studios, the first two being the powerful dramas, *Fury* (1936) and *You Only Live Once* (1937). Unlike the first pair of films (and Lang's German work that preceded his exile in Hollywood), the director brings comedy (not so well) and music (very well) to his third film. The strong performance of Sylvia Sydney (who appeared in both of Lang's earlier Paramount movies) as Helen Roberts anchors Lang's reworking of a serious theme found in his earlier films. However, the ineffectual comedic scenes undermine an otherwise believable performance by George Raft.

The Morris department Store counts among its 250 employees 50 ex-convicts, two of whom are Joe Dennis and Helen. The store owner, Jerome Morris (Harry Carey), believes that criminals are made not born, and capable of changing if placed in the right environment.

Joe and Helen soon marry and enjoy a brief period of happiness until Joe discovers that Helen is also an ex-con (she lies to Joe about her past because she fears he won't marry someone with a record). The remainder of the movie is devoted to a disheartened Joe giving in to the temptation of rejoining his former gang members, while Helen is forced to tell more lies in an effort to save her marriage. Joe and the gang's unsuccessful attempt to rob the Morris department store results in an unexpected kind of happy ending.

German composer Kurt Weill wrote the music for *You and Me*, and in the tradition of his compositions for Bertolt Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera*, the songs function as commentary on the movie's action. "They Call Him Good for Nothing," sung convincingly by Carol Paige in her role as a torch singer, is especially effective in this context.

In his famed *Metropolis* (1927), Lang suggested the heart must act as the mediator between the head—the capitalist—and

the hand—the laborer. After witnessing the rise and the horrors of Nazism, Lang repudiated the film's argument. "I mean," he admitted, "that's a fairy tale."

In *You and Me*, Lang reworks the earlier film's theme through Sylvia Sydney's class-conscious Helen, functioning as a mirror image of the prophetess Maria in *Metropolis*, who delivers the mediating heart message.

Near the end of the movie, Helen uses chalk and a chalkboard to teach an economics lesson to Joe and his former gang members after they are caught in the act of robbing the Morris department store. "This one [the crime boss] takes his profit first, and you get what's left," she tells her "class" (who are seated, appropriately, in kiddy cars in the Toy Department, proving that organized crime and capitalism are one and the same. Helen further points out that the corrupt politicians are "the big shots").

Lang's more obvious German Expressionist stylistics are used sparingly, but convey the sense that ex-convicts are never entirely free. As ex-con Joe Dennis, Raft is believable in the straight scenes, but he seems stiffly uncomfortable in Lang's forced attempts at comedy.

1944's *Ministry of Fear*, the better known of the two Lang films in this collection, is loosely based on British author Graham Greene's 1943 novel of the same title. Strong performances are delivered by Ray Milland, Marjorie Reynolds and, in a brief but deft appearance, Dan Duryea. Lang returns to the more pronounced Expressionist look and feel of his earlier films with mixed results.

Released from a mental asylum where he has spent two years for "mercy killing" his painfully dying wife, Stephen Neale (Ray Milland) immediately becomes entangled in a series of events that lead him to believe (correctly) that a prominent charity is a front for Nazi spies.

At the Mothers of Free Nations fete, Neale meets Austrian-born Carla Hilfe (Marjorie Reynolds), and her brother, Willi Hilfe (Carl Esmond). The former (who isn't aware of the Nazi presence) joins Neale in hunting down the head of the spy ring. A convoluted and body-strewn search follows.

Similar to characters Milland played in a number of other

films, Neale is reserved and articulate, but also capable of expressing real concern and fear. Reynolds' sometimes humorous, more down-to-earth character complements her partner, making believable their falling in love amidst the air raids.

Duryea, who also appeared in Lang's *The Woman in the Window* and *Scarlet Street*, is on screen only briefly as a villainous character with two names, Cost and Travers the Tailor, but as was the case with many of Duryea's villainous roles, he masks an empty and vicious character with precise diction and grace of movement.

High-angle shots of the interior of Nazi-infiltrated British war offices enforce a feeling of surveillance, and the darkness used throughout conveys an atmosphere of secrecy and hidden goings-on.

The movie's predominant theme of organizations being taken over by Nazi sympathizers is underlined by the motif of quite artificial interior and exterior sets. Unfortunately, repeated shots of the same fake rubble-filled street, and the final, almost campy use of a matte shot to create the illusion of Stephen and Carla driving along a coastline, come off as failed attempts at verisimilitude.

William Castle

Better known for gimmicky horror films such as *House on Haunted Hill* (1959), *13 Ghosts* (1960) and *Strait-Jacket* (1964), director William Castle was also associated with quality film noir crime dramas (he was assistant director, for example, on Orson Welles' *The Lady from Shanghai* [1947]). *Undertow* (1949) and *Hollywood Story* (1951) feature convincing, sometimes complex performances and the stylizing (and plot twists) of film noir.

In *Hollywood Story*, director Larry O'Brien (Richard Conte) is in the film capital to make a movie about the unsolved 1929 murder of famous director Franklin Ferrara. In the process, O'Brien becomes involved with Sally Rousseau (Julia Adams). He also becomes a detective of sorts, increasingly determined to discover Ferrara's murderer, as well as the person (or persons) trying to keep him (O'Brien) from making the movie.

Conte (*The Blue Gardenia* [1953], *The Brothers Rico* [1957], *The Godfather* [1972]) successfully grounds the movie's complex plot as both movie director and amateur detective. His latter role is a modified, toned-down version of earlier film noir detectives (perhaps due to the increasing stabilization of post-World War II America). He will cooperate with authority figures, but only on his terms.

Adams is also convincing as the mature woman who shifts from initial suspicion of Larry's motivation for making the movie into being a supportive love interest. As a limited first-

person narrator, Jim Backus's Mitch Davis adds suspense along with the occasional touch of levity.

On-location filming, a feature of noir, heightens *Hollywood Story's* realism and tension, e.g., several important scenes are set up by an opening shot from a darkened interior looking out to the flat light of an afternoon; foreshadowing is also created by the measured use of chiaroscuro lighting.

Also shot on location (this time in Reno, Nevada), *Undertow* picks up on a theme that informed a number of post-World War II productions (most famously, *The Best Years of Our Lives* [1946]), the problems confronting returning veterans. To this end, the film features a strong central performance, excellent cinematography and sharpening class relations.

One-time gambler and war veteran Tony Reagan (Scott Brady) attempts to go straight by using his Army savings to become 50 percent owner of a lodge in Reno, Nevada and by proposing to Sally Lee (Dorothy Hart), favorite niece of Chicago-based casino owner "Big Jim."

Tony's plans are upset when he returns to Chicago to propose marriage and is framed for the murder of Big Jim (who had fired Tony from his casino in Reno before the war, making the latter the prime suspect). Tony finds that Sally can't be counted on to help him and turns instead to Ann McNight (Peggy Dow)—also a Chicago resident whom he met while she was vacationing in Reno. The conclusion is what one might expect, but again, it's realistic.

Brady portrays Tony Reagan as an Everyman veteran who finds American class divisions have, if anything, stiffened after the war. Working class Tony can't see through Sally's appearance and wealth—a fact emphasized by the repeated shots of her in designer clothing and a long convertible—until he knows the loyal, working class Ann.

Irving Glassberg's cinematography also helps reveal the rigid (if initially hidden) social divisions, e.g., several long shots of Tony and Sally meeting and embracing, against the backdrop of a beautiful Chicago shoreline foreground, the artificial beauty of the scheming Sally.

Hart's Sally Lee is a femme fatale, but one who lacks the mystery and allure of a Kathie Moffat (in *Out of the Past* [1947]) or a Phyllis Dietrichson (in *Double Indemnity* [1944]). The absence of these qualities may—at least in part—be due to her relatively brief time on screen.

The four-disc set includes useful commentaries by film noir critic Eddie Muller.



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