

# Noir City festivals highlight critical US films from 1948 on 75th anniversary

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Between January and October this year, the Film Noir Foundation programmed and presented its annual series of Noir City film festivals in several US cities: Oakland, Seattle, Boston, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, Chicago, Detroit and Washington, D.C. Significantly, all the films featured this year were from 1948, a particularly rich year for Hollywood films that take a sharp look at postwar American life, including *The Lady from Shanghai*, *Moonrise*, *Key Largo*, *Force of Evil*, *Road House*, *Call Northside 777* and *Raw Deal*.

It is no coincidence that virtually all of these socially critical films were written and/or directed by artists who would be purged from the American film industry within the next few years during the anti-communist blacklist. For these reasons, the marking this year of the 75th anniversary of these films and the enthusiastic response to the screenings by the multi-generational audiences who filled the theaters attended by this reviewer represent an important cultural event.

As WSWS arts editor David Walsh commented in “The crisis of American filmmaking & cultural life,” by 1948 “the pressing matter of the reality of postwar America ... is revealing itself. ... An important new theme emerges: the powerful presence in postwar society of profiteers and criminals, including criminals in business suits.” Several of the films featured in the Noir City festivals this year are among those that best exemplify this theme.

For those attending the festival, as well as for those who have yet to discover these remarkable films, it must be said that these works have stood the test of time. That is, these films from 1948 speak with urgency to the present situation and to the world we inhabit in 2023. Much has changed, but to a large degree we can recognize the world depicted in these films as our own: the ruthlessness of criminals in business suits, the harshness of life for the majority of the population, and the looming threat of a nuclear third world war, which is referenced directly in *The Lady from Shanghai* and which informs the sense of dread that permeates *film noir* after the war.

The strongest *noir* films of 1948 were made by artists who were responding to life in the wake of the Second World War, which produced the greatest crimes of the 20th century during which tens of millions were killed: above all, the Nazi Holocaust and the US atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Today, as millions around the world protest against the genocidal Israel-US war in Gaza, artists like Melissa Barrera and others who publicly oppose genocide and war are faced with the revival of blacklisting, making them the descendants of the filmmakers of the late 1940s and early 1950s who were purged for telling the truth about postwar American life.

It is not possible in the context of this piece to discuss in detail all of the important films screened in the Noir City festivals this year, but some brief comments are merited.

Direction and screenplay by Orson Welles, from the novel *If I Die Before I Wake* by Sherwood King.

*The Lady from Shanghai*, “Black Irish” Mike O’Hara (Orson Welles), an Irish sailor and veteran of the Spanish Civil War who once killed a Francoist spy, meets the beautiful Shanghai-born “White Russian” Elsa Bannister (Rita Hayworth) in New York City. O’Hara is soon hired on as the ship’s officer by Elsa’s wealthy husband Arthur Bannister (Everett Sloane), a successful and famous criminal defense attorney, as they embark on a pleasure cruise on their yacht from New York City to San Francisco by way of the Panama Canal. O’Hara ultimately finds himself the fall guy, framed in an elaborate murder plot hatched by Bannister to enrich himself even further.

In one striking scene in Acapulco, O’Hara listens to a proposition from Bannister’s partner George Grisby (Glenn Anders), who asks O’Hara to murder him; or rather, to help fake his murder, as we later learn. Grisby, on his way to showing O’Hara “the best places,” leads the sailor past a working-class neighborhood where men, women, and children busy themselves carrying food and animals to and fro.

Arriving at a sparkling beach, a playground for the wealthy tourists and attractive women who can be seen lounging there, Grisby remarks, “Beautiful, isn’t it?” O’Hara answers, “There’s a fair face to the land, surely, but you can’t hide the hunger and guilt. It’s a bright, guilty world.”

Grisby expresses anxiety about nuclear annihilation. “It’s coming, you know,” he tells O’Hara. “First the big cities, then maybe even this.” Later, Grisby tells O’Hara just outside San Francisco, “I don’t want to be within a thousand miles of that city or any other city when they start dropping those bombs.”

Director Welles’s visual style is rich and evocative in *The Lady from Shanghai*. Welles’s mastery of both the blocking of camera movements and the staging of his actors within the frame results in a dynamically cinematic orchestration that brings the film’s action and themes to vivid life. The film’s climactic “hall of mirrors” scene is justly famous. Following O’Hara to an empty amusement park closed for the season, Elsa and Bannister shoot it out in the hall of mirrors.

Surrounded by the many reflections of themselves in the attraction, the married couple shoot at each other, at their own reflections, at themselves, visualizing a story O’Hara tells earlier in the film, about one of the worst sights he’s ever witnessed. While fishing off the coast of Brazil, O’Hara and his party had hooked several sharks, and the blood “drove the rest of [the sharks] mad. Then the beasts took to eating each other. In their frenzy, they ate at themselves.”

“In their frenzy, they ate at themselves.” An accurate description of sharks, of the Bannisters and of the bourgeoisie itself.

Directed by Frank Borzage. Screenplay by Charles F. Haas, from the novel by Theodore Strauss.

*Moonrise* opens with a stunning sequence depicting the psychological torment inflicted on a child whose father was hanged for murder when the boy was just an infant. In a kind of expressionistic nightmare, we see the boy, Danny Hawkins, being bullied by cruel middle-class and rich kids

who humiliate and beat him from early childhood into his teenage years. As a young man Danny (Dane Clark) gets into a fistfight with one of his childhood tormentors, a banker's son named Jerry Sykes (Lloyd Bridges). During the struggle, Danny kills Jerry.

Danny tries to build a romantic relationship with Jerry's girlfriend Gilly (Gail Russell), a schoolteacher who exudes a nervous fragility, and who worries about her troubled students. And now Gilly is starting to wonder why Jerry disappeared soon after she accepted his marriage proposal. Danny, meanwhile, is on layoff from his job as a railroad worker for a number of weeks, and he's getting behind on his rent to his aunt.

Danny is tormented by the notion that he has "bad blood" because of his father's crime. The young man seeks advice from his wise, older African-American friend Mose Jackson (Rex Ingram), a retired railroad brakeman who is said to have read more books than anyone in the area. Mose tells Danny, "I don't know what you're talking about, bad blood. Blood is red. It keeps you alive. It doesn't tell you what you have to do."

In one scene, the young lovers Danny and Gilly dance together in an abandoned, decaying mansion. Gilly's former nervous fragility is gone, and with Danny she blossoms into a serenely joyous and loving woman. "I've never seen you like this before, Gilly," Danny tells her. "I've never been like this before," she tells him. It's an intensely tender and moving cinematic moment. But it can't last. As the murder investigation develops, aided by the dead man's wealthy banker father, the authorities close in on Danny, threatening to destroy the little bit of love he's just started to experience for the first time in his life.

Frank Borzage is perhaps the greatest director of romantic films that the American cinema has ever produced. In his films, we see young men and women falling in love with each other in real time, and against terrible social conditions which threaten to tear them apart at every step. In this context, love becomes a kind of rebellion against a world in which, as Mose says in the film, "there isn't enough dignity."

Directed by John Huston. Screenplay by Huston and Richard Brooks, from the play by Maxwell Anderson.

In *Key Largo*, Humphrey Bogart plays Frank McCloud, a US Army veteran of the Second World War who finds himself holed up with the gangster Johnny Rocco (Edward G. Robinson), and others, at a hotel in Key Largo, Florida during a hurricane. The film is set in a postwar America that has been transformed into a place where the gangster Rocco might as well be president, which McCloud sardonically suggests in the film.

Before the hurricane, Rocco and his gang had been awaiting passage to Cuba at the Hotel Largo, owned and operated by the wheelchair-bound James Temple (Lionel Barrymore) and his widowed daughter-in-law Nora (Lauren Bacall), whose late husband died in combat and had been friends with McCloud while serving in the same unit together in Italy. Once the hurricane strikes, Rocco and his gang hold McCloud and the Temples hostage.

Claire Trevor delivers an unforgettable performance as Rocco's alcoholic girlfriend Gaye Dawn, who apparently was once a fine nightclub singer in the glory days of prohibition, before the ravages of her alcoholism set in. Trevor is heart-wrenching in one scene in which her character, at Rocco's insistence, struggles valiantly to sing a song in exchange for a drink, and she's humiliated in front of the group of gangsters and hostages waiting out the storm in the hotel basement.

In his autobiography *An Open Book*, the film's director and co-screenwriter John Huston described the mood of the immediate postwar period in the US: "The high hopes and idealism of the Roosevelt years were slipping away, and the underworld—as represented by Edward G. Robinson and his hoods—was once again on the move."

During prohibition Rocco, McCloud tells us, was "an emperor [whose] rule extended over beer, slot machines, the numbers racket, and other forbidden enterprises." Later, Rocco was deported and exiled for a time

from the United States, but now he's back and seems to fit right in. The "time when America thought it could get along without the Johnny Roccas" has come to a close, McCloud observes in the film. (One thinks of the Trumps and the political gangsters of today.)

In his struggle against Rocco, McCloud sees the contradiction between America's purported mission in the Second World War ("to cleanse the world of ancient evils...") and the failure of America to live up to its democratic and egalitarian ideals in the immediate postwar period. The hurricane itself serves as a metaphor for the calamity at the door in postwar America.

Directed by Abraham Polonsky. Screenplay by Polonsky and Ira Wolfert from the latter's novel *Tucker's People*.

In *Force of Evil*, the criminals in business suits are the operators of a corporation in New York City seeking to legalize and monopolize the "numbers racket," an illegal lottery that brings in over one hundred million dollars annually, taking in the nickels, dimes and pennies of workers looking for their elusive big break. The events in the film take place on and around the Fourth of July, in effect making this a film about America.

Under the legal direction of Wall Street lawyer Joe Morse (John Garfield), gangster Ben Tucker (Roy Roberts)—Joe's client and business partner who previously "[took] beer in '27"—organizes a corporate-style "hostile takeover" of the numbers racket. Also, Tucker's people bribe politicians and work to lobby public sentiment to make the numbers racket a legal lottery.

Tucker organizes a combination of the biggest numbers racket operations, called "banks," alongside a scheme to eliminate the competition of the smaller banks by fixing the popular "liberty number" 776 to hit on the Fourth of July, the only day when one particular number is played by the overwhelming majority of bettors. This would crash the smaller banks that lack the capital to withstand the massive payouts.

However, the scheme hits a snag because one of these smaller banks is run by Joe's brother Leo (Thomas Gomez), who resists Joe's offer to join Tucker's combination. The tragic drama that unfolds is a Cain and Abel story of American capitalism. Although, as Leo says in the film, "All that Cain did to Abel was murder him."

The most significant aspect of the film is the relationship between brothers Joe and Leo Morse, a relationship first deeply strained by social conditions (the brothers were born and raised in the slums, orphaned in childhood, and Leo had to give up his dreams of becoming a lawyer in order to go to work to support his younger brother) and finally destroyed by the ruthlessness of big business and the emerging gangster-corporatism.

Compared to the would-be corporate baron Tucker, Leo manages to maintain a certain sense of integrity with his small-time numbers operation, which he runs "the way another man runs a restaurant or bar," as Joe's narration explains. But as Leo becomes increasingly revolted by the rottenness of not just the numbers racket but of all business enterprises, he becomes the conscience of the film.

In one scene, when Joe offers to buy out Leo's obligations to his investors, Leo refuses to take Tucker's money because it's "no good." Joe insists, telling his brother, "The money has no moral opinions." "I find I have, Joe," Leo responds. "I find I have."

The dialogue in the film is both snappy and poetic, although the same cannot be said of the dialogue in the novel upon which the film is based, *Tucker's People* by Ira Wolfert, so we can safely attribute the film's remarkable dialogue to writer-director Abraham Polonsky.

Following up his powerful screenplay for *Body and Soul* (1947), also starring and produced by John Garfield, the dynamically directed *Force of Evil* was, astonishingly, the first directorial effort for Polonsky, who would soon be blacklisted due to his association with the Communist Party. More than 20 years would elapse before Polonsky would have the

opportunity to direct his second theatrical feature film, *Tell Them Willie Boy is Here* (1969).

As for John Garfield, that extraordinarily talented actor and producer faced enormous pressure but showed immense moral courage in his staunch refusal to cooperate with the anti-communist witch-hunt of the House Un-American Activities Committee. And for his principled defense of democratic rights and artistic integrity, Garfield was essentially hounded to death by the authorities at the age of just 39 in 1952, representing one of the most tragic victimizations of the shameful Hollywood blacklist period, the reverberations of which are felt to this day.

Directed by Jean Negulesco. Screenplay by Edward Chodorov, story by Margaret Gruen and Oscar Saul.

In *Road House*, Ida Lupino gives a superb leading performance as a torch singer, Lily Stevens, who takes on an extended engagement at a popular road house owned by Jefty Robbins (Richard Widmark) and managed by Jefty's best friend Pete Morgan (Cornel Wilde). Jefty's in love with Lily, but Lily falls in love with Pete. In a jealous rage, Jefty frames Pete for embezzlement.

The screenwriter and producer of *Road House*, Edward Chodorov, would be blacklisted by the early 1950s. *Road House* is not a political film, nor is it a film about the class struggle. Yet the film is distinguished by the rich characterization of Lily Stevens, who is brought to vivacious life in the script and by Lupino's performance with a great degree of social precision.

Lupino's Lily is a tough woman who has had to live by her wits and her wiles to get by. She has the air of a woman who has been burned by life, by love, by former employers. As one character comments after hearing Lily's expressive, world-weary singing for the first time, "She does more without a voice than anybody I've ever heard!" She's not a virtuoso, but she sings from life, which makes her a sensation among the working-class men and women who frequent Jefty's road house.

Similarly, at the time of the production of *Road House* when regular movie attendance was virtually universal among the working class, the interaction between the audience and filmmakers was a more important element. Audiences were watching films that spoke to their experiences, and filmmakers came from and/or attempted to speak to the problems and concerns of their overwhelmingly working-class audiences and the real world they inhabited, not the fantasy world of superhero comic books. This is an approach that must be revived and deepened much further.

Directed by Henry Hathaway. Screenplay by Jerome Cady and Jay Dratler. Adaptation by Leonard Hoffman and Quentin Reynolds. Based on articles by James P. McGuire.

Based on a true story, *Call Northside 777* treats a case of injustice against a young Polish-American worker in Chicago, Frank Wiecek (Richard Conte) who is railroaded for the killing of a policeman, and the investigation by reporter P.J. McNeal (James Stewart) to expose both Frank's wrongful conviction and its subsequent cover-up by the Chicago Police Department, and to secure Frank's release and find the real killer.

At first, McNeal is highly skeptical of Frank's innocence. He first goes to see Tillie Wiecek (Kasia Orzazewski) to find out why she placed an ad offering a reward of \$5,000 for information on the cop's killer. She explains that the man convicted for the murder is her son, Frank (Richard Conte), but he didn't do it.

McNeal asks Tillie how she got the reward money, suggesting that its source may be a criminal in nature. "No, no," she responds in her Polish accent and limited English. "I work. I scrub floors. Eleven years—I never miss a day's work. I earned it. Every penny. ... I get my Frank out someday. Somehow. I dream of this day. ... Eleven years, I dream and I work." This makes an impression on McNeal, and he eventually devotes himself fully to the case, sticking his neck out for Frank and going up against the Chicago Police Department and the city's political leaders.

not one of those notable films of the time that thanks the department for their cooperation, which itself could not have been possible given the film's premise. It offers a necessarily negative depiction of the cops. And the campaign waged by the reporter, and ultimately supported (although with some conflict) by his newspaper, is a kind of Innocence Project before the Innocence Project.

Much of the film was shot on location in Illinois, leading critics to term the film "neorealist," in reference to the great postwar Italian films shot in real locations and dealing with social themes in treating the harsh reality of life for the working class after the war.

Significantly, *Call Northside 777* played in Noir City: Chicago to a sold-out audience who responded with knowing roars of approval when the film showed up the Chicago Police Department for the thuggish gang of corruption and injustice that it was then and is now.

Directed by Anthony Mann. Screenplay by Leopold Atlas & John C. Higgins (uncredited: Don Stafford), suggested by a story by Arnold B. Armstrong and Audrey Ashley.

In the interest of not repeating what has already been said on this film in the WSWS, readers are strongly encouraged to read the discussion on *Raw Deal* by WSWS arts editor David Walsh and author Max Alvarez.

As Walsh wrote in summary of the film, "Joe Sullivan (Dennis O'Keefe) breaks out of prison in *Raw Deal*, an escape arranged by crime boss Rick Coyle (Raymond Burr), who owes Joe \$50,000 and hopes he will die in the attempt. Joe and his girlfriend Pat Cameron (Claire Trevor) go on the run, in the company of Joe's social worker Ann Martin (Marsha Hunt), taken along as a hostage. The trio undergo various misadventures—including an attempt on Joe's life by Rick's henchman—in the course of which Joe and Ann fall for each other. Joe, still planning to leave for South America with Pat, intends to exact revenge on Rick."

*Raw Deal* is an exemplary film, successful on practically every level. The film is enriched by the haunting, poetic voiceover narration by Claire Trevor's Pat set against evocative theremin music ("I don't know which sounds louder: my heels or my heart," Pat says in voiceover when visiting Joe in prison).

The cinematography by the great John Alton deserves special mention for its extraordinary texture, for its striking depth and visual patterns carved with light and shadow. Even typically straightforward close-ups are imbued with brilliant eyelines and stunning background shadow designs cast on the walls behind characters. Alton famously wrote one of the first significant books on cinematography, the indispensable *Painting with Light*.

The film gives one a strong sense of the harshness of the postwar years, of the toughness of ordinary people who had to live in that world, shaped by the Great Depression and the Second World War.

In one exceptionally strong scene, Joe confronts Ann for moralizing about his crimes, telling her, "What do you know about anything? You probably had your bread buttered on both sides since the day you were born. Safe." Ann then reveals the hard reality of her upbringing: "My father was a schoolteacher. He died in the war of the Depression. Only he didn't get any medals. Or any bonus. He left three children. ... 'Safe.' I never asked for anything safe. All I want is just a little decency, that's all."

Viewing these remarkable films from 1948 today, one gets a sense of just what was lost as a result of the blacklist: among other things, a critical point-of-view in representing life as it really is, and a sense of optimism about improving the world in spite of overwhelming obstacles. Art without these things is not worth its name.



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