



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

The Killers

Burt Lancaster and Ava Gardner star in Robert Siodmak's gritty and muscular film noir. Told entirely in flashback, a life insurance investigator pieces together the tragic story of 'the Swede' (Burt Lancaster), a boxer drawn into a dangerous world of crime by his feelings for a fickle mobster's moll (Ava Gardner). The influential opening scene, in which two hit-men track down their prey in a sleepy small town, sets the bleak but seductive tone of noir fatalism to memorably brilliant effect.

Ernest Hemingway's short story has also been filmed by Andrei Tarkovsky and Don Siegel, but Robert Siodmak's version remains the definitive adaptation.

BFI Player, player.bfi.org.uk

Ernest Hemingway's short story 'The Killers' is the starting point for this superb film noir, but Siodmak and his screenwriters (including an uncredited John Huston) add many new layers. Edmond O'Brien is the insurance investigator trying to unravel the Kane-like mystery of why an ex-fighter (Burt Lancaster) was so unfazed when two assassins came for him. Ava Gardner, it doesn't take him long to find out, is at the root of the mystery.

***Sight and Sound*, November 1999**

Robert Siodmak was a man of contradictions. Some were of his own devising, others were thrust upon him. They start at birth, with some sources claiming his birthplace as Memphis, Tennessee, while others give Leipzig or Dresden. Critic Andrew Sarris reckoned that his American films were more Germanic than his German ones, while others feud over whether he was an *auteur* who helped define film noir or a studio hack whose work was decidedly mediocre when not abetted by quality craftsmen. Moreover, while Siodmak was feted in some quarters as the new Fritz Lang or Alfred Hitchcock, he was appreciated in others as a master of kitsch.

So, how do you start to fathom such a self-effacing enigma? Some of the answers lie in an eventful life history that saw his Jewish banking family endure the hardships of the Depression before Siodmak left Berlin for Paris and then France for the United States, as the Nazis rolled across Europe. There are also clues in the films he made before he reached Hollywood, as the optimistic naturalism of *People on Sunday* (1929) – which he produced with his writer brother Curt, roommate Billy Wilder and friends Fred Zinnemann, Edgar G. Ulmer and Eugen Schüfftan – was first replaced by the claustrophobic expressionism that characterised UFA pictures like the Emeric Pressburger-scripted *Abschied* (1930) and the 1933 adultery saga, *The Burning Secret* (which led to Joseph Goebbels branding Siodmak 'a corrupter of the German family') and then by the nascent noir morbidity that pervaded Gallic outings like *Mollenard* (1937) and *Pièges* (1939). But the true Siodmak style only started to emerge in Hollywood towards the end of the Second World War.

Siodmak didn't patent the noir formula, but he showed how to blend German expressionism and French existentialism with American angst and, in the process, he directed more canonical landmarks than anyone else in the new genre's heyday. Dismayed by the world around him, Siodmak examined societal injustice, domestic turmoil, gender conflict, sexual repression, psychological trauma and the rise of the career criminal. Preferring to shoot on controllable studio sets rather than on location, he used deep-focus

photography, precise camera moves, meticulously designed *mises-en-scène* and sculpted lighting effects to create milieux beset by paranoia, greed, lust, obsession and violence. Multiple flashbacks, rapid cuts, mirrored images and unsettling scores reinforced the sense of urban alienation, moral decay and nightmarish paranoia.

These formal and thematic concerns dominate the loose crime trilogy that Siodmak produced in the immediate postwar period. Adapted uncredited by John Huston from an Ernest Hemingway story, *The Killers* (1946) became known as the '*Citizen Kane* of noir' on account of the intricate network of flashbacks that allow insurance investigator Edmond O'Brien to discover the role that Ava Gardner played in the duping of both mobster Albert Dekker and ex-boxer Burt Lancaster. Elwood Bredell's cinematography is grimly atmospheric, with the heist sequence filmed in a single take from a swooping crane being justly celebrated. But, while the performances are exceptional, it's the baroque bleakness of Siodmak's Oscar-nominated direction that ensures this reeks of abject pessimism and hard-boiled doom.

Although the visuals are less stylised, there is still plenty of pitiless villainy in *Cry of the City* (1948), which follows cop Victor Mature's bid to prevent childhood pal Richard Conte from leading his kid brother into a life of crime. Making evocative use of locations in New York's Little Italy, Siodmak creates realist poetry from the rain-soaked tarmac and uses his formulaic story to expose the squalor, corruption and treachery of the mean streets. Franz Planer's views of the Bunker Hill area of Los Angeles are equally atmospheric in *Criss Cross* (1948), which sees femme fatale Yvonne De Carlo lure ex-husband Burt Lancaster into robbing his armoured car with her new gangster beau, Dan Duryea. Establishing the template for the heist caper, this has been described as Siodmak's most American film and its twisting fatalism captures the mood of a nation ill-at-ease with itself.

David Parkinson, bfi.org.uk

A contemporary review

An impressive film elaborated from the Hemingway short story of the same name. It opens with the murder of Swede Lunn, small-town garage hand, by a couple of professional killers, who make no attempt to hide the fact that they are working for someone else. Reardon, an insurance company investigator, takes up the case and embarks upon a succession of clue-giving events beginning with an interview with a maid in a hotel in Atlantic City, beneficiary of a small life insurance policy left by Swede, and ending with the moment at which the broken-down boxer decides to give in to his pursuers.

Gradually, in a series of flashbacks, the twisted, complicated story is unfolded: Swede's infatuation for a decoy girl, his double-crossing of the gang who he thinks have double-crossed him, the burglary, escape with loot, prison sentence and final round-up.

Peopled with a sinister collection of characters and set against a background in which crime and violence are the keynote, the film is permeated by a feeling of intensity apparent in the memorable opening sequence, and which is rarely absent despite the entanglements of the plot. A stimulating if harrowing film, brilliantly directed and photographed, and acted with distinction by a newcomer, Burt Lancaster, as Swede, Edmond O'Brien as the insurance agent, Ava Gardner as the girl and Albert Dekker as the gang leader directly responsible for the major crime.

***Monthly Film Bulletin*, December 1946**

THE KILLERS

Directed by: Robert Siodmak
©: Universal Pictures Company
Presented by: Mark Hellinger Productions
Produced by: Mark Hellinger
Assistant to the Producer: Jules Buck
Assistant Director: Melville Shyer
Screenplay by: Anthony Veiller
Screenplay: John Huston, Richard Brooks *
From the story by: Ernest Hemingway
Director of Photography: Woody Bredell
Special Photography Effects by: D.S. Horsley
Editor: Arthur Hilton
Art Direction: Jack Otterson, Martin Obzina
Set Decorations: Russell A. Gausman, E.R. Robinson
Gown Supervision: Vera West
Director of Make-up: Jack P. Pierce
Hairstylist: Carmen Dirigo
Music: Miklós Rózsa
Music, 'The More I Know of Love': Miklós Rózsa
Lyrics, 'The More I Know of Love': Jack Brooks
Director of Sound: Bernard B. Brown
[Sound] Technician: William Hedgcock

Cast

Burt Lancaster (*Ole 'The Swede' Anderson, aka Pete Lund*)
Ava Gardner (*Kitty Collins*)
Edmond O'Brien (*James Riordan*)
Albert Dekker (*'Big Jim' Colfax*)
Sam Levene (*Lieutenant Sam Lubinsky*)
Vince Barnett (*Charleston*)
Virginia Christine (*Lilly Harmon Lubinsky*)
Jack Lambert (*Dum Dum Clarke*)
Charles D. Brown (*Packy Robinson*)
Donald MacBride (*R.S. Kenyon*)
Charles McGraw (*Al, the killer*)
William Conrad (*Max, the killer*)
Harry Hayden (*George, counterman*)*
Bill Walker (*Sam, cook*)*

Phil Brown (*Nick Adams*)*
Howard Freeman (*Brentwood police chief*)*
John Berkes (*Plunther, the coroner*)*
Queenie Smith (*Mary Ellen Doherty, 'Queenie'*)*
Ann Staunton (*Stella, Reardon's secretary*)*
Garry Owen (*Joe Smalley*)*
Mike Donovan (*timekeeper*)*
John Sheehan (*doctor*)*
John Miljan (*Jake the Rake*)*
Jeff Corey (*Blinky Franklin*)*
Noel Cravat (*Lou Tingle*)*
Wally Scott (*Charlie*)*
Gabrielle Windsor (*Ginny Bryson*)*
Milton Wallace (*waiter*)*
Reverend Neal Dodd (*minister*)*
Harry Brown (*paymaster*)*
Audley Anderson (*assistant paymaster*)*
George Anderson (*doctor*)*
Charles B. Middleton (*Farmer Brown*)*
Vera Lewis (*Mrs Hirsch, landlady*)*
Ethan Laidlaw (*conductor*)*
Ernie Adams (*limping man following Kitty*)*
Jack Cheatham (*police driver*)*
Howard Negley, Perc Launders, Geoffrey Ingham (*policemen*)*
Rex Dale (*man*)*
Al Hill (*customer*)*
Nolan Leary, John Trebach (*waiters*)*
William Ruhl (*motorman*)*
Beatrice Roberts (*nurse*)*
Michael Hale (*Pete*)*

USA 1946©

102 mins

* Uncredited

Restored by Universal Pictures in collaboration with The Film Foundation.
Special thanks to Martin Scorsese and Steven Spielberg for their consultation on this restoration.

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

The Killers

Tue 25 May 20:30; Tue 8 Jun 14:30; Wed 23 Jun 17:50
(+ pre-recorded intro by Imogen Sara Smith, author of 'In Lonely Places: Film Noir beyond the City')

Alice in the Cities (Alice in den Städten)

Wed 26 May 17:50; Tue 1 Jun 14:30; Fri 25 Jun 20:45

Eraserhead

Thu 27 May 18:20; Mon 14 Jun 21:00; Thu 24 Jun 21:10

Man Hunt

Fri 28 May 18:10; Sat 12 Jun 16:00; Tue 29 Jun 14:15

Persona

Fri 28 May 21:00; Wed 2 Jun 18:10 (+ pre-recorded intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large); Mon 28 Jun 21:00

La Haine

Sat 29 May 21:00; Wed 16 Jun 21:00; Fri 18 Jun 20:40

Citizen Kane Sun 30 May 12:40; Mon 21 Jun 20:45

Touch of Evil

Mon 31 May 12:45; Sat 5 Jun 17:50; Sun 20 Jun 18:15

The Last Picture Show (Director's Cut)

Mon 31 May 12:50; Mon 7 Jun 17:45

Steamboat Bill, Jr. Thu 3 Jun 14:30; Tue 22 Jun 18:30

Sweet Smell of Success

Fri 4 Jun 15:00; Sun 13 Jun 15:45; Sat 26 Jun 11:40

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The Man Who Wasn't There

Fri 4 Jun 17:50; Sun 27 Jun 18:20

L'eclisse (The Eclipse)

Sat 5 Jun 12:10; Tue 15 Jun 17:50

The White Ribbon (Das weisse Band)

Sun 6 Jun 18:10; Sat 26 Jun 16:30

Le Doulos + pre-recorded intro by Professor Ginette Vincendeau, King's College London

Mon 7 Jun 14:15; Thu 17 Jun 20:45; Wed 30 Jun 17:45

The Night of the Hunter

Tue 8 Jun 20:50; Wed 16 Jun 18:15 (+ pre-recorded intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large)

The Tango Lesson

Wed 9 Jun 17:50 (+ pre-recorded intro by So Mayer, author of 'The Cinema of Sally Potter')

Cleo from 5 to 7 (Cléo de 5 à 7)

Thu 10 Jun 21:00; Mon 21 Jun 14:30

Bitter Victory

Sun 20 Jun 13:00; Mon 28 Jun 17:55

The Big City (Mahanagar)

Wed 23 Jun 17:40

The Gospel According to Matthew (Il vangelo secondo Matteo)

Thu 24 Jun 17:40

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