



**BIG SCREEN CLASSICS**

# Call Northside 777

**SPOILER WARNING** The following notes give away some of the plot.

In one of the finest postwar Twentieth Century Fox crime films shot on location, James Stewart excels as a cynical journalist who hopes for a scoop in covering a woman's campaign to prove her son innocent of murder, only to become committed to the cause as his investigations proceed. Joe MacDonald's typically great camerawork and the uniformly fine performances of a strong cast make for gripping drama.

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*Call Northside 777* followed on from Henry Hathaway's previously successful docudrama collaborations with the influential Fox producer Louis de Rochemont, such as *The House on 92nd Street* (1945), by recounting the investigation of a prominent Chicago newspaper journalist, McNeal (James Stewart), into the wrongful prosecution of Frank Wiecek (Richard Conte), a Chicago man convicted of murdering a policeman during the Prohibition era.

A mysterious press advertisement, asking the reader 'to call Northside 777' with further information, leads McNeal to the prisoner's mother, who recruits him in her battle to prove her son's innocence. Based on real events, the film is now seen as one of the most important of the cycle of documentary *noirs* that marked a turn away from stylised studio melodrama towards a visual style which favoured a greater investment in notions of truthfulness and actuality and a closer proximity to life 'as it is'.

Hathaway's film evokes these principles in its opening credit sequence showing a sheaf of hand-typed sheets being turned so as to evoke what could either be a newspaper report or a shooting script. It continues with an introductory section that blends elements of real documentary footage and dramatic reconstruction, which are then linked together on the soundtrack by the controlling narration of an off-screen male voice. J.P. Telotte has argued in his analysis of the documentary *noir* tradition that there is a 'compromise' built into films such as *Call Northside 777* through 'their twin pull to both reveal and dominate truth, [and] to appear transparent while filtering reality through a traditional narrative mechanism.'

This is especially true in two key sequences of the film in which the narrative investigation loses its prevailing sense of historicity. Instead, an appeal to 'liveness' is made through the 'real-time' representation of the uncovering of important evidence provided by a lie detector and a photographic facsimile machine. The spectator is invited to witness these events 'as if they were there' in the room, but in order to substantiate their dramatic significance, Hathaway also chooses to repeatedly intercut between two concurrent narrative spaces so that, as well as observing the neutral act of revelation, we

are also invited to identify with the psychologically and politically significant reactions on the part of the film's fictionalised protagonists.

Another aspect of the documentary *noir* that features heavily within the film's *mise en scène* is the vernacular realism engaged to portray Chicago itself. *Call Northside 777* is saturated with now evocative local signage for all manner of public and private institutions of the time that works in conjunction with the depiction of important architectural landmarks to anchor important narrative transitions. These elements are often framed with a more emphatic mobile lens in order to suggest that the film is honing in on a local everyday reality. Once again though, there is an interesting linkage of what Steven N. Lipkin calls 'indexical footage' with 'modelled footage'. The film, for example, links a detached documentary perspective of Chicago's Polish migrant neighbourhood – much of which is shot on actual location – with other more carefully staged studio scenes characterised by highly mannered *noir*-like lighting set-ups.

The result is thus a remarkable tension that has a bearing on how one finally reads the film. McNeal's shift in *Call Northside 777* from hard-nosed sensationalist to moral citizen echoes documentary *noir*'s own broader ethical revision of *film noir*'s conventional cynicism, but by having the film's denouement based on the status of the visual document – Wiecek is freed on the basis of a photograph – the spectator is still also inevitably forced to consider the implications of the way in which the film's very own claim to truth has, in fact, been managed and fabricated by its makers.

**Extracted from *100 Film Noirs* by Jim Hillier and Alastair Phillips (BFI Screen Guides, 2009).  
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## **A contemporary review**

This story, like *Boomerang* and *The House on 92nd Street*, is based on official documents. It is a fact that a Pole called Majczek was wrongly sentenced and after 11 years in jail came out a free man. It is a relief to be able to believe in a story as one does in this one. It is consistent all through, it rings true and maintains an ever-increasing interest to the end. It is exciting, and the twist which provides the denouement is most ingenious. The director has been lucky in his cast. Kasia Orzazewski puts in a lovely performance played with feeling and restraint, and Richard Conte, as Frank, never overacts. It is a clear-cut film, every piece falling slowly into place; there is nothing superfluous. The newspaper office is authentic-looking and one is led to believe that the photography really does depict Chicago as it is.

***Monthly Film Bulletin*, June 1948**

CALL NORTHSIDE 777

Directed by: Henry Hathaway  
©/Presents/Released through: Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corporation  
Produced by: Otto Lang  
Screen Play by: Jerome Cady, Jay Dratler  
Adaptation by: Leonard Hoffman, Quentin Reynolds  
Based on articles by: James P. McGuire  
Director of Photography: Joe MacDonald  
Special Photographic Effects: Fred Sersen  
Film Editor: J. Watson Webb Jr  
Art Direction: Lyle Wheeler, Mark-Lee Kirk  
Set Decorations: Thomas Little, Walter M. Scott  
Costumes Designed by: Kay Nelson  
Wardrobe Direction: Charles Le Maire  
Make-up Artist: Ben Nye  
Music: Alfred Newman  
Orchestral Arrangements: Edward Powell  
Sound: W.D. Flick, Roger Heman  
Sound System: Western Electric  
Wirephoto by: Associated Press

uncredited  
Executive Producer: Darryl F. Zanuck  
Production Managers: Sam Wurtzel, Raymond Klune  
Assistant Directors: Abe Steinberg, Joseph E. Rickards  
Script Supervisor: Stanley Scheuer  
Camera Operator: Till Gabbani  
Grip: Frank Cory Jr  
Stills: Jerry Milligan, Paul Russell  
Make-up: Dick Smith, Tom Tuttle  
Hairstylist: Myrtle Ford  
Technical Adviser: James P. McGuire

Cast

James Stewart (P. James McNeal)  
Richard Conte (Frank Wiecek)  
Lee J. Cobb (Brian Kelly)  
Helen Walker (Laura McNeal)  
Betty Garde (Wanda Skutnik/’Wanda Siskovich’)  
Kasia Orzazewski (Tillie Wiecek)  
Joanne De Bergh (Helen Wiecek/’Helen Rayska’)  
Howard Smith (K.L. Palmer)  
Moroni Olsen (chairman of parole board)  
John McIntire (Sam Faxon)  
Paul Harvey (Martin Burns)

uncredited  
Truman Bradley (narrator)  
J.M. Kerrigan (Sullivan, the bailiff)  
Samuel S. Hinds (Judge Charles Moulton)  
George Tyne (Tomek Zaleska)  
Richard Bishop (warden)  
Otto Waldis (Boris)  
Michael Chapin (Frank Jr)  
John Bleifer (Jan Gruska)  
Addison Richards (John Albertson)  
Richard Rober (Larson)  
Eddie Dunn (John Bundy, patrolman)  
Percy Helton (William Decker, mailman)  
Charles Lane (prosecuting attorney)  
E.G. Marshall (Rayska)  
Norman Mackay, Walter Greaza (detectives)  
William Post Jr (police detective)  
George Melford, Charles Miller, Joe Forte, Dick Ryan,  
George L. Spaulding (parole board members)  
Lionel Stander (Corrigan)  
Jonathan Hale (Robert Winston)  
Lew Eckels, George Cisar, Philip Lord,  
Duke Watson, George Pembroke (policemen)  
Freddie Steele, George Turner (holdup men)  
Jane Crowley (Anna Felczak)  
Robert Karnes (Spitzer)  
Larry Blake, Robert B. Williams, Perry Ivins,  
Lester Sharpe (technicians)  
Helen Foster, Dollie Caillet (secretaries)  
Abe Dinovitch, Jack Mannick (Polish men)  
Henry Kulky (bartender in Drazynski’s place)  
Cy Kendall (bartender in Bill’s place)  
Wanda Perry, Ann Staunton (telephone operators)  
Rex Downing (copy boy)  
Edward Peil Jr, Buck Harrington (bartenders)  
Stanley Gordon (prison clerk)  
Carl Kroenke (guard)  
Leonard Keeler (himself)  
Arthur Peterson (Keeler’s assistant)  
Bill Vendetta (himself, Chicago Times photographer)  
Joe Ploski  
Peter Seal

USA 1948  
111 mins

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

The Stranger

Wed 1 Sep 18:00 (+ pre-recorded intro by film critic Farran Smith Nehme); Fri 17 Sep 21:00; Fri 1 Oct 14:30

Detective Story

Thu 2 Sep 18:00; Fri 24 Sep 18:00; Sun 3 Oct 12:10

Double Indemnity

Thu 2 Sep 14:45; Sun 12 Sep 15:00; Wed 29 Sep 17:45 (+ intro by Lucy Bolton, Queen Mary University of London); Sat 2 Oct 20:50

Call Northside 777

Fri 3 Sep 20:40; Thu 9 Sep 14:30; Tue 14 Sep 17:50; Mon 20 Sep 17:50

The Hound of the Baskervilles

Sat 4 Sep 15:15; Thu 30 Sep 18:15

Cry of the City

Sun 5 Sep 18:10; Thu 9 Sep 18:10; Sat 18 Sep 21:00; Tue 21 Sep 14:45

The Undercover Man

Mon 6 Sep 18:10; Thu 23 Sep 14:45; Sun 26 Sep 12:00

The Big Sleep

Tue 7 Sep 20:45; Sun 19 Sep 11:00; Mon 4 Oct 17:45

Laura

Wed 8 Sep 18:10 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large); Thu 16 Sep 14:30; Tue 21 Sep 21:00; Fri 1 Oct 20:50

The Third Man

Wed 8 Sep 21:00; Fri 10 Sep 14:30; Tue 14 Sep 20:50; Sat 2 Oct 11:30

Rear Window

Thu 9 Sep 20:45; Wed 15 Sep 17:20 (+ pre-recorded intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large); Sat 25 Sep 11:30; Tue 28 Sep 20:45; Tue 5 Oct 14:30

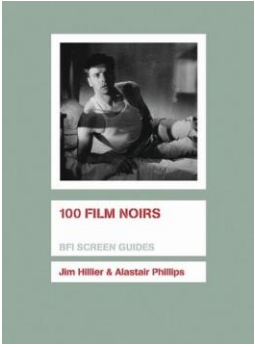
The Big Heat

Sat 11 Sep 14:30; Mon 13 Sep 21:00; Wed 22 Sep 18:00 (+ intro by Simran Hans, writer and film critic for ‘The Observer’); Mon 27 Sep 17:50

Philosophical Screens: Temptation and Coincidence in ‘Double Indemnity’

Wed 29 Sep 20:00 Blue Room

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