



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Cry of the City

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

The title and basic outline of *Cry of the City* (1948) might suggest that it belongs to a post-World War II cycle of urban crime movies influenced by neorealism and wartime documentaries – films such as *The Naked City* (1948), *The Sleeping City* (1950) and *City That Never Sleeps* (1953). But *Cry of the City* is different: there are no bird's-eye views of the skyline here, no omniscient voiceover invoking the metropolis as a character, and little in the way of documentary footage. Instead, there are intense, intimate scenes in a series of cramped interiors – a hospital, a jail cell, a tenement apartment, an office, a car, a subway station, a church. Director Robert Siodmak was a master of chamber *noir*, dwelling on the complicated, ingrown dynamics of family and romantic relationships.

Siodmak belonged to the generation of Jewish directors who fled Germany and Austria to escape the Nazis, and whose arrival in Hollywood was a crucial factor in the development of *film noir*. No director was more closely linked to the genre; nearly all of the American films for which Siodmak is remembered are *noir*, marked by elliptical narrative structures, expressionistic shadows and a recurring theme of self-destructive obsession. In other hands, *Cry of the City* might have been a fast-paced chase movie, a cops and robbers procedural. But Siodmak was always more interested in psychology than in suspense – though he was quite adept at shredding nerves, as proven here by a brilliantly staged jail break in which the escapee must walk slowly down a long concrete tunnel, in a scene scored with a muffled drumbeat that thumps like a heart.

Cry of the City tells the tale of a policeman chasing a fugitive cop-killer, but it is far more than that; it is about the battle for hearts and minds between the two men, as they alternatively vie for leverage and influence in a series of encounters marked by what James Harvey aptly calls 'transactions of personal dominance'. Lieutenant Candella (Victor Mature) is determined not only to capture Martin Rome (Richard Conte), but to turn the hoodlum's family, allies and lovers against him. He knows that Marty is a charismatic charmer whose best weapon is not a gun or a knife, but a gift for seducing and manipulating people into helping him.

Badly injured in a shootout with the police and on the run after escaping from a prison hospital, Rome is in much the same predicament as Johnny McQueen, the dying Irish rebel in Carol Reed's *Odd Man Out* (1947). But while James Mason plays Johnny as a powerless observer of his own fate, an embodiment of mortality and a beautiful martyr, Conte endows Martin Rome with feverish, electric energy, even when he is too weak to rise from a bed. Defiant, remorseless and irrepressibly flippant, Marty turns the tables on authorities and would-be aggressors. Chained to a hospital bed, he taunts the police when they come to grill him: 'I'm full of bullet holes... Beat me? I die. Yell at me? I faint.' Later, dragging his injured leg, crumpling with pain and fatigue, he is as dangerous as a wounded animal, yet he never loses the proud élan and silky elegance that were Conte's trademarks. The son of an Italian barber, Richard (born Nicholas) Conte grew up across the river from New York in Jersey City, and his strong accent and vibrant Italian hand

gestures contribute largely to the authentic flavour of the film's Little Italy setting.

Like Hitchcock, Siodmak preferred the greater control allowed by filming on sets; *Cry of the City* is unusual among his films for being shot partly in real New York locations. He managed to use interiors that are at once palpably real – the whole film has the feel of stale, close air and damp, gritty asphalt – and as dramatically expressive as sets. The apartment of the Rome family is richly atmospheric, with its clutter of religious icons and look of respectable poverty.

Candella belongs to this world too; even as he hunts for Marty, he behaves like a member of the family, calling Mrs Rome 'Mama', and assuming a big-brotherly stance toward the younger siblings. (Despite the way he was often typecast, Victor Mature was neither Italian nor a New Yorker, and while he is not unconvincing he, like his character, lacks the colour and panache of his co-star.) Candella's hatred of Rome is personal, fuelled by the kind of resentment a good son feels for the prodigal brother who is loved despite his sins. Screenwriter Curt Siodmak said that there was an intense sibling rivalry between him and older brother Robert, and this theme plays out vividly in several of the director's films (*The Strange Affair of Uncle Harry*, *The Dark Mirror*). In fact, the script (by Richard Murphy, with uncredited contributions by Ben Hecht) might be stronger if this theme were played up. As it is, Candella's character suffers from being reduced to the voice of law and order, always right and never interesting.

Visiting Rome in jail, the cop asks, 'Was it worth it?' – meaning a life of crime that is slated to end in the electric chair. Maybe, shrugs the hoodlum, because he made a lot of money and had a lot of fun, and what does the cop have to show for his virtue? 'I sleep good at nights,' Candella answers stolidly. 'Yeah, in some cheap room,' Marty retorts, with a triumphant smile and a dismissive gesture. What is significant in this scene is that the two men's arguments count for nothing; their styles count for everything. Marty is as quick and sharp as the switchblade he brandishes in several scenes; Candella is heavy and slow, with Mature's beefy build and droopy eyes, like a man who has gorged on too much *fettuccine alfredo*. There is, to put it bluntly, no contest.

The glamour of outlaws always posed a problem for classic Hollywood crime movies, even as it underlay their popularity. *Cry of the City* was made during the reign of the Production Code, which decreed that films must not glorify criminals, that they must show transgressors being punished and illustrate that crime does not pay. The enforcers of the Code seem not to have realised that doomed criminals become even more romantic. We root for Rome not only because he is more attractive than Candella, but because he is weak and threatened, a man condemned to death and dying anyway, convicted of one crime and falsely accused of another.

Crime is not the only netherworld of cruelty and desperation: the manhunt opens windows on to the city's many corners of furtive misery. The day after Marty's anxious ex-girlfriend Brenda (Shelley Winters) finds an unlicensed foreign doctor to patch up his wounds in the back of a car – parking outside a neon-lit strip of nightclubs to provide some light – the police round up a roomful of unlicensed foreign doctors. They are all European wartime refugees, like Siodmak: dignified and distinguished men now forced into humiliating compromises.

The film is vastly enriched by the offbeat specificity of the supporting characters, not one of whom is a cipher. Towering above them all is the masseuse Rose Given (Hope Emerson), the jewel-robbery accomplice whom Marty finally tracks down. She enters in a brilliant deep-focus shot, advancing toward the camera down a long hallway, turning lights on as she approaches, getting bigger and bigger until she almost blots out the screen. Emerson was over six feet tall and heavily built; she dwarfs Conte, and this scene is the most fascinatingly complex in terms of ‘transactions of personal dominance’. Marty is slumped in a chair, weak with exhaustion and loss of blood, as Rose looms over him. Yet as he lays out the terms of a deal (he now has the jewels, and will trade them for safe passage out of the country), they flirt and banter. There is fear and greed and distrust and latent violence between them, yet the tone of their encounter is light, teasing, even caressing; they recognise and appreciate each other as dangerous.

Symmetries give the film an elegant structure and also suggest equivalences between apparent opposites. The staging of Marty’s first meeting with Rose echoes his confrontation with her partner Niles (Berry Kroeger), a smirking, oily shyster: Marty gets behind him and stabs him with a switchblade through the back of his desk chair. Candella, like his quarry, escapes from a hospital bed after he’s been shot, and drags himself through the city streets. The shadowy church where the two wounded men have their final encounter recalls the hushed, church-like hospital ward in the opening scene. In an accusatory speech that reveals how his obsessive hatred has metastasised, Candella indicts Marty for all the people he has hurt. The far more nuanced moral landscape of the film undercuts this concentration of blame – we have seen how people make their own choices and harbour their own motives. We recognise that both crime and the law use and hurt people. In the end, everyone is hurt; it is as inescapable as the weather. It is the city’s cost of living.

Imogen Sara Smith, *Sight & Sound*, May 2015

CRY OF THE CITY

Directed by: Robert Siodmak
©: Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corporation
Presented by: Twentieth Century-Fox
Released through: Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corporation
Produced by: Sol C. Siegel
Screen Play by: Richard Murphy
From a novel by: Henry Edward Helseth
Director of Photography: Lloyd Ahern
Special Photographic Effects: Fred Sersen
Film Editor: Harmon Jones
Art Direction: Lyle Wheeler, Albert Hogsett
Set Decorations: Thomas Little, Ernest Lansing
Costumes Designed by: Bonnie Cashin
Wardrobe Director: Charles Lemaire
Makeup Artist: Ben Nye
Music: Alfred Newman
Musical Direction: Lionel Newman
Orchestral Arrangements: Herbert Spencer, Earle Hagen
Sound: Eugene Grossman, Roger Heman
Sound System: Western Electric

uncredited

Production Manager: Sid Bowen
Assistant Director: Jasper Blystone
Camera Operator: Paul Lockwood

Cast

Victor Mature (*Lieutenant Vittorio Candella*)
Richard Conte (*Martin Rome*)
Fred Clark (*Lieutenant Jim Collins*)
Shelley Winters (*Brenda*)
Betty Garde (*Nurse Frances Pruett*)

Berry Kroeger (*W.A. Niles*)
Tommy Cook (*Tony Roma*)
Debra Paget (*Teena Riconti*)
Hope Emerson (*Rose Given*)
Roland Winters (*Ledbetter*)
Walter Baldwin (*Orvy*)

uncredited
June Storey (*Miss Boone*)
Tito Vuolo (*Papa Mario Roma*)
Mimi Aguglia (*Mama Roma*)
Dolores Castle (*Rosa*)
Claudette Ross (*Rosa’s daughter*)
Tiny Francone (*Perdita*)
Elena Savonarola (*Francesca*)
Thomas Ingersoll (*priest*)
Vito Scotti (*Julio*)
Konstantin Shayne (*Doctor Veroff*)
Howard Freeman (*Sullivan*)
Robert Karnes, Charles Tannen, Tom Moore (*doctors*)
Oliver Blake (*Caputo*)
Antonio Filauri (*Vaselli*)
Joan Miller (*Vera*)
Kenneth Christy (*Loomis*)
Emil Rameau (*Doctor Niklas*)
Harry Cheshire (*Hanlon*)
Eddie Parks (*Mike*)
Charles Wagenheim (*counterman*)
Kathleen Howard (*Mrs Pruett*)
Jane Nigh, Ruth Clifford (*nurses*)

USA 1948
95 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

NFTS AT 50

Saint Maud + Q&A with director Rose Glass

Thu 2 Sep 17:45

The Last Tree + Q&A with director Shola Amoo

Sat 11 Sep 17:00

Il Postino (The Postman) + Q&A with director Michael Radford

Sun 12 Sep 17:00

An Evening with Roger and James Deakins

Sun 12 Sep 20:30

Absolute Beginners + Q&A with director Julian Temple and cinematographer Oliver Stapleton BSC

Wed 15 Sep 20:25

The Souvenir + Q&A with director Joanna Hogg

Fri 17 Sep 17:45

The Selfish Giant + Q&A with director Clio Barnard

Mon 20 Sep 20:50

Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit + Q&A with director Beeban Kidron

Thu 23 Sep 18:00

Kurt & Courtney + Q&A with director Nick Broomfield

Sat 25 Sep 14:30

Theatre Girls + Q&A with director Kim Longinotto

Sun 26 Sep 15:40

Surge + Q&A with director Aneil Karia

Tue 28 Sep 17:40

Of Time and the City + Q&A with director Terence Davies

Sat 2 Oct 14:15

Rocks + Q&A with director Sarah Gavron

Sat 2 Oct 17:30

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