



HARRY BELAFONTE: MOVIES RACE DEFIANCE

Odds against Tomorrow

Odds against Tomorrow

Director: Robert Wise

©/Production Company: HarBel Productions

Executive Producer: Harry Belafonte *

Producer: Robert Wise

Associate Producer: Phil Stein

Manager of Production: Forrest E. Johnston

Assistant Director: Charles McGuire

Script Supervisor: Marguerite James

Screenplay: John O. Killens, Nelson Gidding

Screenplay: Abraham Polonsky *

From a book by: William P. McGivern

Photography: Joseph Brun

Camera Operator: Saul Midwall

Gaffer: Howard Fortune

Grip: Edward Knott

Film Editor: Dede Allen

Settings: Leo Kerz

Set Decorator: Fred Ballmeyer

Costumes: Anna Hill Johnstone

Make-up: Robert Jiras

Titles: Storyboard Productions

Titles: John Hubley *

Music Composed and Conducted by:

John Lewis

Sound: Edward Johnstone, Richard Voriseck

Sound Editor: Ken Collins

Studio: Gold Medal Studios

Cast:

Harry Belafonte (*Johnny Ingram*)

Robert Ryan (*Earl Slater*)

Shelley Winters (*Lorry*)

Ed Begley (*Dave Burke*)

Gloria Grahame (*Helen*)

Will Kuluva (*Bacco*)

Kim Hamilton (*Ruth Ingram*)

Mae Barnes (*Annie*)

Richard Bright (*Coco*)

Carmen De Lavallade (*Kitty*)

Lew Gallo (*Moriarty*)

Lois Thorne (*Eadie Ingram*)

Wayne Rogers (*soldier in bar*)

Zohra Lampert (*girl in bar*)

Allen Nourse (*police chief of Melton*)

Fred J. Scollay (*Cannoy*) *

Burt Harris (*man in bar*) *

Bill Zuckert (*bartender*) *

Mil Stewart (*elevator operator*) *

Paul Hoffman (*Garry*) *

Cicely Tyson (*Fra*) *

William Adams (*Joe, the bank guard*) *

John Garden (*clerk in bus station*) *

USA 1959©

96 mins

35mm

* Uncredited

A BFI National Archive print

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

Harry Belafonte shines as a mercurial gambler uncertain of bourgeois respectability, indebted to loan-sharks, who threaten his job as a nightclub singer. From the streets of Manhattan to a tense climax in small-town Pennsylvania, this is a neglected noir masterpiece. Belafonte and Robert Wise both claimed this film was the most enjoyable of their storied careers. This story is grounded in its commentary on Jim Crow racism and the trauma of veterans from the Second World War and the possibility of nuclear annihilation. The pulsating score is by jazz doyen John Lewis and performed by the Modern Jazz Quartet.

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Although it gets the occasional screening and is available on DVD, Robert Wise's *Odds against Tomorrow* remains a neglected masterpiece. In its treatment of race and with its African-American star Harry Belafonte (who was also the film's executive producer), the film is ahead of its time. It is also a testimony to Wise's versatility – this is the director who gave us everything from *The Curse of the Cat People* (1944) to *The Sound of Music* (1965).

Odds against Tomorrow is best described as a noir-ish heist movie. The heist movie often concerns itself with process – a minute but exciting examination of some spectacular robbery or kidnap. It also likes to linger over the fallout when the job goes wrong. But *Odds against Tomorrow* shows little interest in the planning and mechanics of its heist – a bank robbery in a small industrial town outside New York. What really distinguishes the film is its concentration on what goes wrong beforehand – so much so that the robbery only occurs at the very end of the film.

The ending is truly apocalyptic, as the robbery leads to a shootout in a petrochemical plant and then an explosion reminiscent of Raoul Walsh's *White Heat* (1949). But there's no self-combusting Jimmy Cagney yelling, 'Made it, Ma. Top of the world!' This is total obliteration – a damnation of biblical proportions without even the saving grace of Cagney's gleeful nihilism.

The infernal flames are of a piece with the film's opening shots, which depict New York as some kind of doomed, windswept city of the plain. The malign wind is more metaphysical than elemental, its force even greater in the first interior shots – of a hotel through whose lift shaft it howls like a banshee.

Things are already looking – and certainly sounding – bad. But Wise's film is no parade of glib pessimism. It earns its despair. For screenwriter Abraham Polonsky (blacklisted as a communist during the McCarthy-era Hollywood witch hunts; his credit here went to Belafonte's friend, author John O. Killens), tragedy is located in a set of social meanings, not some abstracted 'human condition'. Polonsky's interest in the social as well as the psychological – and ultimately also the political – is rooted in story and character. Most of what goes wrong before the heist, which is being organised by ex-cop David Burke (Ed Begley), can be attributed to the racism of one of his recruits – ex-con Earl Slater (Robert Ryan). Thus the bank robbery is doomed to failure for 'personal' reasons and not because of some breakdown in the plan or because of some great detective work.

Ryan's racist – an interesting role for an actor so vociferous in real life on behalf of civil rights – is no cardboard cut-out. He doesn't exactly gain our sympathy,

HARRY BELAFONTE: MOVIES RACE DEFIANCE

Sing Your Song + extended illustrated season intro with Burt Caesar, season curator and Q&A with director Susanne Rostock, Legacy Media Institute Founding Director Tim Reid, writer and activist Candace Allen and actor Clarke Peters
Sat 2 Dec 14:00

Odds Against Tomorrow

Sat 2 Dec 18:10; Thu 14 Dec 20:45

Carmen Jones

Tue 5 Dec 20:45; Wed 20 Dec 20:50; Fri 22 Dec 18:00

The World, the Flesh and the Devil

Sat 9 Dec 15:20; Tue 19 Dec 20:45

Kansas City

Sat 9 Dec 18:10; Sun 17 Dec 18:20 (+ intro by season curator Burt Caesar)

Buck and the Preacher

Sun 10 Dec 18:20; Sat 23 Dec 15:50; Wed 27 Dec 20:40

Seniors' Free Talk: Harry Belafonte – A Veces Miro Mi Vida (Sometimes I Look at My Life) + intro by season curator Burt Caesar and post-screening Q&A

Wed 13 Dec 11:00

Seniors' Free Archive Matinee: Island in the Sun + intro by film historian Marcus Powell

Wed 13 Dec 14:00

BlackKlansman

Thu 14 Dec 18:00; Fri 22 Dec 20:20; Thu 28 Dec 17:50

Harry Belafonte in Concert and Conversation

Sat 16 Dec 15:00

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but there is an understanding of his desperate circumstances. Stigmatised by his time in prison and out of work, Slater has a steady girlfriend, Lorry (Shelley Winters), but still feels like a loner. Further troubled depths are revealed when we see him first rejecting and then succumbing to the sexual advances of his neighbour Helen (Gloria Grahame).

Just as Earl Slater is no straightforward villain, Ed's other recruit, African-American Johnny Ingram (Harry Belafonte), is no obvious hero. (Slater, of course, hates him on sight.) Ingram is a nightclub singer who is certainly one for the wine, women and song – and the horses. His gambling debts leave him at the mercy of loan-shark gangsters. His womanising and general flakiness have led to a painful separation from his wife and their daughter. However, against the odds, he is trying to make a go of things. And failing.

The extensive location shooting in the film was pioneering, right from the windswept opening; the use of specialist infra-red stock makes the streets look utterly real yet somehow out of kilter, with Slater more like a ghost than a man of flesh and blood. This 'estranged' realism is carried over into scenes set in New York's outlying districts, a phantasmagoria rather than suburbia: industrial wastelands and waterways jammed with flotsam and jetsam. Killing time before their bank job, the robbers feel equally washed up as they contemplate the floating jumble.

It's in scenes like these that Wise gets behind his characters' social personae and into their psyches. It's all done by suggestion – by mood and image rather than crude psychologising. These are cinematic states of mind that have come to be associated with European auteurs, but here they are in 1950s America. Indeed *Odds against Tomorrow* was French noir director Jean-Pierre Melville's favourite film.

Wise, a former film editor who cut *Citizen Kane*, is adept at finding the fleeting moment that reveals a character's soul. To describe such moments – for instance, when Johnny sees a discarded doll in the water – is almost to kill them by critique, like breaking down a delicate butterfly into its component parts. But it's the parts coming together that produce these elusive moments. That floating doll conjures up the women in Johnny's life, and that includes his daughter; but it's also Johnny himself – with whom the gods are toying before they discard him. It's all of these things and none of them. After all, Johnny is just looking and the film only suggesting. But that's symbolism for you: the art of suggestion.

The score by John Lewis, pianist of the Modern Jazz Quartet, plays a big part in the making of such moments. It's vibrant and aggressive, following events as they unfold while also at times leading them like some motivational force. But Lewis's bebop hardness and objectivity (before the MJQ, he played with Charlie Parker) can also switch at the drop of a hi-hat into something more subjective and soul-searching.

These swift mood changes don't happen without the light touch of editor Dede Allen, who would go on to work with Arthur Penn on *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and *Night Moves* (1975). Gene Hackman's private eye from *Night Moves* wouldn't be out of place in *Odds against Tomorrow*. Here's a man who bites off more than he can chew, which is as good as asking the Fates to come and get you. And in *Odds against Tomorrow*, they do. The genius of the film is that its Greek tragedy is rooted in the here and now of a racially divided 1950s America. And there's no need for a chorus: the characters' dry one-liners and gallows humour provide their own running commentary.

Paul Tickell, *Sight and Sound*, December 2011