



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

The Killers

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©, 105 mins

* Uncredited

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.org.uk

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

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Devil in a Blue Dress

Fri 1 Mar 20:45; Thu 7 Mar 18:30; Sun 10 Mar 18:30

Jules et Jim

Sat 2 Mar 20:45; Mon 4 Mar 20:30; Mon 11 Mar 20:40; Wed 13 Mar 18:10 + intro

The Killers

Tue 5 Mar 18:15; Sat 9 Mar 18:10; Tue 12 Mar 14:30

In the Cut

Sun 3 Mar 18:20; Wed 6 Mar 18:00 + intro; Fri 8 Mar 20:40

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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