



## BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

# The Wages of Fear (Le salaire de la peur)

### The Wages of Fear (Le salaire de la peur)

Director: Henri-Georges Clouzot

Production Companies: Compagnie Industrielle et Commerciale Cinématographique, Filmsonor (Paris), Véra Films, Fono Roma

Executive Producers: Raymond Borderie, Henri-Georges Clouzot

Producer: Georges Lourau \*

Production Manager: Louis Wipf

Unit Production Managers: H. Jaquillard, L. Lippens

Unit Managers: Favre, Vergne, Lemoigne

General Administration: Charles Borderie

Assistant Director: Michel Romanoff

Italian Assistant Director: Roberto Savarese

Script Supervisor: Lily Hargous

Adaptation/Dialogue: Henri-Georges Clouzot, Jérôme Geronimi

Based on the novel by: Georges Arnaud

Director of Photography: Armand Thirard

Camera Operator: Robert Juillard

Cameramen: Louis Née, Jean Lallier

Assistant Camera Operators: Dicop, Florent, Pater

Stills Photography: Lucienne Chevert, J. Clouzot

Editors: Henri Rust, Madeleine Gug, E. Muse

Art Director: René Renoux

Assistant Art Directors: Pierre Tyberghien, M. Desage

Costumes: Suzy Berton \*

Make-up: G. Bouban

Music: Georges Auric

Sound: William Robert Sivel

Sound Assistants: Arthur van der Merren, P. Zann

Cast:

Yves Montand (Mario)

Charles Vanel (Jo)

Peter Van Eyck (Bimba)

Centa (chief of 'Boss' camp)

Miss Darling

Luis de Lima (Bernardo)

Jo Dest (Smerloff)

Dario Moreno (Hernandez)

Faustini

Seguna

William Tubbs (O'Brien)

Véra Clouzot (Linda)

Folco Lulli (Luigi)

Ricardo \*

Pat Hurst \*

Grégoire Gromoff \*

Jeronimo Mitchell (Dick) \*

Evelio Larenagas \*

Joseph Palau-Favre \*

France/Italy 1953

153 mins

Digital

**SPOILER WARNING** The following notes give away the film's ending.

Clouzot's masterly account of a quartet of desperate and/or greedy misfit expatriates agreeing to transport two truckloads of nitro-glycerine through the South American jungle is impressive for its audacious pacing, its sour depiction of human aspiration and squalor, and its nail-biting tension. Utterly devoid of sentimentality and heroic clichés, this is gleefully dark, misanthropic filmmaking, with the cast fitting the bill to perfection.

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How different would history's lists of film festival winners look if laureate were anointed by audiences vote rather than by illustrious juries? Between 1952 and 1955, the Golden Bear victor at the Berlinale was decided by festivalgoers, and the result was a quirk in awards history: 1953's winner, Henri-Georges Clouzot's 153-minute nerve-shredder *The Wages of Fear*, remains the only film ever to clinch the top prize at both Berlin and the Cannes Film Festival.

It was a mid-career triumph for Clouzot and a launchpad for Yves Montand, a chansonnier and former supporting player who became an international movie star on the strength of his performance here as Mario, a rakish reprobate desperate to flee the Latin American backwater of Las Piedras, a kind of purgatory for criminals lying low. Mario gets his chance – along with three other grimy expats living in the town – when an American oil company with operations in the region offers four drivers \$2,000 each to transport two trucks' worth of lethally combustible nitroglycerine across 500 kilometres of perilous terrain.

Everything about the film is bravura, from its opening stretch (it spends 35 minutes simply painting a lively if pessimistic picture of conditions in Las Piedras, before setting up the high concept) to the white-knuckle journey itself, steeped in sweat, petrol and, increasingly, blood. By the end of the trip, what began as a collaborative endeavour has taken on a Darwinian dimension. The truck driven by Bimba (Peter van Eyck) and Luigi (Folco Lulli) has blown sky-high without warning on an ostensibly safe stretch of road, and Mario and Jo (Charles Vanel, who went on to win Best Actor at Cannes for the role) have managed to navigate through a viscous lake of petroleum that's gushed from a burst pipe, at the cost of Jo's left leg, crushed by one of the truck's enormous wheels. As Jo, back in the passenger seat, succumbs to his injury, Mario rolls up to their destination and delivers the payload alone.

The nitroglycerine has a perverse purpose: igniting it strategically is the only way to dam up the gas pocket that's been feeding a series of roaring, uncontrollable explosions for several days, at huge cost to the American oil major. By structuring the narrative around the nitroglycerine, Clouzot – like Georges Arnaud before him, who wrote the novel the film is based on – frames proceedings with the bleak implication that destruction and conflagration are essential to man's methods. It renders Mario's victory against the odds depressingly hollow and bitterly ironic, stripping it of the heroism that might have accompanied the undertaking.

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**SIGHT AND SOUND**

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### Apocalypse Now: The Final Cut

Sat 1 Jun 15:00; Sat 8 Jun 19:40; Sat 15 Jun 19:40;  
Sun 23 Jun 19:20

### The Wages of Fear

*Le Salaire de la peur*

Sat 1 Jun 17:40; Tue 11 Jun 20:15; Wed 19 Jun  
14:20; Sun 30 Jun 14:40

### The General + Cops

Sat 1 Jun 18:40; Wed 12 Jun 12:10

### Cléo from 5 to 7

*Cléo de 5 à 7*

Sat 1 Jun 20:50; Wed 5 Jun 18:10 (+ intro  
programmer Jelena Milosavljevic); Fri 14 Jun 20:50;  
Fri 21 Jun 12:10

### It Happened One Night

Sun 2 Jun 13:00; Mon 17 Jun 12:10; Tue 25 Jun  
20:30

### Badlands

Sun 2 Jun 20:45; Mon 10 Jun 12:20; Wed 26 Jun  
18:15 (+ intro by Ruby McGuigan, BFI Programme  
and Acquisitions)

### Sullivan's Travels

Mon 3 Jun 18:10; Mon 10 Jun 20:50; Fri 14 Jun  
14:45; Mon 24 Jun 12:10

### North by Northwest

Mon 3 Jun 20:20; Thu 6 Jun 14:30; Tue 18 Jun  
14:30

### Easy Rider

Tue 4 Jun 12:40; Fri 7 Jun 21:00; Sun 16 Jun 20:35;  
Sat 22 Jun 13:20

### The Searchers

Tue 4 Jun 20:30; Thu 20 Jun 12:10; Sat 29 Jun  
15:20

### Where Is the Friend's House?

*Khaneh-je Doost Kojast*

Wed 5 Jun 12:45; Sat 8 Jun 15:40; Wed 19 Jun  
18:15 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-  
Large); Wed 26 Jun 21:00

### Alice in the Cities

*Alice in den Städten*

Sun 9 Jun 20:20; Thu 13 Jun 12:00; Fri 28 Jun  
12:20

### Gun Crazy

Wed 12 Jun 18:20 (+ intro by Josephine Botting,  
BFI National Archive Curator); Mon 24 Jun 20:30;  
Thu 27 Jun 12:20

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But the ironies are just beginning. The next day, Mario, who's been paid Jo's share of the money as well as his own, bids adieu to the derrick managers, nonchalantly rejecting the chauffeur they offer him: 'No thanks – when someone else is driving, I'm scared.' We seem to be in for a triumphant homecoming: the workers merrily wave him goodbye; Mario casually splashes through the petrol lake that claimed Jo's life; and 500 kilometres away, Mario's ardent lover Linda (played by Véra Clouzot, the director's wife) is told by the local bar proprietor that her paramour is on his way. Strauss's 'Blue Danube' waltz is playing on the wireless; Clouzot begins cross-cutting between the waltzing barflies of Las Piedras and Mario, who, listening to the same tune on the truck radio, is conducting a waltz of his own, insouciantly swerving his juggernaut steed this way and that along the high mountain passes.

The waltz may conjure images of ballroom gentility, but it began as a dance of the underclass, its practitioners' claspings of each other's bodies seen by many as vulgar. So it's a perfect choice of music here: for all his freewheeling, Mario is locked in fate's tight embrace, and as the cross-cutting intensifies, so does his metaphysical *pas de deux* with Linda. She faints on the dancefloor, and he careens off a cliff. Thanks to Clouzot's mordant montage, this is the most intimately bonded the two lovers have ever seemed.

It's an ending so cynical it undercuts the political bite of the opening third. Is Mario's fate inevitable, a consequence of his worthlessness under multinational capitalism? Or is his senseless death the result of his own bottomless appetite, not for money but for adrenaline, for life itself? From Las Piedras (Spanish for 'the stones') to the rocks of oblivion at the foot of a cliff: his odyssey has taken him nowhere at all.

Arjun Sajip, *Sight and Sound*, March 2024

In 1953 *The Wages of Fear* established Clouzot's international reputation and made an acting star of singer Yves Montand.

Montand said that Clouzot originally cast Pablo Picasso in the role of truck driver Jo, eventually played by Charles Vanel: 'Clouzot wanted an old guy who looked so tough that young people would never question his machismo. Picasso was perfect for that, and he agreed to play it – until he read the script and found he had to show cowardice. "Picasso cannot be a coward!" he told Clouzot.' Of course, Picasso was fully occupied playing the role of Picasso, which he did to perfection for Clouzot in the documentary *Le Mystère Picasso* (1956).

Paul Ryan, *Sight and Sound*, September 2003