



## Big Screen Classics

# The Pawnbroker

### The Pawnbroker

Director: Sidney Lumet

Production Companies: Pawnbroker Company, Landau Company

Executive Producer: Worthington Miner

Producers: Roger H. Lewis, Philip Langner

Associate Producer: Joseph Manduke

Production Manager: Ulu Grosbard

Assistant Director: Dan Eriksen

Screenplay: David Friedkin, Morton Fine

Based on the novel by: Edward Lewis Wallant

Director of Photography: Boris Kaufman

Editor: Ralph Rosenblum

Production Designer: Richard Sylbert

Set Decorator: Jack Flaherty

Costumes: Anna Hill Johnstone

Make-up: Bill Herman

Music: Quincy Jones

Sound: Dennis Maitland

Cast:

Rod Steiger (*Sol Nazerman*)

Geraldine Fitzgerald (*Marilyn Birchfield*)

Jaime Sanchez (*Ortiz*)

Brock Peters (*Rodriguez*)

Thelma Oliver (*Mabel*)

Marketa Kimbrell (*Tessie*)

Baruch Lumet (*Mendel*)

Juano Hernandez (*Mr Smith*)

Linda Geiser (*Ruth*)

Nancy R. Pollock (*Bertha*)

Raymond St. Jacques (*Tangee*)

John McCurry (*Buck*)

Eusebia Cosme (*Mrs Ortiz*)

Warren Finnerty (*Savarese*)

Jack Ader (*Morton*)

E.M. Margolese (*Papa*)

Marianne Kanter (*Joan*)

Marc Alexander (*Rubin*)

Ed Morehouse (*oratory award man*)

Morgan Freeman (*man on street*) \*

USA 1964

116 mins

Digital

\* Uncredited

Although it rarely features in top 100 lists, Sidney Lumet's *The Pawnbroker* (1964) played a significant role in shaping 1960s American cinema. Yet, it was almost never made and sat in a vault for months, while Hollywood debated whether it should even be released.

When it acquired the rights to Edward Lewis Wallant's novel about Holocaust survivor Sol Nazerman, MGM considered relocating the story to Soho, London, and casting James Mason in the lead. Groucho Marx had expressed interest in the role that eventually went to Rod Steiger, but while the foundering project was rescued by independent producer Ely Landau, neither Stanley Kubrick, Karel Reisz nor Franco Zeffirelli wanted to touch it.

Hollywood had examined the psychological toll of the concentration camps in films like *The Juggler* (1953) and *Judgment at Nuremberg* (1961). But the persecution had always been kept off screen – which makes Sol's flashbacks, as he approaches the 25th anniversary of his wife's death at Auschwitz, so notable.

A peacetime professor in Germany, Sol now runs a pawnshop in Spanish Harlem that's used as a front by a gay pimp (Brock Peters). Wracked by survivor guilt, Sol adopts an air of callous detachment to prevent his traumatic memories from crushing him. Whether sleeping with a lost friend's widow or doling out chits to impoverished clients, he lives entirely on a transactional basis. However, Puerto Rican assistant Jesus Ortiz (Jaime Sánchez) and social worker Marilyn Birchfield (Geraldine Fitzgerald) strive to make a redemptive connection.

For a picture so preoccupied with death, *The Pawnbroker* throbs with life, especially outside the Park Avenue store designed by Richard Sylbert. Its wired cages, bars, locks and alarms are framed and lit by celebrated cinematographer Boris Kaufman in a noirish manner that can only remind Sol of his incarceration.

At first, these recollections are little more than stabbing slivers. But Ralph Rosenblum's editing borrows the shock cut tactics made popular by French New Wave films *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959) and *Breathless* (1960) to show how a fight in a basketball court evokes a man's entrapment on the perimeter wire; how a busy subway car resembles a crammed cattle truck; and how a pregnant girl's cheap glass ring recalls the Nazi theft of jewellery from the fingers of defenceless Jewish women.

Most harrowingly, the sight of Black prostitute Mabel Wheatly (Thelma Oliver) baring her breasts in the hope of securing a loan forces Sol to remember the horror of his wife, Ruth (Linda Geiser), being sexually abused by guards at the camp. But, while Lumet was so convinced that de-eroticised nudity legitimately conveyed Sol's torment that he didn't bother shooting coverage, Geoffrey Shurlock of the Production Code Administration thought otherwise.

The Code had been in force since 1934 to protect filmmakers from outraged viewers as much as to restrict what they could show on the screen. However, the need to pander to powerful religious and social pressure groups had prompted the PCA to assume an advisory role on screenplay content. They

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AND  
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### Rope

Thu 1 May 20:55; Sun 4 May 16:00;  
Thu 15 May 18:10; Tue 27 May 18:10

### Gun Crazy

Fri 2 May 18:30; Thu 8 May 20:45;  
Mon 19 May 18:20

### Singin' in the Rain

Sat 3 May 15:00; Mon 12 May 20:45;  
Fri 16 May 20:45; Sun 25 May 11:40

### Some Like it Hot

Mon 5 May 11:45; Sat 17 May 12:20;  
Fri 23 May 20:30; Mon 26 May 11:45

### Chitty Chitty Bang Bang

Mon 5 May 11:50; Sun 11 May 12:00;  
Sat 24 May 11:30

### The Pawnbroker

Tue 6 May 18:00; Thu 22 May 20:45

### Themroc

Wed 7 May 17:50 (+ intro by Muriel Zagha, writer  
and broadcaster on film, and co-host of cross-  
cultural podcast Garlic&Pearls); Thu 29 May 20:30

### The Manchurian Candidate

Fri 9 May 18:05; Sat 24 May 11:40;  
Fri 30 May 20:30

### The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

Sat 10 May 16:20; Sun 25 May 14:00;  
Sat 31 May 19:00

### The Haunting

Sat 10 May 20:30; Wed 21 May 18:00 (+ intro by  
writer, lecturer and producer Mo Moshaty)

### Seconds

Mon 12 May 18:15; Sat 17 May 15:10;  
Fri 23 May 18:00

### Sweet Charity

Tue 13 May 20:00; Sun 18 May 11:45;  
Mon 26 May 14:20

### The Hustler

Wed 14 May 17:55 (+ intro by Jacob Stolworthy,  
Culture News Editor at *The Independent*);  
Sat 24 May 14:20; Wed 28 May 20:25

### Goldfinger

Wed 14 May 20:50; Tue 20 May 20:45;  
Wed 28 May 18:00

### The Green Man

Sun 18 May 12:30; Wed 28 May 18:20 (+ intro by  
Dick Fiddy, BFI Archive TV Programmer)

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would also excise any scenes that would prevent the awarding of the certificate that passed a film for general exhibition.

Aware that the Catholic Legion of Decency had already condemned *The Pawnbroker*, Shurlock withheld PCA clearance both because of the nudity and a bedroom scene involving Jesus and Mabel that was branded 'unacceptably sex suggestive and lustful'.

Bolstered by Steiger's best actor win at the 1964 Berlin Film Festival, Landau was ready to release the picture without the seal through Allied Artists. However, Oscar-winning director Joseph L. Mankiewicz (who was on the appeals committee) urged Lumet to argue his case before the Motion Picture Association of America, which oversaw the Code. By six to three, the board granted exemption in decreeing the feature to be 'a special and unique case', albeit one that shouldn't set a precedent.

Yet, by approving the US release in March 1965, the PCA had allowed its defences to be breached and there could be no going back. In 1968, the Code was replaced by a ratings system that ushered in the New Hollywood era by allowing filmmakers to explore contentious issues with greater latitude.

Moreover, *The Pawnbroker* changed the way in which Hollywood tackled the Holocaust. Yet, it was criticised by Jewish groups for being self-hating and antisemitic. Similarly, civil rights activists condemned the perceived racial stereotyping.

Lumet refuted accusations that he had turned East Harlem into a latter-day ghetto. But he did challenge the melting pot myth by having Sol seek sanctuary in a country that had not only severely restricted the migration of European Jews before and during the war, but which had been founded on genocide and enslavement. American cinema could never look upon the Land of the Free in quite the same way again.

David Parkinson, [bfi.org.uk](https://bfi.org.uk), 27 August 2021