



Big Screen Classics

Night and the City

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Director: Jules Dassin

Production Company [English Version]:

Twentieth Century-Fox Productions

Production Company [US Version]:

Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corporation

Producer: Samuel G. Engel

Production Manager: R. Kinnoch

Personal Assistants to the Producer: Freddie Fox,
Robert E. Dearing

1st Assistant Directors: George Mills, Percy Hermes

2nd Assistant Directors: John Street,

Douglas Hermes

Casting Assistants: Peggy Smith, John Jones

Screenplay: Jo Eisinger

Based on the novel by: Gerald Kersh

Director of Photography: Max Greene

Camera Operator: Austin Dempster

2nd Grips: V. Butler, A. Southall

Editor: Sidney Stone

Editor [US version]: Nick De Maggio

Art Director: C.P. Norman

Draughtsmen: Ted Clements, Peter Murton,
George Beech

Costumes for Miss Tierney Designed by:

Oleg Cassini

Costumes for Miss Withers Designed by:

Margaret Furse

Hairstyling: Barbara Ritchie, Iris Tilley

Music: Benjamin Frankel

Music Director: Muir Mathieson

Orchestration: Eric Rogers, Bernard Mayers,
Cyril J. Mockridge

Orchestration [US version]: Edward Powell

Sound Recording: Peter Handford

Sound Editor: Esmond Seal

Technical Advisers on Wrestling: Mike Mazurki,
Mickey Wood

Studio: Shepperton Studios

uncredited

Executive Producer: Darryl F. Zanuck

Assistant Production Manager: Albert Pearl

Unit Manager: Percy Hermes

Production Secretary: Noreen Hipwell

3rd Assistant Director: Jack Green

2nd Unit Assistant Director: Anthony Hearne

Continuity: Peggy McClafferty

Assistant Continuity: Hazel Swift

Casting: Weston Drury Jr

Contributing Writer: William E. Watts

2nd Unit Director of Photography: Jo Jago

2nd Unit Camera Operator: Hal Britten

Focus Puller: Godfrey Godar

2nd Unit Focus Puller: Walter Lassally

Clapper Loader: David Oxenham

2nd Unit Clapper Loader: Eddie Earp

Grip: Joe Vincent

Wardrobe Supervisor: Ivy Baker

Wardrobe Master: Arthur Newman

Wardrobe Mistress: Evelyn Gibbs

Wardrobe Assistant: Len Hubbard

Make-up: Dave Aylott

Assistant Make-up: E Attwright

Stills: Arthur Evans

Music US version: Franz Waxman

Singing Voice Double for Ms Tierney:

Maudie Edwards

Sound Recording [US version]: Roger Heman

Sound Camera Operator: John Streeter

Sound Maintenance: Charles Van De Goor

Sound Floor Assistant: Hugh Strain

2nd Floor Assistant: Kevin Sutton

Boom Operator: Bill Cook

It's the title that gets you first; somehow so elemental and sinewy. In four short words it yokes together two key 20th-century fetishes: the black swamp of the night (with the moral terrors it summons up), and the newly concretised urban jungle, a man-made construction so elaborate that it appeared to have taken on a brutal life of its own. As a pairing, it is definitively modern and anti-pastoral. (No dappled greensward or lowing cattle here – they've been abolished). And with the careful positioning of a definite article, it becomes a phrase of pure, hard poetry of authentically modernist intent. Would *The Night and the City* have worked so well? Or *The Night and City*? Or even, God forbid, *City and the Night*? Not a chance.

The writer who came up with it, Gerald Kersh, attached it to his third novel. Published in 1938, *Night and the City* is a high-minded pulp thriller containing a fantastically vivid creation, Soho pimp (or ponce, as the term was then) Harry Fabian. A dapper dresser armed with a fake American accent, and a tenacious finagler in all corners of the petty-crime universe, Fabian is arguably the most finely drawn fictional example of the sharp-suited English hoodlum in the inter-war years. (The main rivals? Graham Greene's Pinkie in *Brighton Rock*, or maybe James Curtis's Kennedy in *The Gilt Kid*.) And though it's never fully spelled out in Kersh's effusive prose, Fabian is an ethnically radical character too: with a name like that, we know he's clearly supposed to be Jewish – a figure a long way from the earnest, poverty-stricken, fresh-off-the-boat characters in books like Israel Zangwill's *Children of the Ghetto*.

His implied ethnic background makes Fabian a figure to contend with, and potent icon at that. (A British Jewish gangster? We can't have enough of those.) There were plenty of real-life counterparts in the 1930s and 40s: street toughs like the Distelman brothers, Morris 'Moishe Blue Boy' Goldstein or Jack 'Spot' Comer. By the end of the decade, Comer could viably contend to be a major underworld figure as he 'took over' the West End and carried out ethnically driven turf-war feuds with Italian roughnecks like Albert Dimes. Earlier, at the turn of the century, Whitechapel saw the gang known as the 'Bessarabian Tigers', led by Max Moses aka Kid McCoy. From the 1880s onward, Soho had its own Jewish community, a necessary ingredient for any aspiring protection-racketeer, who needed solid ethnic turf to prey on. (I know this, if nothing else, because my grandfather, Alf Pulver, ran a tailor's workshop in Poland Street just after the war; his brother, Sid, commandeered a room for his unsuccessful bookie operation.)

Whatever the backdrop, that hook-em-in title would guarantee attention from the cinema world; more than anyone, a film producer would know its power. Kersh was fending off Hollywood even before his novel was published in the US. The film that eventually emerged – set up by Darryl F. Zanuck at Twentieth Century-Fox, directed by McCarthy blacklistee Jules Dassin, led by Hollywood heavy Richard Widmark, shot in London – is like an island in the river of film noir. Not the least, because two distinct versions were completed: one for release in Britain and its empire, and one for the US and the rest of the world. Book and movie(s) don't bear a huge relation to each other, apart from Fabian and his predilection for bone-splintering wrestling promotions, but *Night and the City* is a kind of prism through which to look in a multitude of directions at once: at noir, at British pulp cinema, at communist crime novels, at Soho's own mythology.

It's fair to say that *Night and the City* has suffered a shifting reputation, even if film historians have maintained a consistent interest in it. In the wider world, of actual filmgoers and the media that interact with them, *Night and the City's*

Wrestling Trainer/Adviser: Walter Magnée
Publicity: Ernest Betts
Unit Publicity: Arthur Allighan

Cast:
Richard Widmark (*Harry Fabian*)
Gene Tierney (*Mary Bristol*)
Googie Withers (*Helen Nosseross*)
Hugh Marlowe (*Adam Dunn*)
Francis L. Sullivan (*Phil Nosseross*)
Herbert Lom (*Kristo*)
Stanislaus Zbysko (*Gregorius*)
Mike Mazurki (*The Strangler*)
Charles Farrell (*Mickey Beer*)
Ada Reeve (*Molly*)
Ken Richmond (*Nikolas*)

uncredited
James Hayter (*Figler*)
Edward Chapman (*Hoskins*)
Gibb McLaughlin (*Googin*)
Aubrey Dexter (*Fergus Chilk*)
Russell Westwood (*Yosh*)
Maureen Delaney (*Anna O'Leary*)
Thomas Gallagher (*Bagrag*)
Derek Blomfield (*young policeman*)
Ernest Butcher (*street musician*)
Eliot Makeham (*Pinkney*)
Betty Shale (*Mrs Pinkney*)
Tony Sympton (*Cozen*)
Brian Weske (*messenger boy*)
Frank Pettitt (*cabby*)
Hamilton Keene (*bartender*)
C. Denier Warren (*small American*)
Macdonald Parke, Eddy Reed (*Americans*)
Ray St. Bernard (*Strangler's opponent*)
Lew Marco (*referee*)
Walter Magnée (*a second*)
George Hirste, John Mann, Alan Tilvern,
Len Sharp (*beggars*)
Chunky Pattison (*dwarf*)
Clifford Buckton, Clifford Cobbe (*policemen*)
Charles Paton (*watchman*)
J. Hubert Leslie (*nightwatchman*)
Johnnie Schofield (*cashier*)
Rex Garner (*waiter*)
Peter Butterworth, Arthur Lovegrove (*thugs*)
Freddie Watts
Stanley Escane
Philip Ray
John Sharp
John Rudling
UK-USA 1950©
92 mins
Digital 4K

Night and the City by Andrew Pulver
is available to buy from the BFI Shop:
<https://shop.bfi.org.uk/night-and-the-city-bfi-film-classics-paperback/>

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stature has grown sharply in recent years. Here's an example: in 1981, the film's director Jules Dassin visited the National Film Theatre for what was then called a Guardian Film Lecture, where his interlocutor was the late *Evening Standard* film critic Alexander Walker. The tape is in the BFI's archive. Even though one of *Night and the City*'s key scenes was shot only yards away (in the Lambeth Lead Works' Shot Tower by the side of Waterloo Bridge, demolished in 1962), the film is not mentioned once in an hour-long discussion ranging over Dassin's entire career. You might argue that it is down to Walker's own prejudices, but no one in the audience asks him about it either – all they want to hear about is *Rififi* (1955) and his wife Melina Mercouri. In sharp contrast, 21 years later in 2002, *Night and the City* was celebrated with a centrepiece slot in the same venue at the Crime Scene film festival.

What had happened? The most dramatic change was the ascension of a new generation of cinematic tastemakers, led by the Coen brothers and Quentin Tarantino at the beginning of the 1990s – a generation of tastemakers who prized pulp cinema (and novels) for their own sake. Both the Coens and Tarantino specialised in creating pastiche-oriented crime dramas that sparked scores of imitators, and simultaneously precipitated a shift in audience and critics' positions. In the UK, we had our own watered-down version of this, with the 1998 success of *Lock Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*, which triggered a nostalgic interest in key British crime cinema. *Lock Stock* is clearly much less astute about its forebears than *Reservoir Dogs* or *Miller's Crossing*, but we have to give it its due in popularising previously little-regarded areas of British crime cinema.

Night and the City has also benefited from another, largely independent school of critical thought, one that actually developed through interest in its original source material. Gerald Kersh's novel was a success in its day on both sides of the Atlantic, but it eventually joined other examples of 'lowlife' writing in bargain bins across the land. But urban archaeologists and psycho-geographers never lost sight of it, and in recent years *Night and the City* has joined a flotilla of defiantly indigenous novels – *The Gilt Kid*, *The Lowlife*, *Wide Boys Never Work*, *None but the Lonely Heart*, *The Crust on Its Uppers* – as a treasurable, and increasingly marketable, corner of the cult publishing world.

Night and the City's chosen locale is Soho, in central London; the small district known for gang wars and the underground sex industry, the red-light activities that are the leading element in the squalid moral geometry that Kersh established in his novel. His protagonist, Harry Fabian, is a pre-war prototype of the post-war spiv – a wide boy and hoodlum always on the make – and Kersh's novel is a key entry in that most mythicised of London landscapes: brooding, nightmarish, infested Soho.

It is entirely fitting, then, that the film adaptation of Kersh's novel should go on to become a supreme example of London noir: nothing else really comes close. Its genesis meant that it became the meeting point of distinct cinematic pathways: the American studio system, the ideological crisis of the McCarthy blacklist, the British pulp-thriller tradition in both book and film, the overarching influence of the wider film noir style. As a result, *Night and the City* is a cinematic hybrid of a quite exceptional nature: not only is it the product of international collaboration at a chaotic moment in cultural and creative history, but the same uncertainty resulted in a number of different edits of the film, two of which went on to dispute the status of 'official' version. It's almost as if the dodgy dealings and on-the-hoof spivvory of the narrative content somehow infected the activities of the filmmakers themselves. Not for nothing does it deserve the label of 'spiv noir'.

Extracted from *Night and the City* by Andrew Pulver (BFI Film Classics, 2010).
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