

Film History for Actors

October 10 – 14, 2011

We don't watch these movies to copy what we see. We study them the way physicists study Einstein or painters study Rembrandt. We need to know where our art has been; what it's come from; how it was built. We need to know how high the bar can be set. We are inundated with contemporary film of every quality, but when we turn to the classics, only the finest survive the test of time. We need to understand, in our bones, what greatness is. We need to be able to *feel* it so we know what to aim for. This only comes with familiarity. We watch these film for the sheer exhilaration, for the inspiration that is born in the presence of excellence. The "modern" idea of acting is only one color of the palette--and what artist wants to approach the canvas with only one color? Most successful directors, writers and producers are film geeks and are steeped in every aspect of classic filmmaking. The exigencies of the set require us, often, to speak in a shorthand that assumes a working knowledge of films of every era. No director is going to tell you do "do Cagney here" but he may talk about Gable's confidence and bemused attitude in *IT HAPPENED ONE NIGHT* or Kirk Douglas's self-loathing in *ACE IN THE HOLE* -- and you want to make damn sure you know what he's talking about.

The last incarnation (June 20-24, 2011) of this class was structured around my desire to show how modern acting style is not so modern, and that the kind of realistic style we think we own (or, in our arrogance, "invented") has been going on for 90+ years. This week will be an examination and celebration of "old" acting styles, with the idea that there is just as much to take away from performances that we call "theatrical," "presentational" and "big." We'll look at these performances in the context of their time and talk about how an actor in the 1940s spoke to the audience of the 1940's -- and how he can still move us today. We'll also pay a bit more attention to the director's role and the process of filmmaking. We'll be looking at the work of Spencer Tracy, Gregory Peck, Bette Davis, Humphrey Bogart, James Cagney, Patricia Neal, Andy Griffith, Eddie Bracken, Montgomery Clift, Elizabeth Taylor, Katherine Hepburn, Anthony Quinn, Alan Bates, Irene Papas, Anthony Franciosa, Lee Remick, Walter Matthau, Rossano Brazzi, Lila Kedrova, Teresa Wright, Herbert Marshall, Patricia Collinge, Dan Duryea, Walter Huston, Tim Holt, Freddie Bartholemew, Brock Peters.

Monday, October 10

Ambition

The Public Enemy (1931)

1931 saw the doubling of unemployment to 16.3% , and everybody realized that the stock market crash of 1929 was having far reaching effects . The US government started making some progress on the mob and a notable success was the conviction of Al Capone on tax fraud charges in 1931 which got him an 11 year prison sentence in Alcatraz. Many car manufacturers also went out of business as people did not have money to buy new cars. One of the few successes was the completion of the Empire State building , and in Las Vegas the small local community made the decision to legalize gambling . Nature even conspired to make things worse by causing a serious drought in the Midwest which in turn made food more expensive and turned some area's into dust bowls.



The Public Enemy (1931) is one of the earliest and best of the gangster films from Warner Bros. in the thirties. The film's screenplay (by John Bright and Kubec Glasmon), which received the film's only Academy Award nomination, was based upon their

novel *Beer and Blood*. Unfortunately, the film wasn't even given a Best Picture nomination, nor was Cagney rewarded with a nomination for his dynamic and kinetic performance. Jean Harlow's small role as a sexy call-girl was her only screen appearance with Cagney and her only lead role with Warners.

Director William Wellman's pre-code, box-office smash, shot in less than a month at a cost of approximately \$151,000, was released at approximately the same time as another classical gangster film - *Little Caesar* (1930) that starred Edward G. Robinson as a petty thief whose criminal ambitions led to his inevitable downfall. *The Public Enemy* was even tougher, more violent and realistic (released before the censorship codes were strictly enforced), although most of the violence is again off-screen.

The lead character is portrayed as a sexually magnetic, cocky, completely amoral, emotionally brutal, ruthless, and terribly lethal individual. However, the protagonist (a cold-blooded, tough-as-nails racketeer and "public enemy") begins his life, not as a hardened criminal, but as a young mischievous boy in pre-Prohibition city streets, whose early environment clearly contributes to the evolving development of his life of adult crime and his inevitable gruesome death. Unlike other films, this one examined the social forces and roots of crime in a serious way.

Cagney's character was based on real-life Chicago gangster Earl "Hymie" Weiss (who also survived a machine-gun ambush) and bootlegging mobster Charles Dion "Deanie" O'Banion (an arch-rival to Al Capone). Reportedly, an exasperated Weiss slammed an omelette (not a grapefruit) into the face of his girlfriend. Similarities also exist between the demise of Nails Nathan and the 1923 death of real-life Samuel J. "Nails" Morton of the O'Banion mob. The retaliatory horse killing in the film was a replay of a similar incident when organized crime figure Louis "Two-Gun" Alterie (and other North Side gang members) executed the offending horse in Chicago after the death of their friend.

James Cagney's dynamic, charismatic and magnetic characterization of the murderous thug was his fifth film performance. He had previously performed tough-guy roles in two other Warner Bros. features: *Sinner's Holiday* (1930) (his film debut with co-star Joan

Blondell) and director Archie Mayo's *The Doorway to Hell* (1930). This volatile role made him famous and instantly launched his celebrated film star career, but it also typecast him for many years. [Originally, the roles were reversed, with Edward Woods playing the lead role, and Cagney in a secondary role, but a switch occurred when the contract screenwriters suggested that a mistake had been made. Therefore, the end credits bill Edward Woods above Cagney.] Cagney went on to play other criminal roles, including such films as *Smart Money* (1931) with Edward G. Robinson (their only teaming together), and *Lady Killer* (1933).

Unfortunately, the film also appeared to glamorize criminal activities such as bootlegging (although that was not its intent), and emphasized their high style of life with various floozies (portrayed by Joan Blondell, Mae Clarke, and Jean Harlow). Hence, the film hastened efforts of Hollywood's self-imposed Production Code in the early thirties to strictly censor films (with criminal and sexual subject matter) that depicted undesirable social figures or sexual subjects in a sympathetic or realistic manner.

Many of the characters in the film were based on actual people. Edward Woods was originally cast in the lead role until director Wellman decided Cagney would be more effective in the part and switched the two actors. Another reason for the switch is that the sound technology used in *The Public Enemy* was superior to that used in earlier films, making it no longer imperative to have an actor in the lead role with impeccable enunciation. Although it was still a risk giving Cagney the starring role, his distinctive interpretation of the character, especially his machine-gun speaking style, was now technically feasible. Cagney was also short and seemed uncouth, compared to the typical finesse of a more conventionally cinegenic actor like Woods, helping to establish Warner Brothers' reputation for films that explicitly targeted working class audiences during the Great Depression. At the time of the role switch, Woods was promised by the studio that it would be made up to him with later assignments but this was never followed through and Woods subsequently fell into obscurity. Also, the childhood scenes with Cagney's and Woods' characters were never reshot with the children switched, confusing viewers for generations.

Principal filming took place in January and February 1931.

In the scene where Mike Powers punches his brother Tom, director Wellman privately took Donald Cook aside and, explaining his desire for authenticity in "Tom's" reaction, asked the actor to really hit Cagney. Cook played his part a bit too well, and he struck Cagney in the mouth with such force, he actually broke one of his teeth. Yet in spite of his genuine shock and pain, Cagney stayed in character and played out the rest of the scene. In another incident, live ammunition was used in a scene where Tom Powers ducks around the corner of a building to take cover from machine gun fire; the use of live ammunition was common practice at the time. The bullets struck the wall of the building at the position where Cagney's head had been just a moment prior.

Grapefruit scene



In a 1973 interview featured in the Turner Classic Movies documentary *The Men Who Made The Movies: William Wellman*, Wellman said he added the grapefruit "hitting" to the scene, because when he and his wife at the time would get into fights, she would never talk or give any expression. Since she always had a grapefruit for breakfast, he always wanted to put the grapefruit into her face just to get a reaction out of her, so she would show some emotion; he felt that this scene gave him the opportunity to rid himself of that temptation. Some, such as film critic Ben Mankiewicz, have asserted that Mae Clarke's surprised and seemingly somewhat angry reaction to the grapefruit was genuine, as she hadn't been told to expect the unscripted action. In her autobiography, Clarke stated that Cagney had told her prior to that take what he planned to do. She

said she was surprised to see the grapefruit take of the scene appear in the final film, as it had been her understanding that they were shooting it only as a joke to amuse the crew. According to Cagney, Clarke's ex-husband had the grapefruit scene timed, and would buy a ticket just before that scene went onscreen, go enjoy the scene, leave, then come back during the next show just in time to see only that scene again.

MOVIE REVIEW

THE PUBLIC ENEMY

By Andre Sennwald

Published: April 24, 1931

It is just another gangster film at the Strand, weaker than most in its story, stronger than most in its acting, and, like most, maintaining a certain level of interest through the last burst of machine-gun fire. That was not the intention of the Warners, whose laudable motive it was to have *The Public Enemy* say the very last word on the subject of gang pictures. There is a prologue apprising the audience that the hoodlums and terrorists of the underworld must be exposed and the glamour ripped from them. There is an epilogue pointing the moral that civilization is on her knees and inquiring loudly as to what is to be done. And before the prologue there is a brief stage tableau, with sinuous green lighting, which shows a puppet gangster shooting another puppet gangster in the back.

The Public Enemy does not, as its title so eloquently suggests, present a picture of the war between the underworld and the upperworld. Instead the war is one of gangsters among themselves; of sensational and sometimes sensationally incoherent murders. The motivation is lost in the general slaughter at the end, when Matt and Tom, the hoodlums with whose career of outlawry the picture is concerned, die violently.

Edward Woods and James Cagney, as Matt and Tom respectively, give remarkably lifelike portraits of young hoodlums. The story follows their careers from boyhood, through the war period, and into the early days of prohibition, when the public thirst made their peculiar talents profitable. Slugging disloyal bartenders, shooting down rival beermen, slapping their women crudely across the face, strutting with a vast self-satisfaction through their little world, they contribute a hard and true picture of the unheroic gangster.

The audiences yesterday laughed frequently and with gusto as the swaggering Matt and Tom went through their paces, and this rather took the edge off the brutal picture the producers appeared to be trying to serve up. The laughter was loudest and most deserved when the two

put a horse "on the spot," the reason being that the animal had had the temerity to throw Nails Nathan, the gang leader.

There is a reminder of newspaper headlines toward the close when Tom, lying wounded in a hospital, is kidnapped and murdered. The acting throughout is interesting, with the exception of Jean Harlow, who essays the role of a gangster's mistress. Beryl Mercer as Tom's mother, Robert Emmett O'Connor as a gang chief, and Donald Cook as Tom's brother, do splendidly.

THE PUBLIC ENEMY (MOVIE)

Directed by William A. Wellman; written by Kubec Glasmon, John Bright, and Harvey Thew, based on the story "Beer and Blood" by Mr. Bright; cinematographer, Dev Jennings; edited by Ed McCormick; music by David Mendoza; art designer, Max Parker; produced by Darryl F. Zanuck; released by Warner Brothers. Black and white. Running time: 83 minutes.