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NOIR'S UNSUNG HEROES

PERCY HELTON

By Eric Beetner
Special to the Sentinel

Short in stature, stoop-shouldered, and often peering through thick glasses, Percy Helton stood toe-to-toe with many of the best noir performers of the '40s and '50s. Much of Helton's charm comes from his voice, a strange squeak not unlike a leaky balloon. This hoarseness came about at an early age from a stage role that required him to shout and scream night after night. When the play finished its run and his voice didn't return to normal, he became forever relegated to supporting roles.

His film debut was in 1915's silent *The Fairy and The Waif* (he was the waif) but his noir debut came in 1947 with *Larceny*, featuring John Payne, Joan Caulfield and the always reliable Dan Duryea. Helton is



Percy Helton

Charlie, a charming and kindly old hotel clerk, the only bright spot in a story of double-crossers and cheap hoods out to fleece a WWII widow.

Helton was himself a WWI veteran (earning a distinguished service cross), but performing was the only life he ever really knew since his childhood, when he was featured in his father's vaudeville act. In 1931 he married a gal named Edna and they took that "til death do we part" thing seriously.

Helton is featured in small roles in a surprising number of noir classics (21 in all) such as *Call Northside 777* (1948), *Thieves' Highway* (1948) and *Criss Cross* (1949) where he plays that Noir stalwart: the bartender who knows all the dirt.

That same year Percy Helton was ringside for one of the great boxing films of all time, *The Set-Up*. Director Robert Wise's clever use of real time makes *The Set-Up* a nonstop ticking clock of suspense. Percy Helton fit right in to the sweaty locker room of the boxing hall as Stoker's ring man, Red. In his tank top and greasy comb-over he dishes out tired advice to Stoker as he and

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FNF & UCLA ARCHIVE TO RESTORE THE PROWLER

Work Begins on Pristine New
Version of 1951 Masterpiece

LOS ANGELES, CA—One of the greatest but least-seen noirs, 1951's *The Prowler*, is being restored through a joint effort of the Film Noir Foundation and the UCLA Film and Television Archive. The collaboration agreement was reached in early April, and work on the project has already begun. If all goes according to plan, the restored film will be available for its "re-premiere" at NOIR CITY 6 in San Francisco.

Although *The Prowler* has been screened several times in recent years, the 35mm print being used is the only one known to exist, prompting FNF founder Eddie Muller to remark, "We're thrilled to resurrect *The Prowler* before that last surviving print dies a gallant death." The film, independently produced by Horizon Pictures and originally distributed by United Artists, has never been issued on VHS or DVD and rarely, if ever, appears on television.

Written by the blacklisted Dalton Trumbo (Hugo Butler acted as his front) and directed by the soon-to-be-blacklisted Joseph Losey, the film stars Van Heflin as sociopathic cop Webb Garwood, whose pursuit of lonely housewife Susan Gilvray (Evelyn Keyes) leads to murder. Horizon Pictures was a short-lived production company formed by producer Sam Spiegel and silent partner John Huston (Keyes' husband at the time).

"The UCLA Film & Television Archive is ecstatic about this new preservation partnership with the FNF," said UCLA motion picture archivist Todd Wiener. "The Foundation's enthusiasm and tireless efforts in raising awareness for noir cinema preservation is vitally important on so many levels. *The Prowler* is a perfect title to initiate this new partnership, particularly since the Archive recently acquired pre-print materials that appear to be in excellent shape."

The project will be directed by UCLA restoration specialist Nancy Mysel. She has also initiated a search of the archive's extensive holdings for other neglected noirs that may be ripe for restoration in collaboration with the Film Noir Foundation.



Van Heflin and Evelyn Keyes in *The Prowler*.

"There are some interesting elements in the archive," said Muller, "Just waiting to be turned into projectable 35mm prints."

The UCLA Film and Television Archive is internationally renowned for its pioneering efforts to preserve and showcase not only classic but also current and innovative film and television. Additionally, the Archive is a unique resource for media study, with one of the largest collections of media materials in the United States—second only to the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.—and the largest of any university in the world. Its vaults hold more than 270,000 motion picture and television titles and 27 million feet of newsreel footage. The combined collections represent an all-encompassing documentation of the 20th century.

Under their arrangement, UCLA will handle the physical restoration work, while the FNF acts in a marketing and fundraising capacity. A significant portion of the restoration budget will come from the net revenue earned by the NOIR CITY film festival in San Francisco. Author and FNF member James Ellroy has also made a significant contribution, having cited *The Prowler* as one of his favorite films.

Emigrés and Film Noir

FRITZ LANG

By Marc Svetov
Special to the Sentinel

Insurmountable destructive human forces unleashed by vast criminal networks, opposed to as well as collaborating with the police force—these criminal gangs, led by sociopaths plotting against civilized society, are Fritz Lang's specialty. So many of his films are populated by the sexually abnormal: psychopaths, sadists, masochists, murderers, suicides, even child murderers: it's a veritable pantheon of perversion.

One source of Lang's pessimism is his cultural inheritance; he was the first to film *Die Nibelungen*, the German national saga, a bleak vision of a dysfunctional royal family and the inevitable cataclysm coming from mythic Destiny affecting entire nations. His vision of the future was *Metropolis*, where again we encounter plans for conspiratorial, diabolical forces let loose by a psychotic inventor. The ending is softened—where Labor and Capital meet—but essentially, as with all of Lang, the defeat of evil is only



Fritz Lang

temporary.

Mixing unusual angles with bizarre close-ups, Lang employed an arsenal of unique shots as he ordered take after take, exasperating his collaborators, treating the actors like scenery. His crews were always on the verge of mutiny.

His visual style—chiaroscuro lighting, shadows, streaks, vast pools of darkness, brilliant light; his imagery and themes

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SEATTLE TO BE LATEST "NOIR CITY"

SUMMER IN SEATTLE tends to sunny skies—a welcome respite for Rain City inhabitants—but the Film Noir Foundation will infuse the Northwest movie mecca with darkness this July 6–12th, when Noir City inhabits SIFF Cinema, the beautiful new state-of-the-art cinema operated by the folks who put on the Seattle International Film Festival. The 400-seat theater is located in the Seattle Center, and boasts impeccable picture and sound.

Noir czar Eddie Muller will be on hand to introduce many of the programs. Highlights include rarities that have never been available on tape or DVD like *I Love Trouble*, penned by TV legend Roy Huggins (*77 Sunset Strip*); *Pushover*, featuring Kim Novak's movie debut as a gangster's moll opposite Fred MacMurray's smitten sap; and Phil Karlson's signature film *99 River Street*; plus a gorgeous brand new restoration of the Technicolor noir *Leave Her to Heaven* starring the magnificently deadly Gene Tierney.

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reinforcing a notion of inevitable Destiny within which we are caught as in a spider's web; his architectural-geometrical composition, a veritable encyclopedia of unconventional camera angles—was best achieved shooting inside a studio, where he could exert control over everything. Fate with a large F abounded in all his plots, and was matched by a determinism on the part of this obsessive technician-craftsman who encased a film within his own box of constraints. Fritz Lang—or God?

Lang's Hollywood career has often been characterized as sad and unfulfilled, owing mainly to his own arrogance and inability to adjust to America. Whether he adjusted or not is a moot question, for he remained always the same Fritz Lang, his films instantly recognizable, whether made in Germany or the USA. One has only to compare him with Billy Wilder, also from Vienna via Berlin, to see how very differently the Hollywood careers of two Central European émigrés could look. While Wilder may have directed a couple of noir classics, there is no question that Lang's vision bore an even deeper kinship with noir, and that his work was integral to its cinematic emergence.

Lang arrived in the United States in 1935 as a refugee; he was a privileged one, however, in that he had been invited to Hollywood and did not come penniless. After cooling his heels for what seemed an interminably long time, he got an opportunity in 1936 to direct his initial American film: *Fury*, which is as ambiguous a study of mob mentality as you will ever find on celluloid. Although Lang viewed himself as a political liberal and anti-Nazi, this film graphically cautioned against blind trust in the Goodness of the People.



Dan Duryea in *Ministry of Fear*

Lang later claimed he had wanted to portray an African-American as the lynch mob's victim. We now know this is hogwash, myth-making on Lang's part. There exists no evidence he ever considered such a thing. Actually, the film was based on a true incident that occurred in San Jose, California in 1934; two white men were the lynch mob's victims. (The factual story also served as the basis of 1950's *Try and Get Me!*)

Spencer Tracy plays Joe Wilson, caught up in a strange town, arrested and accused of kidnapping. He is innocent. Hungry for instant justice, an angry crowd burns down the jail where he is incarcerated to get at him. The tables get turned in the end. Joe had escaped from the burning jail in time; he is believed to be dead. Through subterfuges, Joe can view in court the town's own indictment as his "murderer." Shot as a

newsreel and played in court as evidence, the scene of the mob storming the jail—torches blazing in the night, a crowd's bloodlust visible on their faces and in their gestures—still shocks.

Lang followed with *You Only Live Once* (1937), starring Henry Fonda and Sylvia Sydney. It was an early noir about ex-convict Eddie Taylor, played by Fonda, who, as the film begins, is already a two-time loser looking to avoid a third conviction that will mean spending the rest of his life in prison. Sydney is his fiancée. Taylor's destiny is telegraphed in his half-desperate, half-submissive look. He is accused of robbing a bank—the third strike. They are forced to become outlaws, hiding from the police. We want the young couple to escape. The film is, incidentally, a forerunner of Nick Ray's *They Live By Night*, yet Lang's picture is more Depression-stained, stark and realistic, revealing a less sentimental strain of pessimism. It is so uncompromising that at the end one is actually startled that Eddie's pregnant wife is not somehow rescued. The last shot is unforgettable.

In 1944, his noir work picked up again with *Ministry of Fear*, starring Ray Milland. This is pure Lang, a creation out of a studio hat, involving a Nazi conspiracy. Set in wartime England, it is a film that seems to have jumped out of 1925 Berlin, for its stage-bound mise-en-scene, lighting and atmosphere are markedly Expressionist.

Lang liked pulp-fiction material—this reaches back to his Berlin years, too. His film partner Thea von Harbou—his wife until 1933—wrote his screenplays. They collaborated on all Lang's German films up to and inclusive of *M* (1931). Harbou, however, greeted the chancellorship of Hitler with joy; she turned Nazi. Her loss was a major element in the conflict of Lang's American years.

The Woman in the Window (1944) and *Scarlet Street* (1945), pairing Joan Bennett with Edward G. Robinson, alongside Dan Duryea, memorable in a minor role in *Ministry of Fear*, were two of those contemporary films the French famously first got to view after their liberation by American troops. Their arrival, plus the films of other exiles like Preminger and Wilder, made a profound impression on the French audience and generated coinage of the term *film noir*. Need one say more?

Lang entered into a production partnership with Bennett and her husband Walter Wanger after the success of these two films, but the relationship soured after the disastrous reception of the psychological noir *Secret Beyond the Door* (1948).

Clash by Night (1952), a Clifford Odets melodrama, directed for Howard Hughes at RKO, starring Robert Ryan, Barbara Stanwyck and Paul Douglas, is characterized by sado-masochistic relationships between all its protagonists. This was more Odets than Lang, perhaps. Another minor but engaging noir followed: *The Blue Gardenia* (1953), with Anne Baxter and Raymond Burr.

The Big Heat (1953) is considered—beside his two thirties' masterworks—as the greatest of Lang's American films. It certainly hangs together well as a movie. It begins with a corrupt cop's suicide. Glenn Ford, as Det. Sgt. Dave Bannion, is put in charge of the case—which ultimately involves an investigation of his own police force. He is told to lay off the case.

Lang builds sympathy for Bannion by showing him with his wife (Joelene Brando), affectionately joking with each other, kissing in an idyllic fifties' kitchen. One sees the



Lee Marvin, Gloria Grahame and Glenn Ford in Lang's classic *The Big Heat*

modern American appliances in their utopian suburban splendor. His wife bids him goodbye, departing to run an errand. She starts the car in the driveway. It blows up! Lang shows Bannion struggling to get the car door open, smoke pouring out the driver's seat window—a distressing scene, considering what had just been viewed moments before.

There is an unmistakably strong element of sadism later as Lee Marvin throws a pot of scalding coffee into his girlfriend Gloria Grahame's face. Grahame, a narcissistic fifties' pin-up, is transformed by her scars into an avenging angel. She aids Bannion, who has turned in his badge, to defeat the conjoined forces of corruption. In the end, Grahame becomes a martyr. The finish is quite moving. Translated into American terms, Lang's stoic vision is raised to a new humane level and is on a par with his best work.

Lang followed with *Human Desire* (1954). Ford and Grahame are again paired up, with Broderick Crawford. This was a remake of Jean Renoir's *La Bête humaine* in

squalid American settings. In 1956, Lang directed his final American noirs: *While the City Sleeps* and *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt*, which were critically savaged, ending Lang's career in Hollywood.

While the City Sleeps features a sexual deviant and serial killer: a momma's boy, whose job as a delivery boy affords him access to ladies' apartments. This avid reader of comic books—Lang was attuned to his times—is played by John Barrymore, Jr., who suffers by comparison with Peter Lorre in *M*, twenty-five years earlier. Shortly after finishing this film, Lang returned to Germany.

In America, trucking from studio to studio, having a home nowhere, Lang was known as "the man with the monocle"—the epitome of the German émigré. He later gave up wearing it. He loved Hollywood; it cannot be said that Hollywood reciprocated. The high points of his American films, however, are very high indeed—and the texture of film noir would be immeasurably lessened without them.

Mr. Modern Noir: Bonus Review

Keep Your Eyes Open For "The Lookout"

THE LOOKOUT IS EASY TO OVERLOOK. It's a bare bones independent feature with a scant, scatter-shot marketing campaign, no major stars, and a schizoid plot that is tough to hang a label on. Is it a character study, a heist thriller, a melodrama of youthful angst, or a depressing portrait of small town American desperation? It's all of those — plus it's pure 100% noir, right down to the droning first person narration, used sparingly but effectively.

The story deals with a fallen high school hockey star, Chris Pratt (Joseph Gordon-Levitt in an impressively subtle performance) who causes a fatal car accident which leaves him with brain injuries resulting in random bouts of confusion, memory loss and a minor case of Turrets. The kid gets a shit job in the local bank, meets a sexy girl in a redneck bar, then gets sucked into a robbery plot by a small gang of odious punks. The haunting flashbacks to the tragic night that changed his life twist Chris's mind into rationalizing the rip-off as revenge against a world that has betrayed him. Ultimately, though, he may choose a second chance at redemption. Therein lies the compelling conflict.

The story structure bears trace ele-

ments of key 40s heist noirs like *Cross* and *The Killers* — back in the day this story would have been told with Lancaster or maybe John Payne in the lead, Neville Brand or Charles McGraw as the heavy, and anyone from Ava Gardner to Veronica Lake as the femme fatale. In 2007 we get the noir elements without the noir dressing. No fancy clothes, witty wordplay or expressionistic shadows here. The employed aesthetic is as flat and non-descript as the setting, Kansas; the bleak landscapes and achingly lonesome ambience echo *Fargo*, but without the dark humor. This is serious stuff, boldly non-commercial in tone though traditional turf for those who know their noir.

Writer-director Scott Frank is a veteran traveler of this terrain. As a screenwriter he successfully adapted two Elmore Leonard novels (*Get Shorty*, *Out of Sight*) as well as James Lee Burke's *Heaven's Prisoners*. The dialogue and pacing in his directorial debut are terse and taut, suitable for the rawly realistic context. Jeff Daniels hits a career high as Chris's blind room-mate and only real friend. Keep an eye out for this one on DVD or late night cable. Best viewed with a loved one or a couple of uppers for mood support.

—Will Viharo