Directed by Charles Laughton  
Based on the novel by Davis Grubb  
Screenplay by James Agee and Charles Laughton  
Produced by Paul Gregory  
Original Music by Walter Schumann  
Cinematography by Stanley Cortez  
Film Editing by Robert Golden

Robert Mitchum...Harry Powell  
Shelley Winters...Willa Harper  
Lillian Gish...Rachel Cooper  
James Gleason...Birdie Steptoe  
Evelyn Varden...Icey Spoon  
Peter Graves...Ben Harper  
Don Beddoe...Walt Spoon  
Billy Chapin...John Harper  
Sally Jane Bruce...Pearl Harper  
Gloria Castillo...Ruby


JAMES AGEE (November 27, 1909, Knoxville, Tennessee - May 16, 1955, New York City, New York, of a heart attack) wrote books, screenplays, poems—and he is often credited with inventing modern film criticism (he was film critic for both Time and The Nation). He wrote screenplays for Night of the Hunter (1955), The African Queen (1951), and The Quiet One (1948). His best known book is the posthumously-published A Death in the Family (1957), which was awarded the Pulitzer Prize. He is co-author, with photographer Walker Evans, of one of the prose masterpieces of 20th century American literature, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men (1941). Much of work has recently been made available in three volumes in the the Library of America Series.

STANLEY CORTEZ (November 4, 1908, New York City, New York - December 23, 1997, Hollywood, California, of heart attack) was the cinematographer for 78 films and tv series, some of which were Un autre homme, une autre chance/Another Man, Another Chance (1977), Doomsday Machine (1972), The Bridge at Remagen (1969), Blue (1968), The Navy vs. the Night Monsters (1966), The
Robert Mitchum


James Gleason (May 23, 1882, New York City, New York - April 12, 1959, Woodland Hills, Los Angeles, California, of asthma) appeared in 162 films and tv series, some of which were Money, Women and Guns (1959), The Last Hurrah (1958), Once Upon a Horse... (1958), The Female Animal (1958), "Leave It to Beaver" (1 episode, 1957), "The Ford Television Theatre" (2 episodes, 1953-1956), "Cheyenne" (1 episode, 1956), Damon Runyon Theater (2 episodes, 1955), The Night of the Hunter (1955), "The Eddie Cantor Comedy Theater" (1 episode, 1955), Suddenly (1954), What Price Glory (1952), I'll See You in My Dreams (1951), Two Gals and a Guy (1951), Key to the City...
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(1950), The Life of Riley (1949), Tycoon (1947), The Bishop's Wife (1947), The Hoodlum Saint (1946), The Clock (1945), A Tree Grows in Brooklyn (1945), The Keys of the Kingdom (1944), Arsenic and Old Lace (1944), A Guy Named Joe (1943), Crash Dive (1943), Footlight Serenade (1942), The Falcon Takes Over (1942), My Gal Sal (1942), Nine Lives Are Not Enough (1941), Here Comes Mr. Jordan (1941), Meet John Doe (1941), On Your Toes (1939), The Plot Thickens/The Swinging Pearl Mystery (1936), The Big Game (1936), West Point of the Air (1935), Murder on a Honeymoon (1935), Alias the Professor (1933), Off His Base (1932), Battle Royal (1932), Beyond Victory (1931), Puttin' on the Ritz (1930), The Shannons of Broadway (1929), The Garden of Eatin' (1929), The Broadway Melody (1929), and Polly of the Follies (1922).


[epigraph] “I’m not a genius. There’s no room for genius in the theatre, it’s too much trouble. The only actor I ever knew who was a genius was Charles Laughton. That’s maybe why he was so difficult.”

Sir Laurence Olivier on his 80th birthday

[George Bernard Shaw, a trustee of the Royal Academy, after observing young Laughton do scenes from Pygmalion] “You were perfectly dreadful as Higgins but I predict a brilliant career for you within the year.”

“The Night of the Hunter, a novel by Davis Grubb, had been on the best-seller lists early in ’54, and Gregory snapped it up, seeing the whole project, as usual, in one. They would make a film of it, Charles would direct, and the leading character, the murderous Preacher, would be played by Robert Mitchum. The book was, in fact, right up Laughton’s street, rather self-consciously cadenced prose, evoking a Southern world of oppressive communities, simple emotions, hymns, picnics, decency and destruction. He later made a recording of excerpts from the book, in which, backed by the film’s soundtrack, he makes a very persuasive case for its virtues, though it has not, according to those who know, ‘worn well’. It certainly tells its tale powerfully and hauntingly; ‘American Gothic’ as Carrie Rickey calls it, in which the deadpan, hypnotic voice of the storyteller is always present. So Laughton was definitely on; and the moment he offered it to Mitchum, so was he. The extraordinary combination of these two men was a success from the start: ‘this character I want you to play is a diabolical shit,’ said Laughton. ‘Present,’ replied Mitchum. He was their banker: United Artists put up the relatively meager sum involved ($700,000) on the strength of his name. Laughton then cast Shelley Winters, his sometime pupil and recent Oscar nominee (for A Place in the Sun), to play opposite Mitchum, to Mitchum’s considerable disgust; but his trust in Laughton seems to have been absolute.

“Laughton had a strong hunch that the appropriate visual world for Night of the Hunter was D.W. Griffith’s, and accordingly re-ran all his movies. Quite apart from the power of the films themselves, he was overwhelmed by the work of Lillian Gish, who in her unassailable virginity, delicate but indestructible, touched some deep place in him. Charles Higham perceptively describes her as Kabuki-like, and there’s something of the onnegata about her; but Laughton’s response was more than merely aesthetic—one of the indelible memories of his life was having seen her in Broken Blossoms in France, just after the Armistice had been declared. He said he had fallen in love with her then. Her grace, her girlishness, her lack of sexual threat may have combined to form an image of the eternal feminine, an anima, almost, some idealised version of his own feminine self, perhaps. Anyway, he cast her, and when, in her infinitely courteous way, she asked him why he wanted her in the film. His reply would have pleased Brecht: ‘When I first went to the movies they sat in their seats straight and leant forward. Now they slump down, with their heads back or eat candy and popcorn. I want them to sit up straight again.’ Their meeting was only slightly marred by the presence of the film’s screenwriter, James Agee, in a state of charmless inebriation; but everyone in Hollywood except, apparently, Laughton and Paul Gregory, understood him.比如他写道：‘Laughton then cast Shelley Winters, his sometime pupil [George Bernard Shaw, a trustee of the Royal Academy, after observing young Laughton do scenes from Pygmalion] “You were perfectly dreadful as Higgins but I predict a brilliant career for you within the year.”

Laughton seems to have been absolute.

On the face of it, the author of Let Us Now Praise Famous Men was the ideal man to adapt Grubb’s novel. His skills as a screenwriter were not to be sniffed at, either, on the strength of The African Queen; but everyone in Hollywood except, apparently, Laughton and Paul Gregory knew that he was drinking himself, in short order, into the grave. The script he handed Laughton after a summer working by the pool at the house on Curson Avenue was 350-pages long, and, according to his biographer, not an adaptation at all: ‘he had re-created a cinematic version of it in extraordinary detail. He specified use of newsreel footage to document the story’s setting and added any number of elaborate, impractical montages.’ Shooting was only weeks away, so Laughton took on the screenwriting himself. Thus manoeuvred into a position of sole creative responsibility, he proved himself a master. The script is good enough to have been passed off for years (in Five Film Scripts...
by James Agee) as the work of a seasoned genius. As a first screenplay it’s a triumph both of structure and sustained tone. To put it mildly, he knew what he was doing.

“Stanley Cortez was his chosen cinematographer. Famous for his dandyish ways (‘the Baron,’ he was nicknamed) and his advanced technical experiments, he was happy to share his knowledge with Laughton. . . . Cortez was something of a poet; something of a wild man too: ‘To hell with all this caution! To hell with this academic approach!’ he exclaims in Sources of Light. ‘There are times when nature is dull: change it.’ Like Laughton, he got his inspiration from outside his own discipline. ‘I often will revert to music as a key for photographic effect.’ They spurred each other on. ‘Apart from The Ambersons, the most exciting experience I have had in the cinema was with Charles Laughton on Night of the Hunter. . . . every day I consider something new about light, that incredible thing that can’t be described. Of the directors I’ve worked with, only two have understood it: Orson Welles and Charles Laughton.’

Laughton was fortunate, too, in his choice of second-unit directors, Terry and Denis Sanders, whose documentary film A Time out of War eventually won an Oscar. ‘Brother Sanders!’ he greeted the twenty-year-old Terry, fresh out of UCLA; ‘Brother Laughton!’ the young man cried back. He sat them, down and drew precise, is spindly, line drawings of every shot he wanted—the relation of everything to everything else in the frame, and that is what they shot, on location in Ohio: the ravishing overhead shots of the children as they drift down the river. All the rest, the haunting nature scenes on the riverbank, owls, frogs, rabbits and all, were shot in the Studio; the tank on Stage Fifteen in the case of the riverbank. ‘When I tell people they that, they turn white,’ writes Cortez. His technical inventions on the film are numberless, and give rise to scenes the like of which barely exist in the American cinema. The results, however, are invariable simple and poetic in feeling; nowhere a trace of conscious virtuosity. The legendary sequence in which Shelley Winters drowns in her car was achieved with extreme ingenuity and much hardware; the effect is simple, lyrical, and haunting.

As for Mitchum, he has frequently maintained that its his best performance, and that Laughton was his best director. Laughton’s belief in him, his conviction that ‘Bob is one of the best actors in the world’ is unlikely to have made much difference to this man whose inability to accept praise is notorious; what probably did the trick was Laughton’s discovery in him of a private self different from the public one. ‘All this tough talk is a blind, you know,’ he tells Esquire magazine. ‘He’s a literate, gracious, kind man, with wonderful manners, and he speaks beautifully—when he wants to. He’s a very tender man and a very great gentleman. You know, he’s really terribly shy.’ They had recognised in each other a man at war with himself. When Mitchum, incensed by Paul Gregory, had urinated in the radiator of Gregory’s car. Laughton phones him: ‘My boy, there are skeletons in all our closets. And most of us try to cover up these skeletons. . . . my dear Bob. . . . you drag forth the skeletons, you swing them in the air, in fact you brandish your skeletons. Now, Bob, you must stop brandishing your skeletons!’ But Laughton brandished his own favorite skeleton to Mitchum. ‘I don’t know if you know, and I don’t know if you care, and I don’t care if you know, but there is a strong streak of homosexuality in me,’ he told Mitchum as they bowed along the freeway. ‘No shit!’ cried Mitchum. ‘Stop the car!’ Who knows what Mitchum’s skeletons are— that is to say, what the original skeletons are; there are plenty of acquired ones which have been all too well publicised. The interesting thing is that Laughton, normally ill at ease with uniformly masculine men was very comfortable with Mitchum, and that Mitchum’s performance in Night of the Hunter is to a striking degree delicate, seductive, soft-eyed. Even in the scenes of greatest menace, there remains a sinuousness most unlike the monolithically machistic performances which form the bulk of his work. The laconic, smiling, almost humorous quality he brings to Preacher in no wise distracts from the menace; it only enhances it.

Interestingly, Lilian Gish was anxious during filming that Laughton might have undercut Preacher’s evil, and told him so. Laughton’s reply, ‘For Mitchum to play this all evil might be bad for his future. . . . I’m not going to ruin that young man’s career,’ though humorously meant (and an echo of what he’d said on two previous stage shows), indicates a certain protective, fatherly feeling, confirmed by Elsa Lanchester’s remark: ‘Charles was patient with him because Mitchum was going to be one of his children.’

Miss Gish herself brings to her rôle everything Laughton wanted: her scrubbed, sturdy radiance and power of nurture are the perfect polarity to Mitchum’s greasiness. She is the spirit of absolution and healing in the film, and discharges her function as no one else could have done, with a kind of secular sanctity which cannot be forged. As for the children, they too are perfect; which is something of a mystery, because Laughton kept as far away from them as possible. His special loathing was reserved for the little girl, Sally Bruce, but he didn’t have much time either for Billy Chapin as John after Mitchum had given Billy a note: ‘Do you think John’s frightened of the Preacher?’ ‘Nope’ said Billy Chapin. ‘Then you don’t know the Preacher and you don’t know John.’ ‘Oh really?’ said Billy. That’s probably why I just won the New York Critics Circle Prize. ‘Get that child away from me,’ roared Laughton. Thereafter Mitchum directed the boy—with the most remarkable results. Odd paradox, that Laughton should have failed to create any rapport with the children, when it was his vision that the entire film should be a child’s nightmare.

These sections, the opening and closing shots, are perhaps the least successful; they are what the film never is elsewhere: sentimental. The stars are partly the cause of that, but the main culprit is the music, elevated and replete with angelic voices of children. It serves a valuable function, in taking the film out of the realistic groove from the very beginning, but the effect is syrupy, not sublime.

The visual aspect of the film is of course paramount, as it could hardly fail to be, the outcome of a collaboration between two. Supremely visually-oriented artists, Laughton contributed everything he knew by way of pictorial composition; Cortez ensured the intensification of every image. There isn’t an undistinguished frame in the picture; as in Welles’ work, every picture tells a story. The famous A-frame of the roof in Willa’s
death room, the image of Preacher hanging upside down in his bunk in the jailhouse, the strange light which plays on Preacher’s face while he tries to ingratiates himself with John, the boat carrying the children gently downstream; this is visual poetry of the most sensuous kind. The abiding impression of the film is its physicality. Sex and nature loom through the film at all points; nature a kind of all-permeating presence, now in the background, now in the foreground, but always palpable, always there. Sex, from the first glimpse of Preacher in a strip-club. His eyes clouded with homicidal rage, as the flick-knife in his pocket tears phallically through the cloth, to the intimations of Willa Harper’s nubile longings, the dry and brutal talk of Icey (‘I’ve been married to my Walt for forty years and I swear in all that time I’d just lie there thinking about my canning’) and the all-bursting, uncontrollable sexuality of Ruby, one of Lillian Gish’s wards, face painted, lips pouting, irresistibly drawn to the Preacher. All this sex is somehow threatening, perverted or disgusting; except, that is, to Gish. Ruby can confess to her: ‘I’ve been bad’. ‘You was looking for love, child, the only foolish way you knowed how’ Gish tells Ruby, ‘we all need love.’

Reviewing the film on its first appearance in France, François Truffaut wrote: ‘it makes us fall in love again with an experimental cinema that truly experiments, and a cinema of discovery that, in fact, discovers.’ Another way of putting this is that the creative moment remains present in the finished result, what Brecht had called ‘the active creative element, the making of art’. That is what had frequently distinguished Laughton’s performances in the past; it is supremely true of this film. ‘Every day,’ wrote Cortez, ‘the marvelous team that made that picture would meet and discuss the next day’s work. It was designed from day to day in fullest detail, so that the details seemed fresh, fresher than if we had done the whole thing in advance.’

Laughton had found, it would seem, his métier. Everything in his experience contributed to it: his love and knowledge of art, his gifts in shaping a script, his ability with actors, his deep immersion in all the process of movie-making. The man who loved words but could not write, the man who had authority but preferred to work with collaborators, had found his brush, his pen, his team. He had been brought to it, but once he connected with the process, all he needed was encouragement and enthusiasm, and he would surely wreak wonders.

‘Alas, it was a flop. Critically, it did moderately well—misunderstood, treated as a thriller which wasn’t quite thrilling enough, or a parable of which the moral was none too clear—but commercially it was a disaster. As far as the box office is concerned. Paul Gregory was inclined to attribute its failure to United Artists’ favouring of the next Mitchum, Not as a Stranger (which in fact he had started filming even before Night of the Hunter was completed), a much bigger production altogether, five million dollars against Night of the Hunter’s $700,000. It is easy to see, however, that Night of the Hunter would never be a popular hit. Not only is the subject-matter complex, the movie itself has a poetic and imagistic density which makes it somewhat indigestible on first viewing.

Both Billy Wilder and Truffaut drew attention to the inadvisability of starting one’s career as a director with such a film: ‘The film runs counter to the rules of commercialism; it will probably be Laughton’s single experience as a director,’ wrote the Frenchman. Another man, however, might have risen above the disappointment; Laughton was neither of the age nor the temperament to do so. It broke his heart. He was, in the words of more than one witness, destroyed by it.


In the autumn of 1953, Harper and Brothers published The Night of the Hunter, a first novel by a West Virginian named Davis Grubb. Set in the Depression, the book was about a man claiming to be a preacher who murders a widow and pursues her two children down the Ohio River to rob them of $10,000. Atmospheric, lyrical and suspenseful, the novel was a hit with critics and readers; it remained four months on the New York Times best-seller list. Hollywood, of course, noticed. In conventional hands, a film based on the novel would no doubt have been a straight-forward thriller. But it was independent producer Paul Gregory who bought the book, convinced United Artists to produce the film (because Robert Mitchum agreed to star), and gave Charles Laughton the chance to direct his first motion picture. The result was nothing like the usual Hollywood product. Laughton’s Night of the Hunter is at once a fairy tale, a horror film, an allegory, a thriller—a mixture of realism and stylization that even now is hard to define. Released in the autumn of 1955, the film was a flop with critics and audiences.

Today, the novel is known mainly as the source for Laughton’s film, which has achieved the status of a classic. As one of Laughton’s biographers puts it, “Despite its flaws, The Night of the Hunter remains one of the few uncompromised masterpieces of the American cinema.”

Laughton wanted to film the book that Grubb wrote. To that end, he established a close working relationship with the author. He asked Grubb, who had studied art at the Carnegie Institute of Technology, to supply drawings that would help him to visualize scenes and characters from the novel. Ultimately, Grubb drew more than one hundred pictures for Laughton. In 1973, 119 Night of the Hunter drawings, along with an explanatory letter from Grubb, were assembled and put up for sale to collectors. By 1986, a Philadelphia dealer in rare books and prints had the collection on the market for $3,000. Martin Scorsese eventually purchased the drawings, then donated them to the Margaret Herrick Library of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. …

“Beyond acting,” Elsa Lanchester observes, “Charles’ chief talent, I think, was construction. You might call it editing. He was never a creative playwright, but he was a master cutter. He would have like to have been a writer, because, in fact, he knew how to build a dramatic house.”

Laughton’s indirect method of conveying ideas would become familiar to the crew on The Night of the Hunter. At production meetings, he would read from Davis Grubb or the Bible.
to help convey what he was after on screen...He naturally thought in terms of images, even when constructing the script for a play....

Laughton’s peripatetic career as a reader did inform his direction of the film. In his anthology Tell Me a Story, Laughton writes “I have traveled all over the United States on reading tours. Once I traveled 23,000 miles in thirteen weeks and played eighty-seven engagements. I suppose I have been at more places in the United States than any other actor before me.” His experiences on the road gave the transplanted Britisher an understanding of the country that would help him in transferring Grubb’s American landscape to the screen. As Lanchester puts it, “Charles’ love and respect for America grew as he toured the little towns and cities across the country.” In The Night of the Hunter, expressionistic sequences, as well as the film’s overall sense of experimentation, have what one might call a European sensibility. But the Movie’s feel for the countryside and the small towns of West Virginia comes from someone with a profound affection for the regions of “the fabulous country,” as Laughton calls it in the title of his second anthology of readings....

If, as Leslie A. Fiedler puts it, “the primary meaning of the gothic romance...lies in its substitution of terror for love as a central theme of fiction,” then Grubb's novel has both main themes; it is a synthesis of terror and love. For his film adaptation, Laughton seizes on this literary split and gives it visual form. He draws on cinematic traditions to tell his version of the story in two distinct styles—expressionistic and realistic....

The script that Agee delivered, identified as “First Draft” on the title page, turns out to be 293 pages. That is, to be sure, much longer than an average Hollywood screenplay—and twice as long as The Night of the Hunter’s 147-page shooting script. Still, the screenplay is not quite the “monstrosity” that it became in latter-day accounts....Agee’s expansions and additions are never arbitrary. They exist to illuminate the novel’s characters or to develop its conflicts....Despite Agee’s good intentions, his long sequences undermine his work by slowing down the story and diffusing the overall dramatic effect. Elsa Lanchester, who acknowledges that Agee “was an experienced screenwriter,” suggests that he “could have been carried away working with Charles, or perhaps he just lost a practical approach.” Rather than straying from the book, as so many reports accuse him of doing, Agee took to heart Laughton’s desire for a “fanatically accurate adaptation.” Every big scene, and most of the smaller ones, are in the script. Dialogue is often taken verbatim from Grubb or used with minor alterations and trims....With few exceptions, even scenes that Agee invents arise straight out of lines or situations in the novel....

The admiration for Laughton that Agee expressed in his letter about screen credit was universal among the crew with which Laughton surrounded himself. “I think he impressed me more than any director I’ve ever worked with,” said art director Hilyard Brown. He had a marvelous way of enthusing people and getting past the malarkey.” For Robert Golden, “The Night of the Hunter was the most exhilarating experience of my career.” What was most exhilarating for Golden and the other artists on the team was that Laughton did indeed treat them like artists. Brown felt that “I contributed more to The Night of the Hunter than I have to 90 percent of the other pictures I’ve done. I had a lot of freedom to do the work. I could be as creative as I wanted to be.” For Stanley Cortez, too, the production “was a field day for me in terms of extreme creativity that Charles appreciated.”...Although Laughton and Gregory met frequently throughout the shoot, the producer rarely visited the set. Brown remembered a United Artists executive asking Gregory if he was keeping close watch on Laughton, to which Gregory replied, “Look, if that fat son-of-a-bitch doesn’t know what he’s doing, I’m dead anyway.” Gregory, in combination with Laughton, acknowledged the creative contributions of Cortez, Brown, Golden, and Carter by giving each a 1 percent share of the profits. “Never happened to me before,” marveled Brown. “Probably never will again.”...In an already collaborative medium, Laughton created a distinctly collegial atmosphere. To Cortez, “there was a feeling of camaraderie there that seldom exists in the motion picture world....There’s always a feeling of friendship, but not as it was on The Night of the Hunter.”...Mitchum’s own memories are of a harmonious set that centered on Laughton, “the only director I have ever encountered...who was really brilliant.”...

The film may be the only example in American cinema of a pastoral noir....

Although Cortez felt that Griffith’s influence on The Night of the Hunter was purely structural, Terry Sanders pointed out that Laughton wanted to duplicate an important aspect of Griffith’s cinematography—its sharpness of detail.” Sanders remembers seeing one of the films that the Museum of Modern Art had sent out to Los Angeles: a 35mm, hand-colored print of Intolerance (1916). Having watched only bad 16mm dupes at UCLA film school, he was astonished by what he saw. “It was the sharpest, clearest, most beautiful photography I’d ever seen in my life, much sharper than anything you see today. The nitrate film and those lenses were just really incredible. Griffith’s chief cameraman, Billy Bitzer, recalled, “We got the best photographic results in early morning, without shadows. It is then that the light sharpens the distant hills and accentuates the blackness of objects in the foreground.” Laughton reinforced the Griffith look he wanted with words that Sanders copied into his script: “Always sunshine—crisp and light nursery feeling—clear, see everything.” Laughton himself, in the tradition of his mentor, “didn’t shoot on cloudy days, he shot when the sun was high and things were really bright.” Sanders had been hired because his cinematography in A Time out of War was “exactly what [Laughton] wanted.” The young man saw his job as “essentially to somehow capture D.W. Griffith’s spirit and...make sure that all the scenes along the river with the children and the scenes with Mitchum’s double evoked that D.W. Griffith sensibility.”...
The logical conclusion of Laughton’s silent technique is to convey a dramatic moment in a single shot without words."

"The film [music] contains many themes associated with goodness: the two lullabies and their variations, “The Hen and the Chicks” theme, Uncle Birdie’s music—even Willa’s theme, for her allusions are pathetic rather than wicked. But apart from some minor brass figures, there is only one main theme of evil. I do not include “Leaning on the Everlasting Arms,” because the preacher has perverted a religious melody and because Miz Cooper ultimately reclaims the hynm. The musical imbalance is a testament to the power of hate: it has a strength that requires an array of forces to bring it down. The fact that the Preacher’s theme, disguised though it may be, returns to conclude the film, is a telling reminder that evil, too, abides and endures. This is not to say that the music track obliterates the victory within the narrative. Rather, it offers a worldview as realistic as that of Miz Cooper, who knows that “it’s a harsh world for little things.” The music offers a sense of triumph in its harmonic resolution, even as it reminds us of the hunters who roam by night and day.


Grubb insists on the profundity of guilt in all sexual relations. Laughton was hardly a stranger to this idea, but wanted perhaps to counter it in his fable—to say that there is such a thing as guilt-free sensuality. ‘No,’ says Grubb, ‘The bud of guilt was there from the beginning for Preacher to bring so quickly into flower.’ He then has a resonant phrase which must have stirred Laughton’s old Catholic soul: Ecstasy slips so quickly from the loins to the praying hands...the whole Christian ethic is woven thusly—the godly thread of the spirit and the scarlet thread of the flesh...I simply do not think we can show Willa and Ben as pre-snake Adam and Eve without leaving unanswered the question: ‘How could she endure such a man as Preacher is she had been so happy with a man like Ben?’ Preacher you see brought Willa the punishment she had felt (perhaps since childhood) that she had deserved.

Whatever Laughton’s view of sex without guilt, and the presence of this view in the film, the thread of poisoned sex which runs through the story is particularly well realised in the film. By 1931, at the age of thirty-two, he [Laughton] was a dominant figure on the English stage. He had been acting professionally for exactly five years. He was greeting with equal acclaim on Broadway when he appeared there, and was swiftly swept up by Hollywood, where again, he created a sensation with some quite extreme characterisations, among them his Nero in The Sign of the Cross and Dr Moreau in The Island of Lost Souls. He returned to England to make The Private Lives of Henry VIII and then again to try his hand at the classical theatre in a season at the Old Vic which as not accounted a great success for him personally. He returned to Hollywood, where, after a series of complex and flamboyant performances—Captain Bligh, Javert in Les Misérables—Ruggles the butler—he was routinely described as the greatest actor in the world. He went back again to Britain, founding a production company of his own, Mayflower Films, with the German producer, Erich Pommer, formerly head of Ufa in Berlin. Nothing they produced (including Jamaica Inn and St. Martin’s Lane) was entirely satisfactory, and in 1939 he returned to Hollywood to give the performance that was immediately hailed as the climax of his career: Quasimodo in The Hunchback of Notre Dame. For many reasons, it proved to be the last of his overwhelming creations. Thereafter, his work as an actor was craftsmanlike rather than inspired; he tended to lend his personality to ventures rather than aspire to creating the sort of iconic, archetypal figures of his earlier years.

His passion was turned in a different direction. In his personal life, he began to find satisfaction with a series of male lovers; professionally, he started to direct and to tell stories—though he would not have made a distinction between the two activities. His public readings—from the Bible and the miscellany he presented in Charles Laughton, The Storyteller—gave him another lease of life; and the décorless, costume-less reading of Don Juan in Hell, which he directed and in which he also appeared, caused a sensation on Broadway. Stephen Vincent Benét’s epic poem, John Brown’s Body, an unlikely candidate for dramatisation, was woven by Laughton into a tapestry of speech and music that made a revolutionary contribution to the art of theatre. This new lease of life was largely due to Paul Gregory who, seeing Laughton read from the Bible on The Ed Sullivan Show, had instantly spotted the financial potential, and arranged and managed the extensive tours across the country that Laughton now embarked on. It was Gregory who suggested the idea of a Shavian reading (though his ideas was the preface to Back to Methuselah, not Don Juan), and who decided that Laughton should direct a film. After a reading tour, said Gregory, ‘he would just fade. I wanted to bring Charlie into focus as a top director and have him eventually quit performing. The performances were what was killing him.’ Laughton put it differently. ‘Acting in movies only used a tenth of my energy. The unused energy, as it always does, was churning inside me and turning me bad.’ His career as a stage actor had been brilliant but unsustained: apart from anything else, he lacked vocal and physical stamina. His career as a movie actor had been blighted by the circumstances in which commercial film are made. He began to discover himself and the public again with the reading tours; and he began to find fulfilment as an artist with the stage productions. But the film had been his first passion, from his earliest years, and now everything was pointing towards this new departure.

The Cast

Who would play Preacher? In a sense, the spell-binding evil man might, twenty years earlier, have been a Laughton part. His first instinct was a curious one: Gary Cooper. Laughton hugely admired Cooper, whose naturalness and ease eluded him, in life and art. It is hard to imagine Cooper bringing genuine terror to the role; in any event, he turned it down, feeling—no doubt rightly—that it would destroy his public image. Instead, at his prompting, Gregory claims. Laughton approached Robert Mitchum. ‘Mitchum,’ he told him, ‘I’m directing this film and there’s a character in it who’s diabolical shit.’ ‘Present,’ replied Mitchum.

Mitchum was thirty-five at the time, veteran of an enormous number of films, for one of which—GI Joe in 1945—he had received an Academy nomination as Best Supporting Actor (his first part had been in Hoppy Serves a Writ in 1943). Over the years he had evolved a distinctive persona compounded of laconic fatalism and a certain sexual mystery. Agee described it as ‘a
projection of pessimistic intelligence.’ Mitchum and Laughton had met each other on and off in Hollywood, and from the beginning there was a surprising rapport between them….Elsa Lanchester….notes their rapport: ‘they were kindred spirits, both what you call rebels, with no formal respect for formal religion or Hollywood society.’ '...The second crucial piece of casting was Rachel Cooper, the benevolent antipode to Preacher’s evil. The description in the book is crystal clear: ‘She was old, and yet she was ageless—in the manner of such staunch country widows.’ ‘...The answer came to Laughton when he was rerunning the Griffith films. The perfect incarnation of threatened innocence in so many of them, Lillian Gish had matured into an actress of power and authority. For Laughton, she had a special, personal significance: at the end of the First World War, in France, he had watched Broken Blossoms over and over again, and when, in 1962, he lay dying in a coma, he roused himself to say, as if it were the key to his existence: ‘I fell in love with Lillian Gish.’ She conveyed some essence for him of profound, unsentimental goodness, which is exactly what he needed for the part of Rachel Cooper. Gish—fifty-eight at the time—had worked somewhat fitfully since the coming of sound and after Duel in the Sun, that mad David Selznick farrago directed by, among others, Sternberg, Dieterle, and Selznick himself, had vowed that she would never do it again. But Laughton proved persuasive. ‘It was a very fine story of the basic human equation, a story of the battle of good and evil. I thought I could help him, so I told Charles I certainly was interested in the part.…

Schumann was unusually present for a film composer. He was rarely away from the set, conceiving the musical sequences as he watched the scenes being filmed, constantly discussing them with the director. Laughton made clear to him the scenes where his music would be of paramount importance. ‘In these scenes,’ Laughton told him, ‘you are the right hand and I am the left.’ In shooting then Laughton purposely shot much more than the usual footage. ‘This of course,’ says Schumann, ‘is a composer’s dream; to have flexibility and not be tied to exact timing.’ Laughton also drew Schumann’s attention to a crucial principle: ‘if the actors and I have stated it properly on the screen, then you don’t have to restate it with music.’ …

The achievement of Laughton and his team is exceptional and enduring, the imagery original and haunting, tapping into the subconscious and a world of fears and longings; the story-telling is assured and compelling. It was one of the first, pioneering independent productions, and it remains a fine example of a film which defies all formulas, as well as a supreme example of the integrated work of a team. Laughton’s failure to make another film is a serious loss to the history of the movies, but his one masterpiece continues to inspire those who share his sense of the expressive possibilities of the medium.

We’ll be hosting screenings on U.B.’s north campus of two powerful films about the Rwandan tragedy:

**Hotel Rwanda** at 4:00 p.m. in the Student Union Theater, Friday, February 12,

*Sometimes in April* at 5:00 p.m., Student Union Theater, Saturday, February 13.

After the **Hotel Rwanda** screening, we’ll be joined by Paul Rusesabina, the real-life hero Don Cheadle portrayed in the film. The screenings are part of a three-day event at U.B. honoring the late human rights activist Alison Des Forges. The centerpiece of the event is the one-woman show **Miracle in Rwanda**, created and performed by Leslie Lewis Sword. For further information visit [http://www.sa.buffalo.edu/ rwanda/](http://www.sa.buffalo.edu/rwanda/)

**COMING UP IN THE SPRING 2010 BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS XX:**

Feb 16  Kon Ichikawa, *The Burmese Harp* 1956
Feb 23  Sam Peckinpah, *Ride the High Country* 1962
Mar 2  Costa-Gavras Z 1969
Mar 16  Peter Yates, *The Friends of Eddie Coyle* 1973
Apr 6  Wolfgang Petersen, *Das Boot* 1981
Apr 13  Federico Fellini, *Ginger & Fred*, 1985
Apr 20  Michael Mann, *Collateral* 2004

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[http://buffalofilmseminars.com](http://buffalofilmseminars.com)...to subscribe to the weekly email informational notes, send an email to [addto list@buffalofilmseminars.com](mailto:addto list@buffalofilmseminars.com)...for cast and crew info on any film:  [http://imdb.com/](http://imdb.com/)

The Buffalo Film Seminars are presented by the Market Arcade Film & Arts Center and State University of New York at Buffalo with support from the Robert and Patricia Colby Foundation and the Buffalo News