

JANUARY 22, 2002 (V:1): LITTLE CAESAR (1930)

MERVYN LE ROY (15 October 1900, San Francisco—13 September 1987, Beverly Hills, Alzheimer's disease) quit school at 13 to become a newsboy. "I saw life in the raw on the streets of San Francisco," he said. "I met the cops and the whores and the reporters and the bartenders and the Chinese and the fishermen and the shopkeepers. . . . When it came time for me to make motion pictures, I made movies that were real, because I knew first hand how real people behaved." What does that imply about his opinion of the other filmmakers he knew? His first film was *No Place to Go* in 1927; his last was as uncredited director of John Wayne's hyperbolic *The Green Berets* 1968. Le Roy's career in show business began in vaudeville, then his movie-mogul cousin Jesse Lasky hired him at Famous Player-Lasky, where he worked in wardrobe, then as a film tinter, and then as an actor in minor roles. He wrangled a directing job at another studio and made profitable simple entertainments until *Little Caesar* 1930, which invented the '30s gangster genre and made him a major director. His *Gold Diggers of 1933* is generally regarded as one of the classic film musicals of the 30's. It includes some of Busby Berkeley's most spectacular production numbers. Some of the other 65 films he directed were *Mary, Mary* 1963, *Gypsy* 1962, *The FBI Story* 1959, *No Time for Sergeants* 1958, *The Bad Seed* 1956, *Mister Roberts* 1955, *Rose Marie* 1954,

Million Dollar Mermaid 1952, *Quo Vadis?* 1951, *Any Number Can Play* 1949, *Little Women* 1949, *The House I Live In* 1945, *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo* 1944, *Madame Curie* 1943, *They Won't Forget* 1937 (a great social issue film, also notable for the first sweatered film appearance by his discovery Judy Turner, whose name he changed to Lana), *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* 1932, and *Two Seconds* 1931. He produced 28 films, one of which was *The Wizard of Oz* 1939 hence the inscription on his tombstone in the Garden of Honor in Glendale's Forest Lawn Cemetery: "Over the Rainbow." In addition to Judy/Lana Turner, he is credited with discovering Clark Gable, Loretta Young, and Robert Mitchum. Le Roy wanted to cast Gable as Rico's dancing buddy in *Little Caesar* but the studio bosses said no: his ears were too big for movies.

LITTLE CAESAR (1930, 80 minutes)

Edward G. Robinson...Cesare Enrico "Rico"

Bandello

Douglas Fairbanks Jr..... Joe Massara

Glenda Farrell.... Olga Strassoff

William Collier Jr.....Tony Passa, Driver

Sidney BlackmerBig Boy

Ralph Ince....Diamond Pete Montana

Thomas E. Jackson...Sgt. Tom Flaherty

Stanley Fields...Sam Vettori, Owner Palermo Club

Maurice Black....Little Arnie Lorch

George E. Stone Otero

Armand Kaliz....DeVoss, Manager Bronze Peacock Club

Nicholas Bela....Ritz Colonna

Director Mervyn LeRoy

Written by Francis Edward Faragoh, Robert N. Lee, Robert Lord, Darryl F. Zanuck, based on the novel by W.R. Burnett

Producer Hal B. Wallis

Original music Erno Rapee

Cinematographer Tony Gaudio

Film editor Ray Curtiss

First National Pictures Inc., Warner Bros.

Selected in 2000 for the National Film Registry

EDWARD G. ROBINSON (Emanuel Goldenberg, 12 December 1893, Bucharest, Romania—26 January 1973, Hollywood, cancer) had a small part in *Arms and the Woman* 1916, then didn't appear in another film until *The Bright Shawl* 1923. His next film was *The Hole in the Wall* six years after that. Maybe we can get an idea of where his career was about that time by a short he made in 1930: *How I Play Golf: Trouble Shots*. But he also appeared in five features in that same year and one of them—*Little Caesar*—made him a star. Some of his other nearly-100 films are *Soylent Green* 1973, *The Cincinnati Kid* 1965, *Cheyenne Autumn* 1964, *The Outrage* 1964, *The Prize* 1963, *Two Weeks in Another Town* 1962, *The Ten Commandments* 1956, *Hell on Frisco Bay* 1955, *House of Strangers* 1949, *Key Largo* 1948, *All My Sons* 1948, *The Night Has a Thousand Eyes* 1948, *The Stranger* 1946, *Dr. Ehrlich's Magic Bullet* 1940, *The Last Gangster* 1937, and *The Man With Two Faces* 1934. He won an honorary Academy Award in 1973.

DOUGLAS FAIRBANKS, JR. (9 December 1909, New York, New York—7 May 2000, New York, New York, respiratory problems) first appeared in film as a newsboy in *American Aristocracy* 1916, when he was 7 years old. He had connections. He last acted in a made-for-tv movie, "Strong Medicine" 1986. Between the two, he appeared in about 90 other films, among them *Ghost Story* 1981, *Sinbad the Sailor* 1947, *The Corsican Brothers* 1941, *Angels Over Broadway* 1940, *Gunga Din* 1939, *The Prisoner of Zenda* 1937, *Catherine the Great* 1934, *The Dawn Patrol* 1930, *The Jazz Age* 1929, and *Stella Dallas* 1925.

GLEND A FARRELL (30 June 1904, Enid, Oklahoma—1 May 1971, New York City, lung cancer) had only one bit part before her performance as Olga in *Little Caesar*. Then things picked up. She appeared in almost 80 films over a long career, the last of them *Tiger by the Tail* 1968.

Some of the others: *The Girl in the Red Velvet Swing* 1955, *Susan Slept Here* 1954, *Torchy Runs for Mayor* 1939 (her 7th appearance as Torchy, by my count, the first of them being *Smart Blonde* 1937), *Prison Break* 1938, *Gold Diggers of 1937* 1936, *Gold Diggers of 1935* 1935, *We're in the Money* 1935, and *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* 1932.

HAL WALLIS (14 September 1899, Chicago—5 October 1986, Rancho Mirage, California) was producer or executive producer for at least 250 films. Some of them: *Rooster Cogburn* 1975, *True Grit* 1969, *Barefoot in the Park* 1967, *Becket* 1964, *Blue Hawaii* 1961, *G.I. Blues* 1960, *Gunfight at the O.K. Corral* 1957, *The Rainmaker* 1956, *The Rose Tattoo* 1955, *Saratoga Trunk* 1945, *Casablanca* 1942, *They Died with Their Boots On* 1941, *High Sierra* 1941, *Santa Fe Trail* 1940, *Dark Victory* 1939, *The Petrified Forest* 1936, *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* 1932. He won a Best Picture Academy Award for *Casablanca* and the Irving G. Thalberg Memorial Award in 1939 and 1944.

DARRYL F. ZANUCK (5 September 1902, Wahoo, Nebraska—22 December 1979, Palm Springs, California, pneumonia) was producer or executive producer for nearly 200 films, among them *The Agony and the Ecstasy* 1965, *The Longest Day* 1962, *The Roots of Heaven* 1958, *The Sun Also Rises* 1957, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* 1956, *The Egyptian* 1954, *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* 1952, *Viva Zapata!* 1952, *All About Eve* 1950, *Twelve O'Clock High* 1949, *Gentleman's Agreement* 1947, *My Darling Clementine* 1946, *The Razor's Edge* 1946, *Sex Hygiene* 1942 (hey, there was a war on), *The Grapes of Wrath* 1940, *Jesse James* 1939, *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* 1938, *Heidi* 1937, *A Message to Garcia* 1936, *The Prisoner of Shark Island* 1936, and *The Public Enemy* 1931. Zanuck wrote the story and/or script for about 50 films, usually under the names Mark Canfield, Melville Crossman, or Gregory Rogers. He won the Irving G. Thalberg Memorial Award in 1938, 1945, and 1951, and he won Best Picture Oscars for *All About Eve*, *Gentleman's Agreement* and *How Green Was My Valley*.

W.R. BURNETT (William Riley Burnett, 25 November 1899, Springfield, Ohio—25 April 1982, Santa Monica) probably holds the record for having his novels made into film again and again and again. Some examples; *The Asphalt Jungle* (4 times with 4 different titles), *High Sierra* (4 times, 4 titles), and *Saint Johnson* (4

times, 2 titles).

AMENDMENTS TO THE U.S. CONSTITUTION

Article [XVIII]

Section 1. After one year from the ratification of this article the manufacture, sale, or transportation of intoxicating liquors within, the importation thereof into, or the exportation thereof from the United States and all territory subject to the jurisdiction thereof for beverage purposes is hereby prohibited.

(Proposed to the legislatures of the several States by the Sixty-fifth Congress, on the 18th of December, 1917, and declared, in a proclamation of the Secretary of State, dated the 29th of January, 1919, to have been ratified by the legislatures of 36 of the 48 States. The only state not to ratify was Rhode Island.)

Article [XXI.]

Section 1. The eighteenth article of amendment to the Constitution of the United States is hereby repealed.

Section 2. The transportation or importation into any State, Territory, or possession of the United States for delivery or use therein of intoxicating liquors, in violation of the laws thereof, is hereby prohibited.

(Proposed to the several states by the Seventy-Second Congress, on the 20th day of February, 1933, and declared, in a proclamation by the Secretary of State, dated on the 5th day of December, 1933, to have been ratified by 36 of the 48 States.)

WHERE TO LOOK FOR MORE INFO...

...Gerald Peary's "Introduction" to his edition of the script of *Little Caesar* (Wisconsin/Warner Bros Screenplay Series, University of Wisconsin Press, 1981) is an excellent introduction to the film and its times. ... The best book on gangster films is Jonathan Munby, *Public Enemies, Public Heroes: Screening the Gangster from Little Caesar to Touch of Evil* (Chicago 1999). ...The best book on depression-era films is Andrew Bergman, *We're in the Money: Depression America and its Films* (1971).

...a good Edward G. Robinson site with a bio note, bibliography & several interesting links <http://www.moderntimes.com/egr/intro.htm>

...The audio file of "Mother of Mercy, is this the end of Rico?" <http://www.moderntimes.com/egr/audio/rico1.wav>

...Al Capone's FBI file (2397 pages): <http://foia.fbi.gov/capone.htm>

...an online bio of Capone <http://www.crimelibrary.com/capone/caponemain.htm>

Tim Dirks writes:

"The first '100% all-talking' picture and, of course, the first sound gangster film was **The Lights of New York (1928)** - it enhanced the urban crime dramas of the time with crackling dialogue and exciting sound effects of squealing getaway car tires and gunshots. Three great classical gangster films (among the first of the talkies) marked the genre's popular acceptance and started the wave of gangster films in the 1930s in the sound era. The first two were released almost simultaneously by Warner Bros. (considered the gangster studio *par excellence*). All three leading men/criminals, bootleg racketeers of the Prohibition era, met their doom in the final scenes of these films, as if they were receiving retribution for their crimes:

(1) Mervyn LeRoy's **Little Caesar (1930)** starred Edward G. Robinson as a gritty, coarse and ruthless killer named Caesar Enrico Bandello (a flimsy disguise for a characterization of Al Capone.)

(2) William Wellman's **The Public Enemy (1931)** starred James Cagney (in his first film) as a cocky, nasty, and brutal criminal - most memorable in a vicious scene where the snarling gangster pressed a half grapefruit into the face of his moll girlfriend (Mae Clarke). [The same stars were reunited in another Pre-Code quasi-gangster/comedy film, **Lady Killer (1933)**.]

(3) Howard Hawks' raw **Scarface: The Shame of a Nation (1932)** from UA starred Paul Muni as a power-mad, beastly hood (the characterization of Tony Camonte was loosely based on Chicago's brutal, murderous racketeer Al Capone), George Raft (as his coin-flipping emotionless, right-hand killer), and Ann Dvorak (as Tony's sister Cesca). The ultra-violent, landmark film in the depiction of gangsters included twenty-eight deaths, and the first use of a machine gun by a gangster. In tribute over fifty years later, Brian de Palma remade the film with Al Pacino in the title role (**Scarface (1983)**)." The full text of Dirks' article on crime films is online at <http://www.filmsite.org/crimefilms.html>

ANDREW BERGMAN, FROM *WE'RE IN THE MONEY*:

"*Little Caesar* wasted no time. The credits (those who live by the sword are doomed to perish by the sword") and a solitary filling station appeared on the screen. Nighttime. A car pulled in, someone got out of the car and went into the station and the lights went out. Shots. The car tore away. It was a declaration of the gritty realism which would characterize so much of Hollywood's product during the early years of the Depression. After the great box office success of *Little Caesar*, some fifty gang films came to the screen in 1931, causing consternation among civic pressure groups. Theatres were pressured; parent groups and editorials denounced the poisonous effects of gangster heroes on the young.

'Will Hays, once chairman of the Republican National committee and Warren Harding's Postmaster General, was, at this time, President of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, an industry group which had chosen Hays to help 'clean up' suggestive films during the 1920s. Hays responded to concern over gang films by warning that 'to over-emphasize the gangster's role in American life is undesirable.' Chicago's censor board reported that nearly half the cuts it made in films between 1930 and 1931 were for 'showing disrespect for law enforcement' and for 'glorification of the gangster or outlaw.' One quarter of the New York censors' cuts involved gangster pictures." pp. 3-4

The classic gangster film was less a barometer of despair than an act of faith. Despite all the gunplay, mayhem, and omnipresence of death, the gangster film of the early thirties served primarily as a success story. That Americans were attracted to outlaws during the Depression's most wrenching years is an undeniable and useful fact, but the manner in which the outlaws operated only reinforced some of the country's most cherished myths about individual success. The outlaw cycle represented not so much a mass desertion of the law as a clinging to past forms of achievement. That only gangsters could make upward mobility believable tells much about how legitimate institutions had failed—but that mobility was still at the core of what Americans held to be the American dream. Both the bleakness and determined faith of the early thirties are illumined.

"*Little Caesar*, the first great gangster talkie (and, according to young Dwight MacDonald's 1933 judgment, 'the most successful talkie that has yet been made in this country') was what could be called a success tragedy. Caesar Enrico Bandello (Edward G. Robinson) was a figure who followed all the rules of the success model perfected during the late nineteenth century, soared to the top, and was killed." pp. 6-7

GERALD PEARY, INTRODUCTION TO THE WISCONSIN/WARNER BOS SCREENPLAY SERIES EDITION OF *LITTLE CAESAR*. (U OF WISCONSIN PRESS 1981):

From *The Racket* (von Sternberg), close-ups of the gangster's gun and of mobsters shooting policeman were cut out, as well as scenes impugning the integrity of law officials. "Women's clubs and mother's clubs throughout the land are protesting the output of underworld pictures," *The New Yorker* reported in October 1928, and such films disappeared from Hollywood production schedules.

The new conservatism was less reflective of a drastic law-and-order shift of the nation in 1928 than of the gradual souring of millions of persons toward the "open city" of the Jazz Age twenties. With its flaming youth, fast cars, myriad Prohibition violations, and alarming crime rate. As Herbert Hoover, newly elected Republican president, stated in his inaugural address of March 4, 1929, "The strong man must at all times be alert to the attack of insidious disease. The most malign of all these dangers is disregard and disobedience of law."

As if on cue, a cycle of "law-and-order" movies, which dramatized the struggle against the underworld from the police vantage, was ushered into America's theaters. (10)

... American life turned upside down. The stock market crashed, and the country slipped quickly into the Great Depression. ... Still, the federal government kept denying a depression. ... How was Hollywood reacting to the darkening economic conditions? Quite atypically, the film industry participated in the debate over the financial and spiritual health of the country. Whereas most pictures continued to be escapist and nontopical, studios used the gangster film genre in particular to reflect the discontent and alienation, the deep anxiety and hostility, of many Americans facing the Depression.

In some 1930s films, the gangster character became the scapegoat for the country's economic troubles. He was merged with the ruthless businessman whose shady speculative practices were blamed for precipitating the 1929 crash. (11)

Indeed, *Little Caesar* emerged as one of the few movies in which the film makers strove to come closer to real life than had their source. The Depression was not forgotten. As Mervyn LeRoy recalled in his autobiography, he wanted *Little Caesar's* realism to reflect "that era of gloom and desperation that was the world of 1930." (13)

Lacking any loved ones, Rico is best understood as a symbol of the Depression, a person completely dislocated, solitary, forlorn. (18)

Warner claimed no regrets (about nixing Gable for the role): "I always liked and admired Gable but after seeing Edwin G. Robinson in *Little Caesar*, I knew I had not made a mistake.

Le Roy recalled the casting another way: "Somebody—I don't honestly remember if it was Warner or [Darryl] Zanuck or [Hal] Wallis or me—suggested. ... Robinson for the lead. Once the suggestion was made, however, all four of us immediately realized that Eddie was exactly right." LeRoy never intended Clark Gable for Rico. He wanted Gable for Joe Massa instead of Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., who did play the role. On Fairbanks: "I felt he had too much polish and urbanity. I wanted a real tough guy, not somebody who looked as though he had just stepped out of some elegant drawing room." (22)

For the rest of his years, Robinson was associated with the role. Even Mervyn LeRoy gives him his due for *Little Caesar*: "The film typed Eddie, a gentle man, as a gangster for years afterward. ... Eddie lived that part of Rico. He put in all those grunts himself—they weren't in the script and I didn't suggest them to him. He said the lines with so much authenticity that they became real; lines like 'You can dish it out but you can't take it,' 'Take him for a ride,' and 'big shot,' which all became part of our vernacular" (27).

FROM JONATHAN MUNBY, PUBLIC HEROES: SCREENING THE GANGSTER FROM LITTLE CAESAR TO TOUCH OF EVIL. (U CHICAGO PRESS, 1999).

This book is a case study of how the gangster film as a controversial mass cultural form mediated perhaps the most profound period of crisis and transformation in twentieth-century United States history, from the Depression to the Cold War. As an account of the American gangster's film's changes over this period, this work is also, and necessarily, a history of the attempts to censor this particular form of production. Perceived as transgressive, the gangster film was subjected to continual moral and political censure. This is the story of how the concerted efforts to contain the subversive potential of this Hollywood film form were resisted and countered.

... At one level the gangster film typified Hollywood's traditional acquiescence to external authorities, but at others (and more significantly) it clearly violated an established policy of moral accommodation. (1)

Unlike other central national myths, such as the cowboy and the Western outlaw, the gangster never allows an escape from the problems of the here and now. He is not so much about the past or an alternative landscape as he is about the inescapable truths of the urban present. (2)

The black "gangsta" films of today draw on the power of 1930s "classic" prototypes, which addressed similar problems of an American ethnic lower class struggling to overcome problems of cultural and economic ghettoization. ... The recourse to gangster imagery by African Americans is more than a reflection of the "criminal" reality of ghetto life. It has a deeper symbolic worth in connecting today's disenfranchised with a tradition of dissent. In the words of C.L.R. James, the significance of the gangster to Americans is that he is a "derisive symbol of the contrast between ideals and reality." As such, the enduring nature of this national myth lies precisely in its adverse power to dramatize an American idealism at odds with itself. (3)

[*Little Caesar*, *Public Enemy*, *Scarface*] "have been singled out in film criticism

and have been taken to be emblematic of the gangster as a whole in the early 1930s. Yet the more interesting point is that these three films have probably selected themselves as "classics" because of the way they stand out rather than fit into the bulk of gangster film productions at the time. They are so clearly different to what had come before. They represented a break with conventional modes of representing "the other half" on screen. To censors, the classic three were highlighted as signs of sedition, signs of a system in flux rather than signifiers of genre consolidation. (16)

In examining how and why the gangster film helped spawn two of the more significant attempts to regulate Hollywood's powers of mass persuasion—the inception and first enforcement of the Production Code in the early 1930s and the infamous House Committee on Un-American Activities' inquisitions from 1947 to 1953—this study suggests that the purported "certain tendency of the Hollywood cinema" to recuperate dissidence might be less an attribute endemic to the American mass cinema itself than an outcome of a critical vision projected by a "certain tendency of film scholarship." (17)

Cagney, Robinson, and Muni did not descend from schools of "high" acting. All three came out of popular and ethnic theatrical traditions. [[Yiddish stage for Robinson and Muni, vaudeville for Cagney who prided himself on having learned Yiddish to survive in ghetto street culture]] This, in tandem with the fact that they were all once Lower East Side kids, granted them a biographical proximity to the gangster roles that made them Hollywood stars. (41)

After all, *Little Caesar* was more than just a fine gangster film; it was the first great gangster talkie. And this gangster spoke Italian American (actually the situation is more complicated—we have a Jewish American actor imitating an Italian American). The gangster's voice adds a layer of signification that further complicates the nature of the gangster's relation to established success mythology. It is not just that *Little Caesar* is a dark allegory of Algerism; whenever the gangster speaks he reveals that America's cultural story is delivered from a very specific cultural space. His accent frames his desire for success within a history of struggle over national identity. (44)

[Burnett prefaced his book and movie with a quote from Machiavelli "The first law of every being is to preserve itself and live. You sow hemlock and expect corn to ripen."] "In an interview Burnett described his use of the quotation as follows: "It meant, if you have this type of society, it will produce such men." He described Little Caesar as "a gutter Macbeth—a composite figure that would indicate how men could rise to prominence or money under the most hazardous of conditions, but not more hazardous than the Renaissance." (45)

This stress on veracity of language was designed to transform the conventional view of crime and the criminal:

Ultimately, what made *Little Caesar* the smack in the face it was, was the fact that it was the world seen through the eyes of the

Little Caesar played on the hyphenated American's frustrated desire for social and economic inclusion. . . . Yet *Little Caesar* reveals the way in which the rewards for assimilation (simulation/aping) are ultimately withheld. (48)

In their blatant disregard for Prohibition and ironic mimicry of the laissez-faire capitalist "road to success," ethnic urban gangsters directly confronted the key moral and economic precepts associated with an ailing nativist order.

gangster. It's a commonplace now, but it had never been done before then. You had crime stories but always seen through the eyes of society. The criminal was just some son-of-a-bitch who'd killed somebody and then you go and get 'em. I treated them as human beings. [from an interview with Burnett]

. . . . As Burnett emphasized about *Little Caesar*: "It's an Italian picture." It is this filling out of the ethnic point of view that made *Little Caesar* significantly new. The coupling of ethnic vernacular identity with the underworld is something important, not so much as a consolidation of the cycle's rules but as something that ruptured older conventions. (47)

Join us next week, for Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's *I Know Where I'm Going* (1945). Between now and this you've got the January 27 MAFAC Sunday Classics of Emir Kustarica's *Underground* (1995). For more info on both series go to www.buffabfilmseminars.com and www.sundayclassics.com.

The Albright-Knox's huge exhibit of 1950s New York Times photographs opens this Saturday. For

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