 Directed by Jules Dassin  
 Screenplay by Jo Eisinger  
 Based on the novel by Gerald Kersh  
 Produced by Samuel G. Engel.  
 Original Music by Benjamin Frankel (British version), Franz Waxman (American version)  
 Cinematography by Mutz Greenbaum (director of photography, as Max Greene)  
 Film Editing by Nick DeMaggio and Sidney Stone  

Richard Widmark...Harry Fabian  
 Gene Tierney...Mary Bristol  
 Googie Withers...Helen Nosseross  
 Hugh Marlowe...Adam Dunn  
 Francis L. Sullivan...Philip Nosseross  
 Herbert Lom...Kriso  
 Stanislaus Zbyszko...Gregorius  
 Mike Mazurki...The Strangler  
 Charles Farrell...Mickey Beer  
 Ada Reeve...Molly the Flower Lady  
 Ken Richmond...Nikolas of Athens  


Mutz Greenbaum (Max Greene) February 3, 1896, Berlin, Germany—July 1968, London, England) was the cinematographer for 146 films and tv series, some of which were Heavens Above! (1963), A French Mistress (1960), I'm All Right Jack (1959), Lucky Jim (1957), Trent's Last Case (1952), Night and the City (1950), So Evil My Love (1948), Wanted for Murder (1946), Squadron Leader X (1943), Thunder Rock (1942), They Flew Alone (1942), This England (1941), Return of the Scarlet Pimpernel (1937), The

Constant Nymph (1933), Hindle Wakes (1931), Amours viennoises (1931), Die Försterchristl (1931), Zwei Menschen (1930), Zwei Welten (1930, Der Präsident (1928), Frauenraub in Marokko (1928), Das goldene Kalb (1925), Das Tanzende Herz (1916), and Hampels Abenteuer (1915).


and taking out their wrath and their pove Jewish, Negro, Irish, and some Italian, divided among themselves wasn’t entirely black. There were about three or four minority groups living in the ghetto, at each other’s throats all the time: Jewish, Negro, Irish, and some Italian, divided among themselves and taking out their wrath and their poverty upon each other. I was conscious of this, and of the daily problem of eating. And it was cold...it was always so cold.”

Dassin was educated at Morris High School in the Bronx. It is clear that he was already interested in the theatre and show business—a passion apparently inherited from his grandfather, who dabbled in local productions while working as a village wigmaker in Russia. Upon graduating he spent two years traveling through Europe to study theatre while supporting himself with odd jobs. His “most beautiful memory” of this vast tour was “a King Lear heard in Yiddish in Moscow, from the mouth of Michoels, an actor who was almost a dwarf but who was thirty feet tall dramatically.”

Returning to New York in 1936, he learned Yiddish in order to act with the Yiddish theatre companies that flourished at the time. He also joined the Artef Players, a Jewish socialist collective, and appeared in their productions of The Good Soldier Schweik (1937) and Clinton Street (1939). In 1937 he played the lead in Revolt of the Beavers, a Marxist musical for children staged by the WPA Federal Theater Project. For five summers during this period Dassin worked as an entertainment director of a Jewish camp in the Catskills, where, among other things, he engaged the young campers in productions of Shakespeare. At this time he was briefly a member of the Communist party but, according to his own account, left it in 1939.

By 1940, Dassin was writing for Kate Smith’s radio show and adapting literary classics for fifteen-minute radio broadcasts. His adaptation of Gogol’s story “the Overcoat” drew the attention of producer Martin Gabel, who then gave him his first assignment as a director with Medicine Show, a plea for socialized medicine staged as a “living newspaper.” John Mason Brown wrote that the piece was “directed with uncommon felicity,” and although it was not particularly successful, it brought Dassin to the attention of RKO talent scouts.

In 1941 he was invited to Hollywood by RKO as an apprentice director. For six months he did nothing but “sit and observe” the shooting of Alfred Hitchcock’s Mr. and Mrs. Smith and Garson Kanin’s They Knew What They Wanted, receiving $200 a week for the privilege. Not surprisingly, he learned most from Hitchcock, though he felt greater rapport with Kanin. Hitchcock liked “to amuse himself at the expense of innocents. He would never print a take without shouting in my direction, ‘Is that all right...”
for you?”—and I would blush and hide. But he invited me to lunch very often and with great patience and kindness he would draw all over the tablecloth the different technical details he was explaining to me.”

At the end of this well-paid period of high quality instruction, Dassin was unaccountably fired by RKO. He hung around Hollywood for six months, looking for work, and was about to give up “when an extraordinary circumstance presented itself. I still don’t know why... but suddenly I was on the MGM lot and everybody seemed to think I was a nephew of Louis B. Mayer.” Dassin had never met Louis B. Mayer but, offered a chance to show his paces as a director, saw no reason to argue and made three short films—one each about Artur Rubenstein and Pablo Casals, and an adaptation of Edgar Allan Poe’s story “The Tell-Tale Heart.”

Directing the latter, Dassin says, “was a blind experience…. I didn’t know what the hell I was doing.” He was not yet on the MGM payroll and would not be until the film had been seen and approved. But “it was the racetrack season…. Three months went by and nobody saw it and I was starving.” But Dassin’s extraordinary luck held: one day the movie theatre next to the MGM lot lost a newsreel and, to fill out the program, borrowed a print of The Tell-Tale Heart.” It was an immediate success, was widely released, and won a number of prizes.

Dassin’s Tell-Tale Heart, starring Joseph Schildkraut, is regarded by some critics as the best of several screen versions of the story. Gordon Gow, in his two-part article about Dassin in Films and Filming (February and March 1970) called it “a small masterpiece of accelerating tension: emphasis upon the dead eye which seemed to stare at the non-hero and drive him madder and madder until he made it dead for real—and then was assaulted by the throbbing heart in his head, the pulse of conscience.”

Dassin was promptly given a seven-year contract by MGM and promoted to feature director. He was put to work on a string of routine comedies (The Affairs of Martha, Young Ideas) and war films (Nazi Agent, in which Conrad Veidt played a Nazi consul and also his twin brother, and Reunion, with Joan Crawford and John Wayne as heroes of the French Resistance). The latter was a popular success, and so was The Canterville Ghost, an amiable if rather ponderous comedy based on the story by Oscar Wilde but updated to World War II. Robert Young leads the platoon of American Rangers quartered at Canterville Castle, Margaret O’Brien is the six-year-old Lady Jessica, and Charles Laughton is the ghost. Dissatisfied with MGM’s scenario, Dassin sought it revise it, but had run into resistance from the studio. In hopes of getting out of his contract, he staged a one-man strike for fourteen months, but MGM refused to give in. When Dassin was finally forced to resume work, he quickly turned out the sentimental comedy A Letter for Evie (1945), about a correspondence between a soldier and a girl who have never met, and Two Smart People (1946), in which Lucille Ball and John Hodiak star as government bond thieves.

At that point Dassin left MGM and joined the producer-scenarist Mark Hellinger at Universal. It was this partnership that led to Dassin’s first feature of real quality, Brute Force (1947). Scripted by another Hellinger protégé, Richard Brooks, and photographed by William Daniels, it is set in a jail ruled by a sadistic chief guard (Hume Cronyn) who carries out his beatings to the music of Wagner. The audience’s sympathy is with the prisoners, led by Burt Lancaster. In spite of cuts imposed by Universal, Brute Force remains an extremely violent film, the brutality of the guards breeding such simmering hatred among the inmates that their bloody vengeance in the climactic attempted break-out seems inevitable. Even critics who were shocked by the film were impressed by its grim realism and unremitting pace—one called it “harrowingly exciting,” and there was much praise for the performances Dassin had extracted from Lancaster and Hume Cronyn.

Dassin’s next picture, Naked City (1948), was the last produced by Mark Hellinger, who recorded the narration but died of a heart attack just after the shooting began. Set in New York City, it opens in the early hours of a summer morning. We watch the city come slowly to life, street cleaners and milkmen going about their business, and then a cleaning woman finds her young employer murdered. A police lieutenant (Barry Fitzgerald) and his assistant (Don Taylor) go to work on the case, using neither deductive genius nor violence, but simply plodding around the hot streets asking questions until, little by little, the truth begins to emerge.

The real star of the film, as French critic Georges Sadoul remarked at the time, is the city itself, lovingly photographed with a concealed camera by William Daniels. Naked City was not the first Hollywood thriller to be shot on location, and in the documentary style, but it was the first movie made in this way to become a major hit. However, Naked City, which had been coscripted by Albert Maltz, one of the Hollywood Ten, had also been censored by the studio in the final edit: “I wouldn’t say that they cut it,” Dassin told Cahiers du Cinéma in 1955, “but that they tore the heart out of the film.” He walked out of the New York premiere to protest the studio’s interference, but the film itself was a tremendous success, warmly and almost universally praised for its authenticity and pace, its detailed sketches of minor characters, and its “vivid and realistic portrayal of ordinary American people... going about their daily life.” It inspired a long-running television series and, more important, overcame the studios’ resistance to location shooting, ending the reign of the studio-made film noir and launching the vogue for semi-documentary thrillers.

How much credit for Brute Force and Naked City belongs to Dassin, how much to Mark Hellinger, is not clear. Certainly Dassin’s next two thrillers, made for other producers, were inferior, but this may also have reflected his growing contempt for the movie industry. The better of the two was Thieves’ Highway (20th Century-Fox, 1949). Richard Conte stars as a World War II vet who invests everything he has in a truck and a load of early-season apples and sets off on the two-day journey to San Francisco. He has two aims—to get his apples to market and to avenge his father, who has been robbed and maimed by a produce racketeer (Lee J. Cobb). The film is a violent and exciting account of his journey but lacks the warmth and humanity of Naked City.

By this time Dassin was feeling the pressures of the blacklist. “There was a studio head who had the courage to buy the rights to an Albert Maltz novel, The Journey of Simon McIver, for me. He had no doubts about the scandal that would create…. I spoke
on the radio...I fought back....Then the studio head told me. “Beat it. Get yourself to London fast. There’s a film to make there.” That’s how I made Night and the City.” Based on Gerald Kersh’s novel about wrestling racketeers, Night and the City (1950) starred Gene Tierney and Richard Widmark; it met with little enthusiasm in England (although it was well received in France) and became a film that Dassin “has chosen to forget.” He spent the rest of the year in Europe, writing plays, scenarios, and short stories.

It was not the failure of Night and the City that ended Dassin’s Hollywood career, but the fact that in 1952 Edward Dmytryk and Frank Tuttle named him as a Communist in testimony before the House Committee on Un-American Activities. With the studios closed to him, Dassin made one 16mm documentary for the “Meet the Masters” series on great musicians, then turned to Broadway (where he had staged two productions in 1948), starting work on the unsuccessful revue Two’s Company (1952), starring Bette Davis in her first song-and-dance role. He was still at work on the revue when he was subpoenaed by the committee to testify, on those grounds securing a postponement. According to Dassin, he was eventually informed that his testimony had been “postponed indefinitely.” This did not alter the fact that he was unemployable in the United States, and in 1953 he set off for France with his wife (the former Beatrice Launer) and their three children.

Things were at first not much better in Europe. Dassin had been invited to France to direct a Fernandel comedy called Public Enemy No. One; he was fired two days before shooting was to begin, apparently because the female lead, Zsa-Zsa Gabor, had questioned Dassin’s alleged Communist ties, and when the producer started making inquiries in the United States, it became clear that American distributors would blacklist the movie if Dassin’s name appeared on the credits. He wrote some plays and some poetry and got into debt, but said that his years on the blacklist were not wasted: “I had time to think and feel. I began those years as a technician. I came out of them an artist.” And in the end Dassin found a French producer willing to back a low-budget movie based on an Auguste le Breton thriller. The result was Du Rififi chez les hommes (Rififi, 1955).

Rififi is the prototypical caper movie, showing how a well-characterized and likable gang of jewel thieves execute a carefully planned robbery, thus attracting the attention of a ruthless syndicate. Photographed by Philippe Agostini and with music by Georges Auric, the film stars Jean Servais, Carl Möhner, and Robert Manuel. Dassin himself collaborated on the script and appears (under the pseudonym Perlo Vita) as a dapper safecracker with a weakness for women.

One critic found Rififi inferior to The Asphalt Jungle in that “its relationships are not so densely structured and it lacks the formal economy of the Huston picture. But it is still an intensely exciting film, and the long sequence of the robbery, with the criminals silently engrossed in the carrying out of their meticulously detailed plan, is masterly. The recognizable pattern of natural reactions to a normal working day creates a wonderful irony in view of the nature of the work….It is this absorbed dedication in the plan’s brilliant detail which creates such a strong sense of personal involvement.” Virginia Graham agreed that the half-hour robbery sequence, which is entirely without dialogue or music, “builds up so potent an atmosphere of excitement that it becomes difficult to breathe.” Others were reminded of the documentary technique of Naked City by the film’s view of what Gavin Lambert called “a grey, busy, ordinary Paris, full of anonymous figures hurrying along streets nearly always glistening with rain.”

Rififi brought Dassin the prize as best director at Cannes and became the most profitable French film ever made up to that time; it is also said to have inspired several imitative robberies. Dassin has said that making the picture was very difficult because he was still learning French: “I sometimes ask myself whether so much of the film was silent because of my own lack of French.” However, Gordon Gow has pointed out that the “silent” robbery, though devoid of dialogue and music, was in fact “alive with a cunning orchestration of small sounds—falling plaster and so forth—denoting danger for the thieves.” (And in fact the atmosphere of tense apprehension has already been established in a preceding sequence by Auric’s brilliant score, with its suggestion of hammers tapping and burglar alarms shrilling.)

At the 1956 Cannes Festival, Dassin met the Greek actress Melina Mercouri, who had just made her movie debut in Cacoyannis’ Stella. She became Dassin’s companion, his star, and in due course his wife. With the help of her father, a member of the Greek parliament, Dassin made his next film on the island of Crete. Celui qui doit mourir (He Who Must Die, 1958) was adapted by Dassin and Ben Barzman from Nikos Kazantzakis’ novel The Greek Passion. It is set in 1921 in a Greek village under Turkish rule. One day the village is approached by a horde of emaciated refugees from a rebel village that has been burned by the Turks. The local priest Grigoris (Fernand Ledoux) refuses assistance for fear of angering the Turks, so the refugees camp on the hillside, there to starve. Slowly and almost unconsciously, the townspeople who have been chosen for parts in the annual village Passion Play begin to enact their roles in real life. Manolios (Pierre Vaneck), the timid, stuttering shepherd who has been chosen to play Christ, decides to smuggle food to the refugees. He is joined by some of his “disciples” and by the whore Kata (Melina Mercouri)—Mary Magdalen in the play. The situation rapidly gets out of hand, both Greek and Turkish authorities become alarmed, and Manolios is eventually murdered in the church by the man cast as Judas in the play. But his death inflames the little town and inspires the people to rebellion: the film (unlike the book) ends with refugees and villagers massed behind homemade barricades, awaiting the onslaught of the Turkish army.

The film has political as well as religious implications, and at least one American hate group alleged that it was an “anti-Christian filthy film” filled with Communist and Jewish propaganda. But Isabel Quigly found Celui qui doit mourir “a brave film and an exciting one, intellectually as well as emotionally,” and for Bosley Crowther it was “one of the most powerful films of
recent years...one that should shock, excite and foment a lot of thinking about humanity.”…

Where the Hot Wind Blows (1958), based on Rogwer Vailand’s Goncourt novel La Loi, about the injustices wrought by obsolete laws in the Italian south, was made with an international cast that included Melina Mercouri, Gina Lollobrigida, Marcello Mastroianni, Yves Montand, and Pierre Brasseur. Lollobrigida and Mastroianni were foisted onto Dassin at the last moment by a producer who would have lost his backing without them. Dassin had to write them into what he thinks was originally “the best screenplay I’d ever written” or let down the actors and crew he had just assembled. The result, as he says, was “a mess...just sheer nightmare.”

Returning to Greece, Dassin and Mercouri set up their own production company (Melinafilm) to make what became the most famous of Dassin’s pictures, Pote Tin Kyriaki (Never on Sunday, 1959), scripted and produced by himself, and made on a minuscule budget of $150,000. It was to save money that Dassin cast himself in a lead role as Homer Thrace, an idealistic American in love with the glory that was Greece. In the Athens port of Piraeus he encounters Ilya (Mercouri), a prostitute who is nevertheless her own woman—she goes to bed only with men she likes, for whatever they can pay, and never, never works on Sunday. The film is an account of Homer’s fortunately unsuccessful attempt to improve and educate this exuberantly loving and carefree child of nature.

Time’s reviewer wrote that “Dassin’s satire is obviously directed at the United States, but his touch is light and his affection for the object of his satire unmistakable”...Never on Sunday established the mercurial Mercouri as an international star, its bouzouki theme tune by Manos Hadjidakis became a major hit, and the title (of film and song) passed into many of the world’s languages. The development of the Greek film industry that followed has been attributed to this vast international success.

Jacques Natteau, Dassin’s photographer on Celui qui doit mourir and Never on Sunday, excelled himself in Dassin’s modernized version of Phaedra, which has Mercouri as the libidinous wife of a shipping tycoon (Raf Vallone), in love with her stepson (Anthony Perkins). Full of decorative scenes of international high life, it seemed to most critics a well-meaning but rather foolish and forgettable movie (though several admired the impressionistic lighting of a passionate love scene in which the couple seem literally to be on fire).

There was better press for Topkapi (1964), based on an Eric Ambler novel about an eccentric gang of jewel thieves and how they go about stealing an unstealable treasure from the Topkapi Palace in Istanbul. Combining a witty script, extravagant color photography (Dassin’s first), and equally extravagant playing by Peter Ustinov, Robert Morley, Mercouri, and Akim Tamiroff, it also cheerfully parodies the famous caper in Rififi without surrendering suspense. Less successful were the next two films, a rather pretentious adaptation of Marguerite Duras’ novel 10:30 p.m. Summer, with Mercouri as an alcoholic losing her husband (Peter Finch) to a younger woman (Romy Schneider), followed by Survival 1967 (1968), a pro-Israeli documentary about the Arab-Israeli war made in collaboration with Irwin Shaw.

By this time it had become possible for Dassin to work again in the United States. He had done so in 1962, staging an unsuccessful play called Isle of Children, and five years later he and Mercouri returned with their triumphantly successful musical version of Never on Sunday. They were still in New York with Ilya Darling when, in April 1967, a junta of senior army officers turned Greece into a police state. Mercouri and her husband were both intensely political people and, Dassin said, “we decided to give our lives to Greece, which seemed more important than anything else.” They threw themselves wholeheartedly into propaganda and fund-raising work against the new regime, with such effect that the Colonels stripped Mercouri of her citizenship and confiscated her Greek properties. There were reported threats on her life.

Dassin’s hatred of repression is visible, in a different context, in Uptight (1968). This was based on Liam O’Flaherty’s novel of the Irish Troubles, The Informer, which had already inspired two films, but which is here, in the wake of Martin Luther King’s assassination, translated into a drama of the black liberation movement. Dassin wrote the screenplay in collaboration with Julian Mayfield, who also plays the tormented informer Tank, and with Ruby Dee, who appears as Tank’s girlfriend. A number of other parts were taken by residents of Cleveland’s black ghetto, where the film was shot. The result was admired for its attempt to deal honestly with the conflict between black militants and moderates, but found sadly old-fashioned in its dialogue and clumsy in execution.

Melina Mercouri starred again in La Promesse de l’aube (Promise at Dawn, 1970), playing the indomitable mother in this adaptation of Romain Gary’s autobiographical novel, set in Russia, Poland, and France. Despite various production difficulties—Polish authorities refused permission to shoot in Krakow, and Dassin broke both his legs in a fall at the French studio—the film was well received.

Around this time, Dassin and Mercouri were formally charged, along with fifty-five others, with conspiring against the Greek junta, and Dassin was summoned to stand trial in Athens (which he did not do). Three years later, following the massacre by the Greek colonels of fifteen students at Athens Polytechnic University in November 1973, Dassin undertook The Rehearsal (1974), a powerful reenactment of the event presented in the form of a play rehearsal. Mercouri produced the film on a minimal budget, and a number of international theatre celebrities participated without charge, among them Laurence Olivier, Maximilian Schell, Arthur Miller, and Lillian Hellman. A few days before The Rehearsal was to premiere in New York the colonels were ousted from power, and the film was never released commercially.

With the fall of the junta, Dassin and Mercouri were able to return to Greece, where they divided their time between theatre and filmmaking. After staging Brecht and Weill’s Threepenny Opera in Greek in 1975, they began working on A Dream of Passion, inspired by Mercouri’s theatre performance in Medea. The
film stars Mercouri as a fading actress, in Greece to play Medea, who, as a publicity stunt, visits a pathetic American woman (Ellen Burstyn) jailed for infanticide. A complex relationship develops between the two women. "Finally," wrote Richard Schickel, "the modern Medea’s story gets told, the play opens, and the picture ends, leaving the audience no wiser...unless, of course, one is interested in some ‘personal statements’ about the state of the movie business, contemporary issues, and the star and director themselves that they manage to tuck in along the way. It perhaps need not be added that these are of a piece with the rest of A Dream of Passion—awkward, pretentious, and empty.”

A Dream of Passion had its admirers, however, and so did Dassin’s last film, Circle of Two (1980), shot in Toronto and New York, with Richard Burton as a blocked artist unblocked by his wintry fling with a teen-aged girl (Tatum O’Neal). But here again the general response was dismissive—Paul Taylor called it “an utterly redundant romance” incorporating “the sad spectacle of the veteran Dassin attempting to pass judgment on a film culture that has evidently passed him by.” According to Dassin, neither the scenario nor the two stars were of his own choosing, and after this unhappy experience, he concentrated on directing plays in Greece and on writing a novel.….Dassin was divorced from Beatrice Launer in 1962 and married Melina Mercouri in 1966. His daughters Julie and Richelle are both actresses, and his son Joe Dassin was a popular singer until his death of a heart attack at the age of forty-two. Hearing the news of Joe’s death, Dassin himself suffered a heart attack….Summing up his long career, Siclier and Levy write, “Realist poet if there is one, he views the world with a lucid eye that never lacks tenderness….Dassin wouldn’t know how to define himself within one film genre….His talent manages to unfold equally well in the detective story (La Cité sans voiles), the biography (Promesse de l’aube), the epic fresco (Celui qui doit mourir), or the humorous parable (Never on Sunday)….Dassin’s art has one merit above all: sincerity. if it is necessary to single out one word that defines the whole of his development and his work, that would be it.”

Night and the City, DVD Times.co.uk
Harry Fabian, played by Richard Widmark in Jules Dassin’s film noir masterpiece Night and the City, is a man of more ambition than sense. “An artist without an art,” as one character in the film aptly describes him. He’s a bastard, a two-bit loser, a fate-challenged pariah who thinks nothing of robbing his ill-fated girlfriend Mary (Gene Tierney) and after he’s been caught in the act, accepting money she has to borrow in order to pay his debt. He’d rather spend what little he scrounges up on tips to inflate his self-importance than paying the people [he] owes. But Harry’s not really that bad of a guy, once you get over the almost total lack of redeeming qualities. His childlike enthusiasm at every big idea that just might let him “be somebody” is infectious and, in the end, heartbreaking. I see Harry Fabian as a poison I’d want to avoid at all costs in real life, but, on film, he’s a fascinating, naturally sympathetic character barely constrained into his hour and a half cinematic cage.

His London is a grimy, dirty, perfectly noir representation of the lowlife world in which he lives. Harry is a macabre symbol of a city that’s all underworld, all double cross, all the time. He has sense enough to realise things aren’t working out the way he’d like and, in between charming tourists with harmless lies, discovers what he believes to be the mother lode of opportunities. Or perhaps it’s just his latest scheme. The excitement he brings to every thunderbolt idea is matched only by the infantile volatility he displays when things don’t go his way. Regardless, our number one ne’er-do-well sees his chance when a hulking giant of a man loudly expresses his dissatisfaction at what’s going on in a wrestling match. “That’s Gregorius,” exclaims a man in front of Harry, a potential mark only five seconds earlier. “Who?,” Harry asks. “Fist wrestler the world has ever known,” replies another man. After Gregorius has had enough and begins to exit, Harry races out of the arena to the box office and aggressively apes the complaints he’d just heard Gregorius, who’s now entering the room, make a minute ago.

Gregorius sees Harry’s performance and continues on his way out. Fabian then chases after the aging former wrestler and feigns adoration. “You’re not...Gregorius?” “The greatest wrestler the world has ever known?,” he regurgitates without a wink. A plan is hatched, an idea set in motion. Harry will promote wrestling with the support of Gregorius and his protégé. Two problems: the eternal lack of money and Kristo, racketeer and wrestling promoter who’s also the son of Gregorius. To fix the first problem Harry goes to his semi-employer Phil Nosseross, who runs The Silver Fox, a night club where Mary helps con old men into buying drinks for champagne toasts and overpriced chocolates from scantily clad women. With Helen Nosseross (played with cunning precision by Googie Withers) also in the room, Harry begs for 400 quid, but gets laughed down. Helen berates Harry for his gall, but slyly gets her husband to agree to match L200 if Harry can scrape up his half. Nosseros (pronounced like his animal lookalike) and Harry have some history, as Harry seems to have with almost everyone in the film, including Helen. Part of what Dassin and screenwriter Jo Eisinger are able to convey so well are the enormously full backstories of these characters. Carrying a healthy amount of respect for the audience, the film presents Fabian as he is and without apology or explanation. There’s a great deal implied about the past in nearly every exchange between Fabian and Mary, Phil, Helen, or the various “friends” Harry calls on, but there are no great lengths taken to establish any of it. Refreshingly, the audience is trusted to recognise these things instead of having the past condensed in unnatural movie minutes. A good example is the first time we see Harry and Helen meet, after Fabian is upset because she didn’t support his attempt to rope in her husband as an investor. Widmark plays the scene initially as furious and impatient, but then Withers, string of pearls dangling to her cleavage, attacks him with a forceful kiss out of nowhere. Something’s going on and Helen, like much of Dassin’s film, is one step ahead of both Harry and the audience.
As it turns out, though, neither character cares much for the other aside from what best suits each one. Harry needs the Nosseross money and Helen wants to break free from her husband’s purse control, both see one another as means to their goals. Both are also more than willing to double cross each other, though Harry proves himself more adept at hustling. The double cross is a vital theme in Night and the City. Nearly every character says one thing and does another, usually without a pang of guilt. These are evil people made interesting by compelling performances and brilliant storytelling. Withers, in particular, is a force of nature, an atypical noir female who’s married for a lifestyle even though she’s strong-willed enough deny her husband sex in the form of a kiss. Instead of just taking what she wants, she cons and charms her way into it. Sadly for Helen, things don’t turn out quite as planned.

Faring even worse is Harry, who unwillingly watches everything fall apart around him. The cinematic punch to the gut comes when Gregorius grapples in an impromptu wrestling match with Kristo’s star performer The Stranger. It’s a wrenching and unforgettable scene, as tense and brutal as three minutes could be in 1950. The visceral images of two cattlelike men, one in his forties and the other a full seventy years old, methodically pounding and grabbing each other like slabs of raw meat is somehow turned into a majestic battle of old versus new, sport versus entertainment. As Gregorius, Stanislaus Zbyszko, a well-known former wrestler himself, is impressive throughout the picture, and especially poignant during the match and its aftermath. Dassin reportedly found Zbyszko on a chicken farm in New Jersey and handpicked him for the role, his only dramatic film acting.

I’d be remiss if I didn’t devote a few words to Richard Widmark’s performance. Widmark is something of a hero to many film noir lovers, bursting onto the scene as the psychotic Tommy Udo in Kiss of Death and then having to work out of the villain gutter at Fox. His Harry Fabian, arguably matched in Widmark’s career only by McCoy, is a highly accomplished feat of fatalistic noir acting. Fabian is at once repulsive and without redemption, but, ultimately, benignly sympathetic, a martyr even. Widmark captures something in the doomed character that’s hard to comprehend, much less describe. This worthless manchild with an overinflated ego, who fetishises the nameplate delivered to the short-lived Fabian Promotions headquarters, is almost too stupid to dislike. I don’t know why I root for Harry, but I know his fate breaks my heart every time....

This BFI release of Night and the City is, like Criterion’s disc, the preferred American cut of the film. After Dassin had finished work on the movie, 20th Century-Fox studio head Daryl Zanuck apparently added some scenes and changed the music from Waxman’s score to a newer, lighter one by Benjamin Frankel without consulting the director. The longer version was originally released in UK cinemas, but has never been put on DVD....

There’s no question as to whether those who enjoy film noir should own Night and the City on DVD. It’s Jules Dassin’s finest film and features Richard Widmark in a never-bested performance.

from Wikipedia

**Night and the City** (1950) is a film noir based on the novel by Gerald Kersh, directed by Jules Dassin, and starring Richard Widmark and Gene Tierney. Shot on location in London, he plot evolves around an ambitious hustler whose plans keep going wrong.

The picture is considered a classic of the film noir genre. Director Dassin later confessed that the never read the novel the movie is based upon. In an interview appearing on The Criterion Collection DVD release, Dassin recalls that the casting of Gene Tierney was in response to a request by Daryl Zanuck, who was concerned that personal problems had rendered the actress “suicidal,” and hoped that work would improve her state of mind. The film’s British version was five minutes longer, with a more upbeat ending and featuring a completely different film score. Dassin has endorsed the American version as closer to his vision....

**Critical Reaction**

The film has been noted as groundbreaking in its lack of sympathetic characters, the deadly punishment of its protagonist (in the American version), and especially in its realistic portrayal of triumph by racketeers neither slowed nor at all worried by the machinations of law. Critics of the time did not react well; typical was Bosley Crowther’s review in The New York Times, which read in part. “[Dassin’s] evident talent has been spent upon a pointless, trashy, yarn, and the best he has accomplished is a turgid pictorial grotesque...he tried to bluff it with a very poor script—and failed...[the screenplay] is without any real dramatic virtue, reason or valid story-line...little more than a melange of maggotty episodes having to do with the devious endeavors of a cheap London night-club tout to corner the wrestling racket—an ambition in which he fails. And there is only one character in it for whom a decent respectable person can give a hoot.

The film was first re-evaluated in the 1960s, as film noir became a celebrated genre, and it has continued to receive laudatory reviews to date. Writing for Slant Magazine, Nick Schager said, “Jules Dassin’s 1950 masterpiece was his first movie after being exiled from America for alleged communist politics, and the unpleasant ordeal seems to have infused his work with a newfound resentment and pessimism, as the film—about foolhardy scam-artist Harry Fabian (Richard Widmark) and his ill-advised attempts to become a big shot—brims with anger, anxiety, and a shocking dose of unadulterated hatred.”

from **“Notes on Film Noir” Paul Schrader 1972**

*Film Noir* is not a genre (as Raymond Durgnay has helpfully pointed out over the objections of Higham and Greenberg’s *Hollywood in the Forties*). It is not defined as are the western and gangster genres, by conventions of setting and conflict, but rather by the more subtle qualities of tone and mood. It is a film “*noir,*” as opposed to the possible variants of film gray or film off-white.

*Film noir* is an extremely unwieldy period. It harks back to many previous periods: Warner’s Thirties gangster films, the French “poetic realism” of Carné and Duvivier, Sternbergian melodrama, and farthest back, German Expressionism crime films (Lang’s *Mabuse* cycle). *Film noir* can stretch at its outer limits from...
The Maltese Falcon (1941) to Touch of Evil (1958), and most every dramatic Hollywood film from 1941 to 1953 contains some noir elements. There are also foreign offshoots of film noir such as The Third Man, Breathless and Le Doulos.

…Appropriately, the masterpiece of film noir was a straggler, Kiss Me Deadly, produced in 1955. Its time delay gives it a sense of detachment and thoroughgoing seediness – it stands at the end of a long sleazy tradition. The private eye hero, Mike Hammer, undergoes the final stages of degradation. He is a small-time “bedroom dick,” and makes no qualms about it because the world around him isn’t much better. Ralph Meeker, in his best performance, plays Hammer, a midget among dwarfs. Robert Aldrich’s teasing direction carries noir to its sleaziest and most perversely erotic. Hammer overturns the world in search of the “great whatsis,” and when he finally finds it it turns out to be–joke of jokes–an exploding atomic bomb. The inhumanity and meaninglessness of the hero are small matters in a world in which The Bomb has the final say.

…in retrospect the gangster films Warshow wrote about are inferior to film noir. The Thirties gangster was primarily a reflection of what was happening in the country, and Warshow analyzed this. The film noir, although it was also a sociological reflection, went further than the gangster film. Toward the end film noir was engaged in a life-and-death struggle with the materials it reflected; it tried to make America accept a moral vision of life based on style. That very contradiction – promoting style in a culture which valued themes – forced film noir into artistically invigorating twists and turns. Film noir attacked and interpreted its sociological conditions, and, by the close of the noir period, created a new artistic world which went beyond a simple sociological reflection, a nightmarish world of American mannerism which was by far more a creation than a reflection.

film noir was first of all a style, because it worked out its conflicts visually rather than thematically, because it was aware of its own identity, it was able to create artistic solutions to sociological problems. And for these reasons films like Kiss Me Deadly, Kiss Tomorrow Goodbye, and Gun Crazy can be works of art in a way that gangster films like Scarface, Public Enemy, and Little Caesar can never be.

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/.

COMING UP IN THE SPRING 2010 BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS XX:

Feb 9 Charles Laughton, Night of the Hunter (1955)
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
Mar 23 John Cassavetes, A Woman Under the Influence 1974
Mar 30 Stanley Kubrick, The Shining 1980
Apr 6 Wolfgang Petersen, Das Boot 1981
Apr 13 Federico Fellini, Ginger & Fred, 1985
Apr 20 Michael Mann, Collateral 2004

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...to subscribe to the weekly email informational notes, send an email to addto list@buffalofilmseminars.com
...for cast and crew info on any film: 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