Directed by Jules Dassin  
Screenplay by Jules Dassin, René Wheeler and Auguste Le Breton  
Based on the novel by Auguste Le Breton  
Produced by René Vuattoux  
Original Music by Georges Auric  
Cinematography by Philippe Agostini  
Edited by Roger Dwyre  
Jean Servais...Tony le Stéphanois  
Carl Möhner...Jo le Suedois  
Robert Manuel...Mario Ferrati  
Janine Darcey...Louise le Suedois  
Pierre Grasset...Louis Grutter aka Louis le Tatoué  
Robert Hossein...Remi Grutter  
Marcel Lupovici...Pierre Grutter  
Dominique Maurin...Tonio le Suedois  
Magali Noël...Viviane  
Marie Sabouret...Mado les Grands Bras  
Claude Sylvain...Ida Ferrati  
Jules Dassin...Cesar le Milanais (as Perlo Vita)  

Cannes 1955: nominated for Golden Palm, won Best Director  

Nominated Oscar: Best Writing, Story and Screenplay - Written Directly for the Screen- Pote tin Kyriaki (1961); Nominated Oscar: Best Director- Pote tin Kyriaki (1961).  

Jean Servais (24 September 1910, Antwerp, Belgium—17 February 1976, Paris, France, heart failure) acted in 85 films and television series, among which were Un tueur, un flic, a... (1977), Le protecteur/The Protector (1974), Le seul du vide/Threshold of the Void (1974), L'affaire Crazy Capo/The Crazy Capo Affair (1973), La plus longue nuit du diable/Castle of Horror/ The Buffalo Film Seminars  

Conversations about great films with Diane Christian and Bruce Jackson  


American director, scenarist, and producer, Jules Dassin was born in Middletown, Connecticut. He was one of the eight children of Samuel Dassin, a barber, and the former Berthe Vogel, both Russian Jewish immigrants. The family moved to New York City when Dassin was still a small child and settled in Harlem. “We were so poor it was ridiculous,” he said. “At that time Harlem 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/Flesh and Desire (1954), After the War (1955), The Good Soldier Schweik (1937), À nous la liberté/Liberty for Us (1931), Le sang d’un poète/The Blood of a Poet (1930)


Julius Dassin in Middletown, Connecticut. He was one of the eight children of Samuel Dassin, a barber, and the former Berthe Vogel, both Russian Jewish immigrants. The family moved to New York City when Dassin was still a small child and settled in Harlem. “We were so poor it was ridiculous,” he said. “At that time Harlem 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/Flesh and Desire (1954), After the War (1955), The Good Soldier Schweik (1937), À nous la liberté/Liberty for Us (1931), Le sang d’un poète/The Blood of a Poet (1930)
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 was permitted 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, streetcleaners 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.

Dassin—*RIFIFI*—3
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 co-scripted 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 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 Barzmann 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 Katerina (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 Vailland’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 (Melinafilms) 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 (Mercourl), 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, Maximillian 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 Greece 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 winsy 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.”


The modern heist movie was invented in Paris in 1954 by Jules Dassin, with Rififi, and in 1955 by Jean-Pierre Melville, with Bob le Flambeur. Dassin built his film around a twenty-eight-minute safecracking sequence that is the father of all later movies in which thieves carry out complicated robberies. Working across Paris at about the same time, Melville’s film, which translates as “Bob the High Roller,” perfected the plot in which a veteran criminal gathers a group of specialists to make a big score. The Melville picture was remade twice as Ocean’s Eleven, and echoes of the Dassin can be found from Kubrick’s The Killing to Tarantino’s Reservoir Dogs. They both owe something to John Huston’s The Asphalt Jungle (1950), which has the general idea but not the attention to detail.

Rififi was called by François Truffaut the best film noir he’d ever seen (it was based, he added, on the worst noir novel he’d ever read). Dassin’s inspiration was to expand the safecracking job, which is negligible in the book, into a breathless sequence that occupies a fourth of the running time and is played entirely without words or music. So meticulous is the construction and so specific the details of this scene that it’s said the Paris police briefly banned the movie because they feared it was an instructional guide.

There is something else unique about the heist scene: It is the centerpiece of the film, not the climax. In a modern heist film, like The Score (2001), the execution of the robbery fills most of the third act. Rififi is more interested in the human element, and plays as a parable, with the heist at the top before the characters descend to collect their wages of sin. After the heist there is still a kidnapping to go.

The film was shot on a modest $200,000 budget on Paris locations that Dassin scouted while wandering unemployed around the town; he was on the Hollywood blacklist and hadn’t worked in four years. Streets are usually wet in movies because they photograph better that way, but Paris is especially damp in Rififi, shot in wintertime and showing a criminal milieu where the only warmth comes in a flat where one of the crooks lives in a flat with his wife and little boy.

The film centers on Tony (Jean Servais, a Belgian actor who had gone through hard times because of alcoholism). Always
referred to as “the Stéphanois,” he’s a sad-eyed, tubercular ex-con who dotes on the little boy, his godson. Tony reveals a nasty streak of cruelty against a former mistress and is quite capable of cold-blooded murder, but by the end he seems purified by loss. His character believes in honor among thieves, and his lonely vengeance against the kidnappers provides the film with its soul.

The boy’s father is Jo the Swede (Carl Möhner). Jo and his friend Mario (Robert Manuel) have their eyes on diamonds in a store window and want to smash and grab just before the light turns green for their getaway car. Tony nixes the plan and advises them to go for the big score—the store’s safe. They enlist a safecracker named Cesar who is played by Dassin himself (credited as “Perlo Vita”). Casing the store is done with a old brilliance. Tony ostentatiously leaves his bulging wallet neglected on a counter, to show his indifference to money. Determining the type of safe and the kind of alarm, they stage a rehearsal, test the alarm’s sensitivity (it responds to vibrations), and discover they can immobilize it with foam from a fire extinguisher.

“No rods,” Tony advises. “Get caught with a rod, it’s the slammer for life.” But the thieves are as ruthless as necessary, tying up the couple who live over the diamond store before gingerly breaking their way through the ceiling with a cushioned hammer. The composer, Georges Auric, originally wrote music for this sequence, but agreed with Dassin that it was unnecessary, and for twenty-eight minutes we hear nothing but taps, breathing, some plaster falling into an umbrella positioned to catch it, some muffled coughs, and then after the alarm is disabled, the screech of the drills used to cut into the safe. There is, of course, no reason why the men cannot talk softly, and so the silence is Dassin’s inspired directorial choice, underlining the suspense. When I saw the film in a 2002 revival in London, the twenty-eight-minute sequence played as it always does, to a theater that was conspicuously hushed in sympathy.

The movie opens with a back-room poker game, and after the heist Dassin mirrors the scene with another shot of men around a table. Nice, how he uses close-ups of their eyes before showing the diamonds. They have committed a perfect crime, but Cesar gives a ring to a girlfriend, and when it’s spotted by Pierre (Marcel Lupovici), the boss of a Montmartre nightclub, he guesses the identity of the thieves and sends his men after them for the jewels.

The last third of the film centers around the kidnapping of Jo’s son, who will allegedly be returned if the jewels are handed over. Tony knows better: The boy is a witness. He searches for the boy, questioning bartenders, hookers, tough guys, and old pals to get a lead. In these scenes Montmartre seems to cower beneath the damp skies of dawn.

The film’s violence has a crude awkwardness that makes it seem more real. Finding a cop beside the stolen getaway car, Tony leaps from a shadow and cudgels him, not with the smooth grace and sensational sound effects of a modern crime picture but with the clumsiness of a man not accustomed to hitting policemen. Much of the violence takes place just offscreen; that may be because of the production codes of the day, but it’s effective because the focus falls on the face of the person committing the violence, and not on the violence itself.

There is one scene nobody ever forgets. Cesar the safecracker, whose stupidity leads to the betrayal of the perfect crime, is found by Tony tied to a pillar in the deserted nightclub. He tries to apologize for his mistake. He’s sincere, and Tony knows he’s sincere. “I liked you, Macaroni,” Tony tells Cesar. “But you know the rules.” Cesar (played by Dassin) does and nods sadly.

Dassin was a particular master of shooting on city locations. The Naked City (1948) is famous for its semidocumentary use of New York. His great London noir Night and the City (1950), with Richard Widmark as a desperate fugitive hunted by mobsters, makes such good use of darkness and the rubble of bomb sites that it deserves comparison with The Third Man. In Rififi, Dassin finds everyday locales—nightclubs, bistros, a construction site—and invests them with a gray reality. Just before the heist begins, there is a scene all the more lovely because it is unnecessary, in which nightclub musicians warm up and gradually slide into collaboration. There’s a real sense of Montmartre in the 1950s.

Dassin, born in 1911, still giving interviews in 2002, was named as a onetime Communist during the McCarthy witch hunt. He wasn’t crazy about the Rififi project but needed work. Its worldwide success was a blow against the blacklist, which fell after the listed writer Dalton Trumbo was openly hired by Kubrick for Spartacus and Otto Preminger for Exodus, both in 1960. By then Dassin had settled in Europe; he was married to the fiery Greek actress Melina Mercourli from 1966 until her death in 1994. His last great success, Topkapi (1964) was a return to the heist genre, and is credited by Mission: Impossible. Although Dassin returned to the United States occasionally, as for the successful black militant drama Up Tight (1968), he was basically lost to American moviemaking, and lives in Athens on a street named for Mercouri. The restoration of Rififi long available only on shabby videotape, rescues a milestone in movie history.


Usually, asking a director when he first encountered Stanislawsky is not a question about a literal meeting, but Jules Dassin has a literal answer.

“The man himself? Shall I tell you? It was in 1923, when the producer Morris Guest brought the Moscow Art Theater to New York. I was a boy, and I saw this with my own eyes. John Barrymore was playing ‘Hamlet’ at that time, and he had heard of Stanislawsky and his great actors. And it seems he cut big chunks out of his ‘Hamlet’ that night to run and see some of the Moscow Art Theater. He made his entrance still dressed in his inky black Hamlet costume, and rushed up to the stage and kissed the feet of the director and the actors. I saw that!”
Mr. Dassin, a vigorous 89, was in New York recently to introduce the rerelease of "Rififi," the classic caper film he made in France in 1955, after the blacklist forced him to leave Hollywood. "The title comes from the North African tribe, the Rifs, who were in constant conflict," he said. "So it's all about melees and conflicts and fighting, out of which the novelist Auguste Le Breton made the word 'rififi.'

"He went on to write 'Rififi in Tokyo,' 'Rififi in San Domingo,' 'Rififi in Flatbush' and so on."

Translating 1950's underworld slang into subtitles for 2000 posed a problem for Mr. Dassin, who worked with Bruce Goldstein (whose company, Rialto Pictures, has released the film in the United States) and the journalist Lenny Borger to create a new English text.

"Breton's characters spoke a very special language, and one unknown to many parts of France outside of the Paris circle," Mr. Dassin said. "When I was given the book to read, I understood nothing of it. It was a very special argot, and I should not be surprised if he invented some of it. To know what the book was about, I had a guy read it to me who was a specialist."

Mr. Dassin, born in Middletown, Conn., and raised in the Bronx, landed in Europe after the director Edward Dmytryk named him in the hearings by the House Committee on Un-American Activities into Communist influence in Hollywood. Having specialized in film noir in Hollywood ("The Naked City," "Brute Force") Mr. Dassin returned to the genre for his first film in France, and it became a worldwide hit.

In 1964 he went back to the form for "Topkapi," with its famous high-wire burglary scene—a sequence that Mr. Dassin was surprised to find re-enacted without acknowledgment in Brian De Palma's 1996 "Mission: Impossible." "That shocked me," he said. "I think it was just too literal, the same thing. I said, 'Is this allowed?' Apparently it was."

After shooting "Rififi" in Paris, Mr. Dassin discovered Greece, where he met and married the actress Melina Mercouri, who starred in his 1960 film "Never on Sunday" as well as "Topkapi." Athens remained his home after her death in 1994. "I stopped working right after my wife died, to continue on with some of the unfinished projects she undertook when she was the Greek Minister of Culture. We've created a foundation in her name. And I'm trying to get a museum built. There are wonderful educational projects in schools, with fascinating results. That's all my time now."

COMING UP IN BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS XIX:

- Sept 29 Kenji Misoguchi Akasen chitai/Street of Shame 1956
- Oct 6 Richard Brooks Elmer Gantry 1960
- Oct 13 Roman Polanski Nôz w wodzie/Knife in the Water 1962
- Oct 20 Stanley Kubrick Lolita 1962
- Oct 27 Carl Theodor Dreyer Gertrud 1964
- Nov 3 Eric Rohmer Ma nuit chez Maud/My Night at Maude's 1969
- Nov 10 Andrei Tarkovsky Solaris 1972
- Nov 17 Arthur Penn Night Moves 1975
- Dec 1 Bela Tarr Werckmeister harmóniák/Werckmeister Harmonies 2000
- Dec 8 Mike Leigh Topsy-Turvy 1999

CONTACTS:
...email Diane Christian: engdc@buffalo.edu
...email Bruce Jackson bjackson@buffalo.edu
...for the series schedule, annotations, links and updates: http://buffalofilmseminars.com
...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