ROAD BLOCK (RKO Radio, 1950; rel. 1951) Directed by Harold Daniels; produced by Lewis J. Rachmil; Screenplay by Steve Fisher and George Bricker from a story by Geoffrey Homes and Richard Landa; Camera, Nicholas Musuraca; Musical Score, Paul Sawtell; 73 mins.

With Charles McGraw (Joe Peters); Joan Dixon (Diane); Lowell Gilmore (Webb); Louis Jean Heydt (Harry Miller); Milburn Stone (Egan); Joseph Crehan (Thompson); Martha Mears (Ginger); Peter Brocco (Bank holdup man); Dewey Robinson (Mike); Harry Lettier (Saunders); Howard Negley (Police Captain); Dave McMahon (Radio Operator); Phyllis Planchard (Bobbie Webb); Steve Roberts (De Vita); Richard Irving (Fartos); Taylor Reid (Green); Clarence Straight (Talbot); Jean Dean (Airline hostess); Dave Willock (airline clerk); Janet Scott (Mrs MacDonald).

Film Noir is a complex combination of thematics, stylistics and a fatalism reinforced by (now non-existent) movie morality and censorship. Although many critics, and especially the French, are rigid in setting boundary lines for it, in this essay we shall examine "Road Block" and "In the Watches of the Night". However, if - and with some justification - one accepts the key noir period as being from 1940 until 1956 - then to RKO Radio goes the credit of having made the first "traditional" and bona-fide noir in their 1940 "The Stranger on the Third Floor", photographed, like tonight's film, by one of the foremost noir cinematographers, Nicholas Musuraca. Although the Universal film noirs - particularly those like "The Killers" and " Crisis Cross" with the definitive Biodrak-Lancaster-Rosza combination - are probably best known, and always made some of the very best and least stereotyped noirs ("Out of the Past", "The Locket") and also some of the most stylish "E's", ranging from Anthony Mann's "Desperate" and Robert Wise's "Born to Kill" to tonight's "Road Block". Incidentally, it is almost certainly director Daniels' best picture; a climax to a series of interesting E's for other companies. But thereafter, as Howard Hughes proceeded to change and ultimately destroy Rko, the studio's E product was reduced to mere program fodder, and Daniels' later assignments ("Sword of Venus", "Port Sinister") gave him no opportunities at all.

Although "Road Block" is casually related to the "Double Indemnity" school - the destruction of a basically decent man through sexual obsession - it is also a little more related to middle-class reality, and thus in a sense more tragic. The woman is not evil, and the hero is essentially weak, very offbeat cast for classical noir, and especially the innocent victim (Nancy). Although it follows its entrapped protagonists to a predestined end in the dry waterways of the Los Angeles drainage system, its path is anything but clichéd. The off-beat opening grabs attention right away, and good writing and taut dialogue never allows that attention to lag. (Of the four writers involved, two, Fisher and Homes, were veterans of tough crime/noir stories).

It's also of an ideal length: the 60 minute noirs usually had to opt for suspense and action alone, the additional 13 minutes allows more time for character and motivation development. The plot is just long enough for another 20 minutes to be added, and then of course it would have been an "A" with a Mitchell or a Lancaster starred).

Oddly enough, it was held out of release for a year after its completion, probably because of a surfeit of similar films on the market at the time. One of the pleasures of noir is that even when its plot is linked to a specific time period, its treatment is usually so stylised and larger-than-life that it doesn't reflect that period realistically enough to date. It's hard to realise that this expert little film, which seems so fresh and modern, is already 36 years old.

-- Ten Minute Intermission --

THEY MADE ME A FUGITIVE (U.S. title I BECAME A CRIMINAL) (Warner-British,1347) Directed by Alberto Cavalcanti; Produced by N.A. Bronsten; an A.R. Shipman production; Screenplay by Noel Langley from the novel "A Convict Has Escaped" by Jackson Bued; Camera, Otto Heller; Musical Score by Marius Francois; 85 mins (U.S. edited running time).

With Trevor Howard (Clem Morgan); Sally Gray (Sally); Griffith Jones (Narcey); Rene Ray (Corra); Mary Hovell (Reggie); Vida Hope (Mrs. Fenshawe); Margaret Denham (Hr. Fenshawe); Ballard Berkeley (Inspector Rockliffe); Phyllis Robins (Olga); Eve Ashley (Ellen); Charles Farrell (Curley); Jack McNaughton (Scopy) and Michael Brennan, Lyn Evans, Bill O'Conner.

1947 was for both Britain and the U.S., the absolute peak year of film noir, both qualitatively and quantitatively. It position, a year or so after the end of World War two, enabled it to incorporate not only the standard noir themes, but also those of post-war neuroses, frustration and disillusionment. In Britain that year - and British noir tended to be more related to everyday life than the American equivalent - this film and Robert Hamer's "It Always Rains on Sunday" were standouts. They also, and especially Hamer's film, illustrated the films' affinity with the pre-war French cinema best exemplified by "Le Jour Se Leve". Cavalcanti, formerly a documentarian, became Britain's noir specialist; of the seven features he made in the 40's, five were noirs.
Interestingly enough, the film was produced by A.R. Shipman of the big independent theatre circuit of Shipman and King. He was getting into production then on the basis that exhibitors knew best what audiences wanted. Accordingly, this unremittingly grim film was made to coincide with audience requirements. Of course, Mr. Shipman may not have been totally prepared for what Cavalcanti did with the script. In its day it was considered both exceptionally tough and totally gloomy; when it was generally reissued, only two years later, it was substantially cut. Although we have been looking for a complete 16mm print for over 25 years, the American edition unfortunately is all that is available. While edited versions are usually to be deplored, and we make no exception here, at the same time it is is exceptionally well and seamlessy edited. All the scenes that I remember best from 1947 are here, and the main difference is the not unimportant one of mood. Warners sold the film essentially as an action picture, with the typically rough-hewn Warner posters of the day making it look like a Hollywood picture. (And it does have enough rough action to justify that approach). The title change was primarily to avoid confusion with a recent Paramount film, "They Made Me a Killer". Most of the cuts are at the beginning, establishing the process by which the ex-Raf officer is drawn into crime - and his disgust when he finds that dope is the base of the underworld racketeering. Partly due to censorship over here the references to dope are minimised, and the story gets under way quicker. The only real damage is in the sequence wherein the homicidal wife (Vida Hope) tries to persuade the fugitive to murder her husband. In the shortened framework of a tough melodrama, and given Hope's strange playing of the role, the sequence seems almost silly. In the longer, more methodically paced original version, the woman merely seems like one more inevitable web of entanglement for the typical noir hero. Apart from having that unfortunate effect, it would have added some 20 minutes of realistic minimal importance. (Not that we'll stop searching for a full print!) ***

A few quick exterior scenes on the moors apart, the film is entirely studio made. It's an Art Director's London rather than the real thing - grey, drab, Germanic - but it works far better than the London of "The Shot at the City", a film that tried to combine Noir and Semi-Documentary, and mixed real London with a studio London to come up with a very artificial whole. Although dealing with the immediate post World War Two period, it somewhat matches the mood and feeling of frustration that characterised the Wellman/ Casney "The Public Enemy" of 1931. Unlike the "glamorous", super-organised crime of the American films of the same period, this crime is petty, small-scale and nasty. Anyone who was in London - and particularly its Soho underworld (which surrounded the film industry in Wardour Street) - at that time, will recognise its basic reality. Wartime shortages, prolonged after the war, created a huge boom in the Black Market, and the crooks and thieves came out of hiding to wheel and deal quite openly in the streets. They patterned their persona on exaggerations of what were already exaggerations - the gangsters of the Hollywood movies. With their cheap, "smart" patter and their flashy clothes and gaudy ties, they looked and sounded ludicrous. Yet there was nothing funny about their methods which included razor-slash ing gange. Griffith Jones, formerly a light-weight sawing hands occasionally a likeable cad, does a superb job in creating the essence of the sadistic, conscienceless postwar crook, a total acting about-face for him.

The action sequences aren't as expert as they might be - this was before Hollywood 2nd unit men were at work in Britain - but the rough-hewn quality of the fights does at least add to the realism. The film is relatively little-known here; Warners gave it no New York first-run, probably reasoning that since its trade press reviews were good, it would do better with the public not knowing in advance from key reviewers that it was a British film. And since it was an independent film on which Warners rights ultimately expired, it has not remained a part of their tv package.

Tonight's program is admittedly rather downbeat for a week devoted to July 4 celebrations, and it was bad showmanship on our part not to have scheduled last week's aggressively patriotic program for tonight! But at least tonight's two films do remind us that Crime Does Not Pay -- a message that Hollywood has not only forgotten but literally rejected in recent years!

Program Ends approx. 10.22.
Discussion/question session follows.

--- William K. Everson ---


---

*** Note: the sequence itself is not cut, but is less effective given the changed rhythm of the film.