

PRESS RELEASE

09/32

Gangsters at BFI Southbank July 2009



Following the Wall Street Crash in 1929 the Gangster genre erupted like a crime wave with more than 60 films produced between 1930 and 1933 alone. This July **BFI Southbank** will take a look at some of the key films from this prolific period of filmmaking.

The Motion Picture Production Code, which was enforced in 1934, was a set of censorship guidelines citing what was acceptable and unacceptable in films for cinema-goers to view. The pre-Production Code 30s movie gangster, whose exploits overlapped with real-life rural desperados, aren't heroic in the conventional sense – they're not righteous, handsome or glamorous – but their dynamism is irresistible. **Edward G Robinson's** Rico Bandello in *Little Caesar* (1930) is a trigger-happy hood, no question, but he's also, typically, a first-generation American on the make, a go-getter who has sized up the odds against him and figures on levelling the score. Rico; **Paul Muni's** Tony Camonte in **Howard Hawks' Scarface: The Shame of a Nation** (1932); **James Cagney's** Tom Powers in *The Public Enemy* (1931)- these guys are insolent, assertive and at the same time aspirational. No wonder the establishment clamped down and insisted that all films adhered to the rules.

The post-war films of the 40s and 50s saw a focus on the individual gangster in films such as *Dillinger* (1945) and *Al Capone* (1959). Then, with the rise of the Hollywood blockbuster in the 60s and 70s, the films focused on the excess of the gangster, demonstrated by the violence in

Roger Corman's *The St Valentine's Day Massacre* (1967) and Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) in order to draw the crowds. Our representation from the 80s onwards include films such as *Scarface* (1983), **Brian De Palma's** seminal remake, and **Sergio Leone's** *Once Upon a Time in America* (1983) that look back to the classic Gangster film whilst others such as *The Newton Boys* (1998) try something new like endeavouring to bring together the Gangster and Western genres.

With guns, guts and gals, Gangsters at BFI is a grapefruit smashing season not to be missed!

PRESS CONTACT

Katie Gilbert - Tel: 020 7957 8919 or email: katie.gilbert@bfi.org.uk

Little Caesar

The definitive movie gangster, Rico Bandello is an outsider, a smalltime hood with an accent, a craving for respect, and ruthless determination. Robinson had enjoyed a big success playing Al Capone on stage (they shared a physical resemblance), and WR Burnett's novel also draws on Capone's vertiginous rise through the ranks, before contriving a more dramatic fall. Made on the cheap, the movie was a big hit, initiating Warners' cycle of 'torn from the headlines' muckrakers.

USA 1930 Dir Mervyn LeRoy With Edward G Robinson, Douglas Fairbanks Jr 80min PG

Thu 2 July 20:40 NFT2, Tue 7 July 18:30 NFT1, Fri 17 July 14:30 NFT2

The Public Enemy

Despite the title, this is a more sympathetic portrait of a charismatic slum kid who takes a wrong turn and pours his drive and ambition into racketeering. Cagney's Tom Powers is unbridled energy, a human dynamo with a staccato speech pattern and a grin as quick as his fist. Loosely based on Hymie Weiss, an enemy and victim of Capone, Powers made Cagney a movie star overnight.

USA 1931 Dir William A Wellman With James Cagney, Edward Woods, Donald Cook, Joan Blondell, Jean Harlow, Mae Clark 83min

Fri 3 July 20:30 NFT3, Sat 11 July 18:30 NFT1, Wed 22 July 14:30 NFT2

Scarface

X marks the spot in this, the apotheosis of the urban gangster movies of the pre-Code era. Again the story is inspired by Al Capone, though screenwriter Ben Hecht threw in an incest theme as a tip of the hat to the Borgias. Muni's Tony Camonte is every bit as brutish as Al Pacino's Tony Montana in the remake, an almost childlike thug who brightens up when he gets his hands on his first Tommy gun: 'Get out of the way, Johnny, I'm gonna spit!'

USA 1932 Dir Howard Hawks With Paul Muni, Ann Dvorak, Karen Morley 93min

Sat 4 July 16:15 NFT1, Wed 8 July 20:40 NFT2

'G'-Men

Legend has it that Machine Gun Kelly coined the term 'G'-men, arrested without a shot being fired in the first major public relations coup for J Edgar Hoover's Federal agents – or 'Government Men'. At Hoover's urging, Hollywood studios were prevailed on to stop glamorising outlaws – and so we find Cagney as an attorney who signs up to fight crime after gangsters kill his buddy. Don't suppose that he's any softer just because he's on the right side of the law.

USA 1935 Dir William Keighley With James Cagney, Margaret Lindsay, Ann Dvorak 85min

Sun 5 July 16:00 NFT2, Mon 13 July 20:40 NFT2

The Roaring Twenties

If the early Warners crime movies came straight from the day's headlines, Mark Hellinger's expansive production takes a longer view, tracing a WWI veteran's trajectory in the illegal booze trade after struggling with unemployment. If Cagney's Eddie Bartlett goes to the bad his options were severely limited, and he remains capable of redemption. An obvious influence on *Once Upon a Time in America*.

USA 1939 Dir Raoul Walsh With James Cagney, Priscilla Lane, Humphrey Bogart 105min PG

Sat 11 July 16:00 NFT2, Wed 15 July 20:45 NFT1, Tue 21 July 14:30 NFT2

Dillinger

John Dillinger was declared off-limits to Hollywood after assuming near-folkhero status during his cavalier crime spree of the early 30s. This curious, *noir*-inflected low budget effort from writer Philip Yordan exploits episodes like his daring prison break, but Lawrence Tierney's chillingly callous

portrait has nothing to do with the real bank robber. (Nearly 50 years later Tierney masterminded the robbery in *Reservoir Dogs*.)

USA 1945 Dir Max Nosseck With Lawrence Tierney, Edmund Lowe, Anne Jeffreys 70min PG

Fri 10 July 18:20 NFT2, Sat 18 July 16:00 NFT2

Baby Face Nelson

As a Warner Bros cutter, Siegel put together the montage sequences in *The Roaring Twenties*. Later, of course, he made *Dirty Harry*. This tight, expert crime thriller shows how much he had learned from his studio apprenticeship, and the brisk, unsentimental intelligence he brought to the table. But the real revelation is Mickey Rooney, utterly authentic as Dillinger's sometime partner-in-crime, a trigger-happy hood at the mercy of his own psychosis.

USA 1957 Dir Don Siegel With Mickey Rooney, Carolyn Jones, Cedric Hardwicke 85min PG

Sun 12 July 16:00 NFT2, Tue 14 July 20:40 NFT2

Machine Gun Kelly

The success of *Baby Face Nelson* inspired a slew of gangster biopics, many connected with director-producer Roger Corman. This was his first stab at the genre, and he claimed it was Kelly's anti-climactic demise that interested him. Shot in ten days, it's a movie about a bully with a mommy complex – anticipating the Freudian hysterics of *Bloody Mama*. 'Without His Gun He Was Naked Yellow!', announced the ads.

USA 1958 Dir Roger Corman With Charles Bronson, Susan Cabot, Morey Amsterdam 80min 12A

Tue 14 July 18:20 NFT2, Fri 17 July 20:40 NFT2

Al Capone

A fairly accurate biopic, taking Big Al from bouncer to mob boss and beyond. Steiger is on mercurial form, chewing on a long cigar instead of the scenery. If the documentary stylings appear somewhat dated, that's because they draw on *The Roaring Twenties*, not genuine newsreel footage. For many critics, though, Steiger lays down a standard that even De Niro in *The Untouchables* failed to match.

USA 1959 Dir Richard Wilson With Rod Steiger, Fay Spain, Martin Balsam 103min 15

Sat 18 July 20:40 NFT2, Wed 22 July 18:20 NFT2

The Rise and Fall of Legs Diamond

Arguably Boetticher's most important film outside his westerns, this slick, smart, utterly fraudulent biopic reprises the basic elements that underlie the classic gangster movie. Ray Danton found his best-ever role as the flamboyant, graceful Jack Diamond (nicknamed 'Legs', here, because of his dancing abilities), and would reprise the role in *Portrait of a Mobster*. In an early role, Warren Oates is Jack's expendable brother. Photographed by Lucien Ballard.

USA 1960 Dir Budd Boetticher With Ray Danton, Karen Steele, Warren Oates 101min PG

Wed 22 July 20:40 NFT2, Fri 24 July 18:20 NFT2

Bonnie and Clyde

'They're Young. They're In Love. And They Kill People.' Like a smile dying, Arthur Penn's new wave gangster rhapsody gets you high on the thrills and spills of the chase, then hits you with the consequences right between the eyes. The violence was a turning point for the genre, but so too the romantic take on the attractive, non-conformist outlaws. The stuff that counter-cultural myths are made of.

USA 1967 Dir Arthur Penn With Warren Beatty, Faye Dunaway, Gene Hackman 111min 15

Wed 15 July 18:30 NFT1, Tue 21 July 20:45 NFT1, Wed 29 July 14:30 NFT3

The St Valentine's Day Massacre

Returning to the scene of the crime – 1920s Chicago – nearly a decade after he made *Machine Gun Kelly*, Corman made the most of an unusually generous budget from Twentieth Century Fox. Sadly, the studio nixed his idea of casting Orson Welles as Capone, and the part was inherited by the improbable Jason Robards. Screenwriter Howard Browne was a veteran journalist who had covered the crime beat in the 20s, and the movie feels scrupulously researched.

USA 1967 Dir Roger Corman With Jason Robards, George Segal, Ralph Meeker, Jean Hale 100min 15

Wed 29 July 20:40 NFT2, Thu 30 July 18:10 NFT3

Bloody Mama

In a very, very different mode, Corman let loose here. Steeped in Freudian motifs and throwing history out the window, the movie makes no bones about its anti-social anti-heroes. The Barker clan comprises a sadist, a homosexual, a lady-killer and a junkie (De Niro sniffing glue). Each takes his turn in Ma's bed. Not for the faint hearted, this is positively Jacobean movie-making.

USA 1970 Dir Roger Corman With Shelley Winters, Pat Hingle, Don Stroud, Robert De Niro 90min
Sat 25 July 20:40 NFT2, Mon 27 July 18:20 NFT2

Thieves Like Us

Three cons escape from prison and take to robbing banks. It's all they know. Unsentimental and scrupulously unglamorous, this is a film about the wrong side of the tracks, where the helpless and the hopeless persist in betting against the odds and lose every time. Nick Ray filmed Edward Anderson's novel as *They Live By Night*, while the Coens took it somewhere else entirely in *O Brother Where Art Thou*.

USA 1973 Dir Robert Altman With Keith Carradine, John Schuck, Shelley Duvall 123min 12A

Tue 21 July 18:30 NFT1, Mon 27 July 20:45 NFT1

Dillinger

Dean Stanton, Richard Dreyfuss, Geoffrey Lewis, John Ryan 102min

Milius made his directorial debut under the auspices of Roger Corman's AIP studio, still profiting from the gangster revival inspired by *Bonnie and Clyde* (dismissed as two-bit hoodlums here). This is easily the most accurate movie Dillinger to date – Warren Oates could pass for the premier public enemy number one in a line-up. Look for Richard Dreyfuss as 'Baby Face' Nelson.

USA 1973 Dir John Milius With Warren Oates, Ben Johnson, Michelle Phillips, Cloris Leachman, Harry

Thu 23 July 18:20 NFT2, Fri 24 July 20:40 NFT2

The Lady in Red

John Sayles wrote this cheerful exploitation flick for Roger Corman, giving us a novel angle on the Dillinger story by focusing on the notorious 'lady in red'. Pamela Sue Martin – between *Nancy Drew* and *Dynasty* – is the preacher's daughter who is seduced by a reporter, beaten by her father, and runs away to Chicago, where she eventually winds up in a brothel. 'The thinking person's crunch movie,' declared *Time Out*.

USA 1979 Dir Lewis Teague With Pamela Sue Martin, Louise Fletcher, Christopher Lloyd 93min

Wed 29 July 18:10 NFT3, Fri 31 July 20:30 NFT3

Scarface

'Nothing exceeds like excess,' says Elvira (Pfeiffer) and this is the movie to prove it. De Palma's overblown, operatic disco'n'coke era update on the Hawks classic confirms the potency of the gangster myth, even as it replays – and plays with – cliché and convention. Al Pacino's snarling Cuban Tony Montana is as hyper-real as Cagney or Robinson, a little man's impersonation of a tough guy.

USA 1983 Dir Brian De Palma With Al Pacino, Michelle Pfeiffer, Steven Bauer, Robert Loggia 170min

Sat 4 July 18:30 NFT1, Thu 16 July 20:45 NFT1

Once Upon a Time in America

If *Scarface* seems like the quintessential 80s film, Leone's masterpiece is oddly timeless, for all that it spans 40 years of American social history and Time is its central theme. Leone was born in 1929, and *Once Upon a Time...* is an imaginative, amoral recollection of the roaring 20s, a melancholy meditation on camaraderie, fleeting youth, illusionment, money and power. Monumental cinema.

USA-Italy 1983 Dir Sergio Leone With Robert De Niro, James Woods, Elizabeth McGovern, William Forsythe, Burt Young, Tuesday Weld 229min

Mon 20 July 18:30 NFT1, Sun 26 July 18:30 NFT1

The Newton Boys

Linklater mines for the missing link between the cowboy movie and the gangster picture, and excavates reallife (though little known) 1920s Texas bank robbers, the Newton brothers.

'Linklater's first big-budget movie may be the Jules and Jim of bank-robber movies, thanks to its astonishing handling of period detail and its gentleness of spirit, both buoyed by a gliding lightness of touch.' – Jonathan Rosenbaum

USA 1998 Dir Richard Linklater With Matthew McConaughey, Skeet Ulrich, Ethan Hawke 122min 15

Tue 28 July 20:30 NFT3, Fri 31 July 18:10 NFT3

NOTES TO EDITORS:

Booking informationThe BFI Southbank is open to all. BFI members are entitled to a discount on all tickets. BFI Southbank Box Office tel: 020 7928 3232. Unless otherwise stated tickets are £9.00, concs £6.65 Members pay £1.40 less on any ticket. Website www.bfi.org.uk/southbank

BFI Filmstore

The BFI Filmstore is stocked and staffed by BFI experts with over 1,200 book titles and 1,000 DVDs to choose from, including hundreds of acclaimed books and DVDs produced by the BFI.

The benugo bar & kitchen

Eat, drink and be merry in panoramic daylight. benugo's décor is contemporary, brightly lit and playful with a lounge space, bar and dining area. The place to network, hang out, unpack a film, savour the best of Modern British or sip on a cocktail.

There's more to discover about film and television through the BFI. Our world-renowned archival collections, cinemas, festivals, films, publications and learning resources are here to inspire you.

***** PICTURE DESK *****A selection of images for journalistic use in promoting BFI Southbank screenings can be found at www.image.net under BFI / BFI Southbank / July 2009 / Gangsters

Katie Gilbert

Assistant Press Officer - BFI Southbank

British Film Institute
21 Stephen Street
London W1T 1LN
tel: +44 (0)20 7957 8919 - direct line
fax: +44 (0)20 7436 0439
email katie.gilbert@bfi.org.uk

At BFI Southbank in May we continue our **Nouvelle Vague** and **Albert R Broccoli - Bond and Beyond** seasons, complete with a special Bond Weekender (1-3 May) and extended runs of *From Russia With Love* and **Jean-Luc Godard's** classic *Pierrot le fou*, re-released by the BFI. We also present an extended run of **Ernesto Contreras'** brand new film *Blue Eyelids*. Meanwhile, we also examine the work of experimental filmmaker **Stephen Dwoskin** and revisit the TV dramas of the late playwright and barrister **John Mortimer**. In the Gallery we launch **Iain Forsyth & Jane Pollard's** 3D video installation *Radio Mania: An Abandoned Work*, and at the BFI IMAX we launch **J J Abrams'** long-awaited *Star Trek* in spectacular IMAX format on 8 May.

www.bfi.org.uk/whatson

View treasures from our archive at: www.youtube.com/bfilms

Theatrical releases:

From Russia With Love Terence Young – 24 April

Pierrot Le Fou Jean-Luc Goddard – 22 May

Accident Joseph Losey – 5 June

North by Northwest Alfred Hitchcock – 19 June

Shirin Abbas Kiarostami – 26 June

For BFI Southbank tickets, book online at www.bfi.org.uk or call the Box Office 020 7928 3232 (lines open 11.30am - 8.30pm)

For IMAX tickets, book online at www.bfi.org/imax or call the Box Office 0870 787 2525 (lines open 10.30am - 7.30pm)

The BFI is a registered charity registration number 287780). This email and any attachment is intended only for the person or entity to whom it is addressed and may contain confidential material. If you are not the addressee or have received this email in error, please inform the sender immediately and delete it from your computer. If this email has been transmitted outside the ordinary course of its business, the BFI accepts no liability for any loss or damage suffered by any person arising from any use of or reliance on information contained in this email, and any opinion expressed in this email is personal to the sender and may not reflect the opinion of the BFI.

