

## Robert Siodmak: Prince of Shadows Film season at BFI Southbank April and May 2015



**Tuesday 17 February 2015, London.**

**BFI Southbank** today announced full details of its two month season dedicated to the supremely stylish German director **Robert Siodmak**, taking place throughout April and May. Though most famous for his American thrillers of the 40s such as *Phantom Lady* (1944) and *The Killers* (1946) Siodmak displayed skill, subtlety and inventiveness in various genres. The season will showcase early work from his time spent in Germany and France, the intervening years in the US when he was hailed as the 'new Hitchcock' and signed to a long-term contract with Universal, and later on, his short spell working in Britain. The centrepiece of the season will be an extended run of *Cry of the City* (1948), a noir thriller which anticipates the films of Martin Scorsese, re-released by the BFI in selected cinemas across the UK from **Friday 17 April**.

The season will start by focusing on the earlier part of Siodmak's career, beginning with his remarkable debut *People on Sunday* (1929), a revolutionary experiment in realism using non-actors, to tell the story of four young Berliners one Sunday afternoon. Further early work made in Germany included *Farewell* (1930), Siodmak's first full-length feature which was co-written by Emeric Pressburger, *Inquest* (1931), an atmospheric Berlin-set crime film, and *The Burning Secret* (1933), Siodmak's last film in pre-war Germany, which was condemned in the Nazi press as 'detrimental to family values'.

Fleeing Nazism, Siodmak then worked in France, directing a number of features including *Hatred* (1938) and *Snares* (1939). The former is perhaps the greatest of his films made during his time in France, wonderfully evoking both the glamour of Shanghai and the stifling atmosphere of provincial Dunkirk. *Snares* was Siodmak's last European film before immigrating to the US, and anticipated his great noir thrillers which were still to come. After establishing himself in Hollywood with some enjoyable B-movies such as *Son of Dracula* (1943) Siodmak distinguished himself with the very

successful *Phantom Lady* (1944). Working with some of the biggest stars of the period, including **Burt Lancaster**, **Ava Gardner** and **Olivia de Havilland**, Siodmak's noir films, which he preferred to shoot in the studio in order to create his atmospheric, menacing worlds with absolute control, included *Christmas Holiday* (1944), *The Killers* (1946) and *The Dark Mirror* (1946). The centrepiece of the season will be an extended run the fast-paced crime thriller *Cry of the City* (1948), which will be re-released by the BFI in selected cinemas across the UK from **Friday 17 April**; anticipating the films of Martin Scorsese, *Cry of the City* is a classic awaiting rediscovery.

As the end of the decade neared, Siodmak's films became less successful, and the popularity of the shadowy studio-shot thrillers waned; these psychological thrillers looked dated to those who longed for Technicolor and widescreen. Following his final Hollywood film noir, the **Barbara Stanwyck** led *The File on Thelma Jordan* (1950), and swashbuckling adventure *The Crimson Pirate* (1952), which was a 'humiliating experience' for Siodmak, he returned to Europe, where he would continue to make films until the late 1960s. The season will include two films from this latter period, *The Devil Strikes at Night* (1957) and *The Rough and the Smooth* (1959). The former was a chilling exposé of Nazi corruption based on real events and was remarkably frank for a German film of the period. The latter was one of his rare British films, a dark and almost claustrophobic drama about an archaeologist abandoning his straight-laced British fiancée in favour of a seductive German woman, which Siodmak navigates with sensitivity and flair.

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**NOTES TO EDITORS:**

**SEASON LISTINGS:**

**APRIL:**

**Out of the Shadows: the Strange Case of Robert Siodmak**

Though Siodmak was actually a very versatile director, his best known works – apart from his silent masterpiece *People on Sunday* – are the dark crime films of his 'middle period' in Hollywood. In this illustrated talk, Senior Film Programmer Geoff Andrew looks at Siodmak's special expertise in the thriller genre and, particularly, at his role in the development of film noir.

**TUE 31 MAR 18:10 NFT3**

**People on Sunday Menschen am Sonntag**

*Germany 1929. Dirs Robert Siodmak, Edgar Ulmer. With Erwin Splettstösser, Brigitte Borchert, Wolfgang von Waltershausen, Christl Ehlers. 89min. EST. Live piano accompaniment*

This magical blend of documentary and fiction transports us to a glorious summer Sunday in 1920s Berlin. Four young people enjoy a lakeside picnic, but sexual rivalry soon lends an edge to their flirtations. A revolutionary experiment in realism using non-actors, it was a surprise early hit for Siodmak and his collaborators, who included future star directors Fred Zinnemann and Billy Wilder.

**TUE 31 MAR 20:30 NFT3**

**THU 2 APR 18:10 NFT3**

**Abschied Farewell**

*Germany 1930. Dir Robert Siodmak. With Brigitte Horney, Aribert Mog, Erwin Bootz. 80min. EST*

Siodmak's first full-length feature for production company Ufa, co-written by Emeric Pressburger, centres on the strained relationship of a young couple in a Berlin boarding house presided over by a spiteful, gossipy

landlady. Building on the realism of *People on Sunday*, Siodmak brilliantly exploits the new medium of sound to create a claustrophobic world where walls have ears and pain is rarely private

**WED 1 APR 20:40 NFT2**

**SAT 4 APR 18:20 NFT2**

**Inquest** Voruntersuchung

*Germany 1931. Dir Robert Siodmak. With Albert Bassermann, Gustav Fröhlich, Hans Brausewetter. 95min. 35mm. EST*

This atmospheric, Berlin-set crime film depicts the nightmarish plight of an eminent old judge (Albert Bassermann) whose son appears to have murdered a prostitute. The interplay of light and shadow conjures a sense of unease, as does the startling alternation of silence and sound. Bassermann, the German star who would later work with Hitchcock, is quietly compelling as the anguished father.

**TUE 7 APR 18:20 NFT2**

**WED 8 APR 21:00 NFT2**

**The Burning Secret** Brennendes Geheimnis

*Germany 1933. Dir Robert Siodmak. With Willi Forst, Hilde Wagener, Alfred Abel. 87min. 35mm. EST*

Adapted from Stefan Zweig's novella about the impact of a young mother's adulterous affair on her innocent but observant child, Siodmak's last film in pre-war Germany was condemned in the Nazi press as 'detrimental to family values' and threatened with a ban. Other critics were more open-minded, with Lotte Eisner full of praise for the director's subtle, understated approach.

**FRI 10 APR 20:50 NFT2**

**SUN 12 APR 16:00 NFT2**

**Hatred** Mollenard

*France 1938. Dir Robert Siodmak. With Harry Baur, Albert Préjean, Gabrielle Dorziat, Marcel Dalio. 105min. 35mm. EST*

Captain Mollenard (the extraordinary Harry Baur) is an adventurer, a man of huge sensual appetites whose greatest fear is that he will be forced to return home to the wife he loathes. Shot by Eugen Schüfftan, this is perhaps the greatest work of Siodmak's French exile, wonderfully evoking both the glamour of Shanghai and the stifling atmosphere of provincial Dunkirk.

**MON 13 APR 20:40 NFT2**

**SUN 19 APR 18:10 NFT2**

**Pièges** Snares + intro by Alastair Philips, Associate Professor in Film Studies, University of Warwick\*

*France 1939. Dir Robert Siodmak. With Maurice Chevalier, Marie Déa, Pierre Renoir. 111min. 35mm. EST. PG*

Siodmak's last European film before emigrating to the US anticipates the great noir thrillers to come. A seductive young woman sets out to entrap a murderer who attracts his victims by placing lonely hearts ads. Some sinister types emerge from the shadows, but which is the killer? Erich von Stroheim's turn as a creepy dress designer is one to relish.

**FRI 17 APR 18:10 NFT2\***

**THU 23 APR 20:40 NFT2**

**Son of Dracula**

*USA 1943. Dir Robert Siodmak. With Lon Chaney Jr, J Edward Bromberg, Robert Paige. 80min. 35mm. PG*

A stylish, highly enjoyable third film in Universal's *Dracula* series, with Chaney as the Count (ie not his son!) turning up in the American Deep South under the bizarre name of Alucard and setting about seducing a belle interested in the supernatural. Though the script is a little creaky, Siodmak ensures the proceedings are pleasingly atmospheric

**SAT 18 APR 20:45 NFT2**

**SAT 25 APR 16:00 NFT2**

**Cobra Woman**

*USA 1944. Dir Robert Siodmak. With Maria Montez, Jon Hall, Sabu, Lon Chaney. 71min. 35mm. PG*

A Kenneth Anger favourite, this lurid South Seas suspense saga about death and desire on an island populated by cobra-worshippers and ruled by the sublimely sinful Naja (Montez in one of two roles) has become

established as a classic of camp melodrama. It may be nonsense, but with its hothouse emotions and suggestive snake dances, it's great fun.

**TUE 21 APR 18:10 NFT3**

**WED 22 APR 20:45 NFT3**

#### **Phantom Lady**

*USA 1944. Dir Robert Siodmak. With Ella Raines, Franchot Tone, Alan Curtis. 87min. 35mm. PG*

Siodmak hit his Hollywood stride with this noir mystery in which a secretary (Raines, excellent in the first of four roles for the director) turns amateur sleuth to prevent her boss' execution for his wife's murder. As she searches for a missing – or non-existent? – woman who might furnish his alibi, Siodmak creates a shadowy world where nothing is as it seems.

**SUN 26 APR 15:00 NFT1**

**WED 29 APR 20:45 NFT1**

#### **Christmas Holiday**

*USA 1944. Dir Robert Siodmak. With Gene Kelly, Deanna Durbin, Gale Sondergaard. 93min. 35mm. PG*

Adapted by Herman Mankiewicz from Somerset Maugham, this dark thriller sees a New Orleans nightclub hostess (Durbin) menaced by her husband Robert (an impressive Kelly), who's handsome and wealthy but dangerously unstable. As ever, Siodmak's visual sense is acutely alert to subtle psychological undercurrents, while Sondergaard is dependably unsettling as Robert's mother.

**MON 27 APR 21:00 NFT2**

**THU 30 APR 18:20 NFT2**

#### **Cry of the City**

*USA 1948. Dir Robert Siodmak. With Richard Conte, Victor Mature, Shelley Winters. 95min. 12A*

A vivid depiction of life in New York's Little Italy, Siodmak's fast-paced crime thriller anticipates the films of Martin Scorsese. An electrifying variation on the theme of a hoodlum (Conte) and a cop (Mature) who knew one another as kids, it opens with the former seriously wounded in hospital but determined to escape the police watching over him; he needs to clear the name of his fiancée, who's suspected of a jewel robbery. While Conte, all insolent, menacing charm, is especially magnificent, and Mature invests the detective's pursuit with unsettling hints of obsession, the movie fields a glorious gallery of shady figures, from a lawyer oozing corruption to a memorably sadistic masseuse. The steely realism is enhanced by flourishes of noir stylisation. A classic awaiting rediscovery.

**Fri 17 – Thu 30 Apr (Seniors' Matinee + intro Fri 24 Apr 14:00 NFT2)**

#### **MAY:**

##### **The Suspect**

*USA 1944. With Charles Laughton, Ella Raines, Henry Daniell, Rosalind Ivan. 85min*

Laughton gives a beautifully nuanced performance as a fundamentally decent man driven to drastic measures when his shrewish wife turns jealous over his friendship with a young woman (Raines). Siodmak's atmospheric evocation of early Edwardian London, Paul Ivano's camerawork and the uniformly fine performances (including Daniell as the protagonist's memorably unpleasant neighbour) make for a superior psychological thriller.

**Time & Date TBC**

##### **The Strange Affair of Uncle Harry**

*USA 1945. With George Sanders, Ella Raines, Geraldine Fitzgerald, Sara Allgood. 80min*

Another gripping yet touching study in oppression and repressed passion, as Sanders' shy smalltown designer falls for a more sophisticated city girl (Raines), arousing the ire of his possessive, hypochondriac sister (Fitzgerald). Once again the acting by a strong cast and Ivano's cinematography ensure suspenseful drama, but it's Siodmak's attention to telling details that gives the film its subtlety and weight.

**Time & Date TBC**

##### **The Spiral Staircase**

*USA 1946. With Dorothy McGuire, George Brent, Ethel Barrymore. 83min*

Siodmak's highly influential foray into Gothic territory centres on a mute maidservant feared to be at risk when a peaceful town suffers, at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a series of murders of disabled or disfigured

women. Nick Musuraca's prowling camera ladles on the *chiaroscuro* atmosphere while enhancing the thematic motifs of voyeurism and entrapment. There's a fine supporting cast too.

**Time & Date TBC**

#### **The Killers**

*USA 1946. With Burt Lancaster, Ava Gardner, Edmond O'Brien. 103*

Adapted from a short story by Hemingway, this boasts a peak-form Lancaster as the Swede, drawn into a dangerous world of crime by his feelings for a fickle mobster's moll (Gardner). The opening scene – prelude to a series of flashbacks illustrating O'Brien's investigations into a murder – sets the bleak but seductive tone of *noir* fatalism to memorably brilliant effect.

**Time & Date TBC**

#### **The Dark Mirror**

*USA 1946. With Olivia de Havilland, Lew Ayres, Thomas Mitchell. 85min*

De Havilland excels in a dual role as identical twins, one of whom was seen leaving the scene of a murder. As Mitchell's detective and Ayres' psychiatrist try to establish which of the sisters' alibis is false, Siodmak overcomes a slightly contrived narrative conceit by sheer classy direction: if the script's Freudian slips are showing, the visuals and lead performance(s) carry the day.

**Time & Date TBC**

#### **Time Out of Mind**

*USA 1947. With Phyllis Calvert, Robert Hutton, Ella Raines, Leo G Carroll. 88min*

A rare screening for this enjoyably wild drama about a Maine family, with a fortune made from shipping, being thrown into crisis when the son tells his father he'd rather follow a career in music. A heady mix of pianistic success and drunken decadence ensues when he's packed off to Paris. The music is by Miklós Rózsa, Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco and an uncredited Daniele Amfitheatrof.

**Time & Date TBC**

#### **Criss Cross**

*USA 1949. With Burt Lancaster, Yvonne De Carlo, Dan Duryea. 88min*

Remade by Soderbergh as *The Underneath*, this supremely seedy tale of obsession and betrayal features Lancaster (again) as the fall guy, an armoured-car payroll guard who tries to win back his ex-wife (De Carlo) by participating in a heist with the hoodlum (Duryea) she's taken up with. Taut pacing, visual precision, vivid characters and excellent LA locations make for a classic.

**Time & Date TBC**

#### **The Great Sinner**

*USA 1949. With Gregory Peck, Ava Gardner, Melvyn Douglas. 110min*

Inspired by *The Gambler* and scenes from other Dostoevsky novels, this stylish cautionary tale features Peck as a novelist whose fateful encounter with a beautiful young woman (Gardner) leads him to the casinos of Wiesbaden – and a decline into compulsive gambling. Isherwood contributed to the script, while the cast also boasts Walter Huston, Ethel Barrymore and the incomparable Agnes Moorehead.

**Time & Date TBC**

#### **The File on Thelma Jordan**

*USA 1950. With Barbara Stanwyck, Wendell Corey, Paul Kelly. 100min*

Siodmak's final Hollywood film noir, a remarkably bleak study of the destruction wrought by femme fatale Stanwyck on the assistant DA (the dependably hangdog Corey) and the cop (Kelly) investigating the role she played in the death of her aunt during a jewel robbery. George Barnes' superb camerawork and some admirably terse dialogue enhance the dark mood of fatalistic despair.

**Time & Date TBC**

#### **The Crimson Pirate**

*US 1952. With Burt Lancaster, Nick Cravat, Eva Bartok. 105min*

Altogether lighter in tone, this marvellously enjoyable period swashbuckler stars Lancaster and his circus-partner Cravat as 18<sup>th</sup>-century pirates of the Caribbean caught up in a rebellion against a tyrant. Colourful

adventure, rousing action scenes and tongue-in-cheek humour are perfectly balanced, while the leads' dazzling, seemingly effortless and extraordinarily graceful acrobatic stunts are a joy to behold.

**Time & Date TBC**

**The Devil Strikes at Night** Nachts, wenn der Teufel kam

*W Germany 1957. With Claus Holm, Mario Adorf, Hannes Messemer. 105min. EST.*

Based on real events, Siodmak's chilling exposé of Nazi corruption is remarkably frank for a German film of the period. A serial killer is terrorising war-time Hamburg, but the course of justice is perverted by sinister self-interest. Who – in this warped society – can remain untainted? Watch out for the eerie pre-credits sequence and a satirical scene in a swastika-bedecked girls' school.

**Time & Date TBC**

**The Rough and the Smooth**

*GB 1959. With Nadja Tiller, Tony Britton, William Bendix. 99min*

A rare outing for a British film made shortly after Siodmak worked on the ATV series *OSS*. From a novel by Robin ('The Servant') Maugham, it's a dark, almost claustrophobic drama about an archaeologist abandoning his relatively strait-laced British fiancée for a more overtly sexual German woman. Siodmak navigates the psychological undercurrents with sensitivity and flair; the expressive sets are by Ken Adam.

**Time & Date TBC**

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**\*\*\* PICTURE DESK \*\*\***

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