A COMMON LANGUAGE

American Expatriate Directors in British Noir

By Imogen Sara Smith
Special to the *Sentinel*

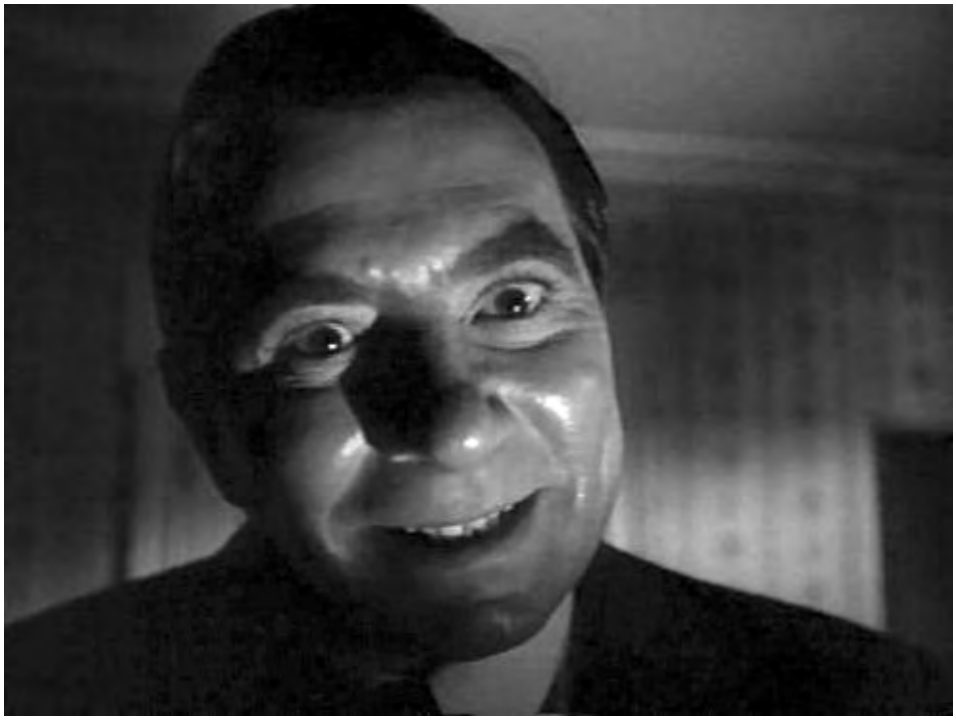
FILM NOIR owes much to exiles, those connoisseurs of alienation and displacement. In Hollywood, noir was fed by the infusion of refugees from Nazi Germany, who brought with them the expressionist techniques and dark, unsavory world-view of Weimar cinema, now as *verboten* in their homeland as their Jewish blood.

While no such flood of foreign talent fed British noir, a small cadre of American directors and actors blacklisted during the anti-communist witch-hunt of the 1950s took refuge in England. Jules Dassin, Edward Dmytryk, Cy Endfield and Joseph Losey had already directed noir films in America, where left-wing filmmakers often used crime movies to attack the corrosive effects of capitalism. Dassin soon moved on, but the other three stayed in Britain. Being driven out of their own countries because of their political beliefs—especially amid an atmosphere of betrayal, paranoia and surveillance—was unlikely to brighten their outlook.

Their outsiders' perspective, their sensitivity to class, and their personal experiences of dislocation were well suited to a time of cultural and social upheaval. In the aftermath of the war, the British struggled through a decade of rationing and austerity; they saw their Empire dissolve and the world re-orient itself around the economic, political and cultural might of America; at home the Labour Party under Clement Attlee radically reshaped the social landscape with soak-the-rich taxes, the nationalization of major industries, and the development of the "cradle-to-grave" welfare state. At the end of the 1950s, a cycle of plays and movies dubbed "kitchen sink realism" revealed the anger and squalor of the working classes, and were met with shock and acclaim. In fact, British cinema had been offering grim, unvarnished portraits of lower class life since the late 1930s under the cover of crime thrillers, which mirrored the success of American noir in smuggling subversive views into mainstream entertainment.

The generation that grew up during and just after the war found their identity in American rock and roll (an up-from-the-bottom art form) and styles copied from Hollywood movies—Marlon Brando's motorcycle jacket, Tony Curtis's hair. When four lads from Liverpool became the Beatles, the despised "scouse" accent that a generation earlier would have assigned them to lives as tram-drivers or dock-workers became the voice of England to the rest of the world. The exuberance of rock music and the groovy excesses of "Swinging London" were a revolt against postwar austerity. The gritty crime dramas of the 1950s and the short-lived "kitchen sink" movement gave way to lighter, escapist films like the James Bond series.

"About once in each century," Neal Ascherson writes, "the British allow themselves to hope." They briefly imitate the optimism of their cousins across the pond; the belief in transformation and progress. But for the people "described as the only nation to feel Schadenfreude about themselves," fatalism and defensive, deprecatory humor can never be much further off than the next rain shower. For some Hollywood directors who had channeled their skeptical, pessimistic views into noir films, and been branded "un-American," Britain was not only a refuge, but a country that spoke their language.



Robert Newton in *Obsession*

I. "Thanks, Pal": Obsession and the Anglo-American war of nerves

Four English gentlemen lounge over coffee and whiskey in the cozy mausoleum of their club, deploring the problems of the day. The empire is being neglected; Britain can no longer feed herself; they're living off American dollars. "We've only got to pick up a newspaper and what do we read about? Americans!" one fulminates, seeing a headline reporting the disappearance of a U.S. officer stationed in London. One of the men in the club, Dr. Clive Riordan (Robert Newton), knows the answer to the mystery, but he stays silent.

The missing person is a light-hearted young soldier named Bill Kronin (Phil Brown), who was carrying on a flirtation with the doctor's gorgeous, shallow, incorrigibly unfaithful wife Storm (Sally Gray). Bill had the misfortune to be the last straw, the victim for whom Clive was waiting with an elaborately concocted plan. Nothing so crude as divorce or socking his rival on the nose; nothing so ineffectual as joining in the bitter complaints about G.I.'s "overpaid, oversexed and over here," or repeating the popular joke about cheap women's underwear made during the war: "one Yank and they're off." No, he has merely devised the perfect murder.

Obsession (1948, aka *The Hidden Room*) was one of three films directed in England by Edward Dmytryk, who fled the States after being branded one of the Hollywood Ten. A son of Ukrainian immigrants, he had worked his way up from a studio messenger and earned his noir stripes directing *Murder, My Sweet* (1944) and *Crossfire* (1947) before his career was derailed by his brief membership in the Communist party and his refusal to cooperate with the House Un-American Activities Committee. (He returned to the U.S. in 1951, served a six month jail sentence, recanted, denounced communism, and went back to work.) Dmytryk's other two British films were just the fare HUAC feared: *So Well Remembered* (1947) is about a reformer's attempt to alleviate poverty in a depressed Lancashire mill town, and *Give Us This Day* (1949, aka *Christ in Concrete*) follows the struggles of Italian immigrant laborers in New York. But *Obsession* is something else entirely: a witty, sophisticated thriller with a macabre, black-comic edge, and a sly riff on cold-fish Englishmen and their fondness for joking about murder.

Clive is tormented by his wife's infidelity, but not because he loves her; it's impossible to imagine this smugly detached man who plays with elaborate model train sets in his basement being goaded by romantic or sexual feelings. What he can't endure is the insult to his intelligence posed by her deceit. His revenge is

inspired by the need to demonstrate his superior cleverness; poor Bill Kronin is a hapless pawn in his impeccably sadistic scheme to punish his wife.

Clive comes up with the unique "insurance policy" of kidnapping Bill and holding him prisoner for months, waiting to see whether he will be suspected in the disappearance. Once he's in the clear, he can carry out the actual murder without increasing his chances of being caught. He's particularly pleased with the method he's devised for disposing of the body: a chemical compound that dissolves flesh and bone—without damaging plumbing! Stuffing a body in a trunk is, after all, "so old-fashioned; quite an English institution."

So, for months, the resourceful and good-humored American is chained up in a cellar under a deserted bomb site, turning into a gaunt, bearded, shivering wreck. The fresh and charming Brown, another blacklist exile, holds his own against Newton at his most diabolically mild. The doctor visits every day, bringing cold chicken and sandwiches, thermoses of martinis, and Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, as well as acid in hot-water bottles, with which he gradually fills a bathtub in preparation for the corpse.

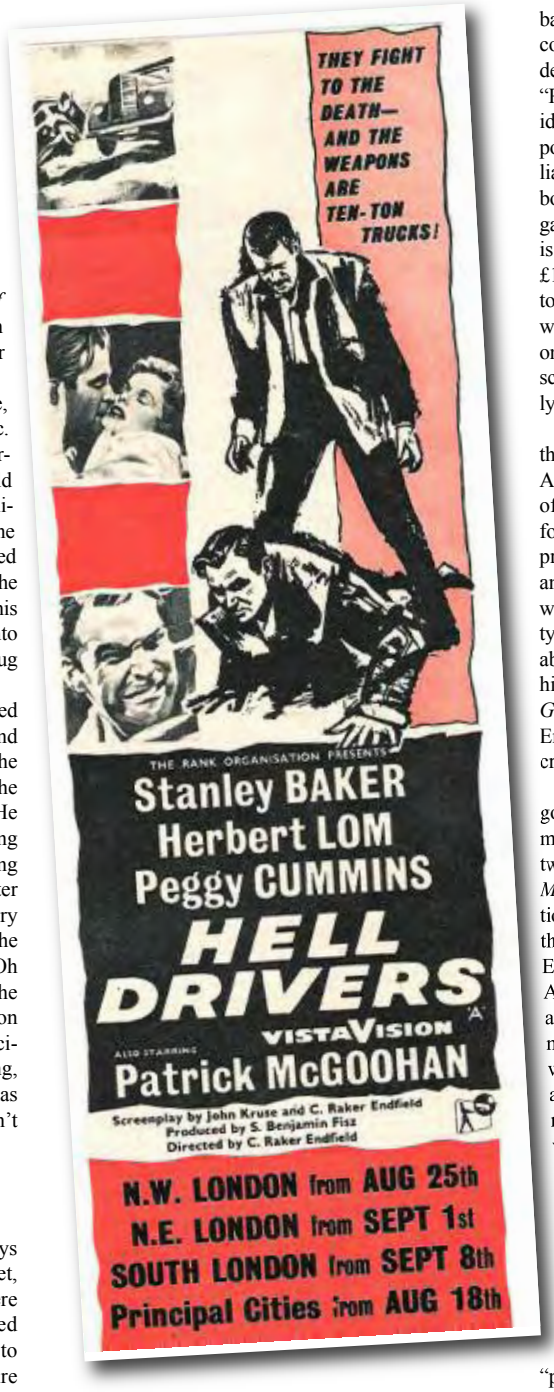
The two maintain a flawless gentlemanly charade, though on Bill's side the courtesy is bitterly sarcastic. On Clive's it seems sincere; he likes the man he's torturing. It's a war of nerves, the American says; a Cold War, a long wait under the shadow of potential annihilation. (Clive's club-mates, reading of the case in the newspaper, think the vanished Yank must be involved with "that nuclear contraption.") Bill can't match the impassivity of his English captor, but he never loses his spirit; after Storm's small, fluffy dog follows Clive into the cellar, Bill sets to work training him to pull the plug of the bath, draining all that precious acid.

Meanwhile a Scotland Yard superintendent named Finsbury turns up, claiming he's been assigned to find the lost dog. He's played by Naunton Wayne, the cricket-fixated Caldicott in *The Lady Vanishes*; the quintessential vague, stiff-lipped upper-class twit. He gives Clive a dose of his own medicine by appearing even more maddeningly calm and polite, maintaining the demeanor of a frozen mackerel. In the end, after Bill has been rescued in the nick of time, Finsbury comes to Riordan's club to arrest him. "What's the penalty for a near-miss?" Clive asks casually. "Oh well, at least they won't chain you up, you know," the superintendent replies, an understated condemnation of his appalling cruelty. Clive is caught, not coincidentally, after he gives himself away by saying, "Thanks, pal" to Finsbury—an expression he has picked up from Bill. Even the purest Englishman isn't immune to creeping Americanization.

II. Angry Young Men: *Hell Drivers* and the rise of the working class

The beleaguered British film industry was always looking for ways to break into the American market, since box office returns from England alone were insufficient to turn a profit. Studios imported American movie stars, usually of the second rank, to headline British casts, and they were willing to hire blacklisted directors, though they had to work under assumed names so that their films could be distributed in the U.S. British studios also attempted to imitate the success of American crime dramas, which could be made on a low budget. Taken to a bizarre extreme, this effort produced *No Orchids for Miss Blandish* (1948), a gangster movie set in a very unconvincing New York, with a weary Jack La Rue leading a gang of Brits trying hard to sound like American tough guys. What it lacked in authenticity the film made up for with then-shocking levels of violence and hints of sexual perversion (the story was loosely inspired by Faulkner's *Sanctuary*, filmed in 1933 as *The Story of Temple Drake*, starring La Rue as the rapist), and it was met by disgust and outrage in the press. *No Orchids* doesn't live up to its notoriety, but the love story between a kidnapper and his victim is surprisingly touching.

The Good Die Young (1954), by English director Lewis Gilbert, successfully blends its trans-Atlantic



cast, highlighting a natural rapport between expatriate Americans and the British working class, as both are preyed upon by a malevolent aristocrat. In a pub aptly called the Four in Hand, the four strangers meet, united only by their desperate need for money. Three of them are good men plagued by selfish parasites: one needs to save his wife from her clinging mother; one is trying to salvage his marriage to a vain, self-absorbed minor movie star; and one has lost his life's savings to his wife's wastrel brother. The fourth, a disinherited Earl's son married to a wealthy older woman who has finally sickened of his sponging and philandering, talks them into robbing the post office on a night when sacks of old money are brought in to be exchanged. In its focus on a heist, with the trappings of a stolen car and a suitcase full of guns, the film borrows liberally from American noir, even down to the omniscient narrator and a car rolling through dark city streets under the credits.

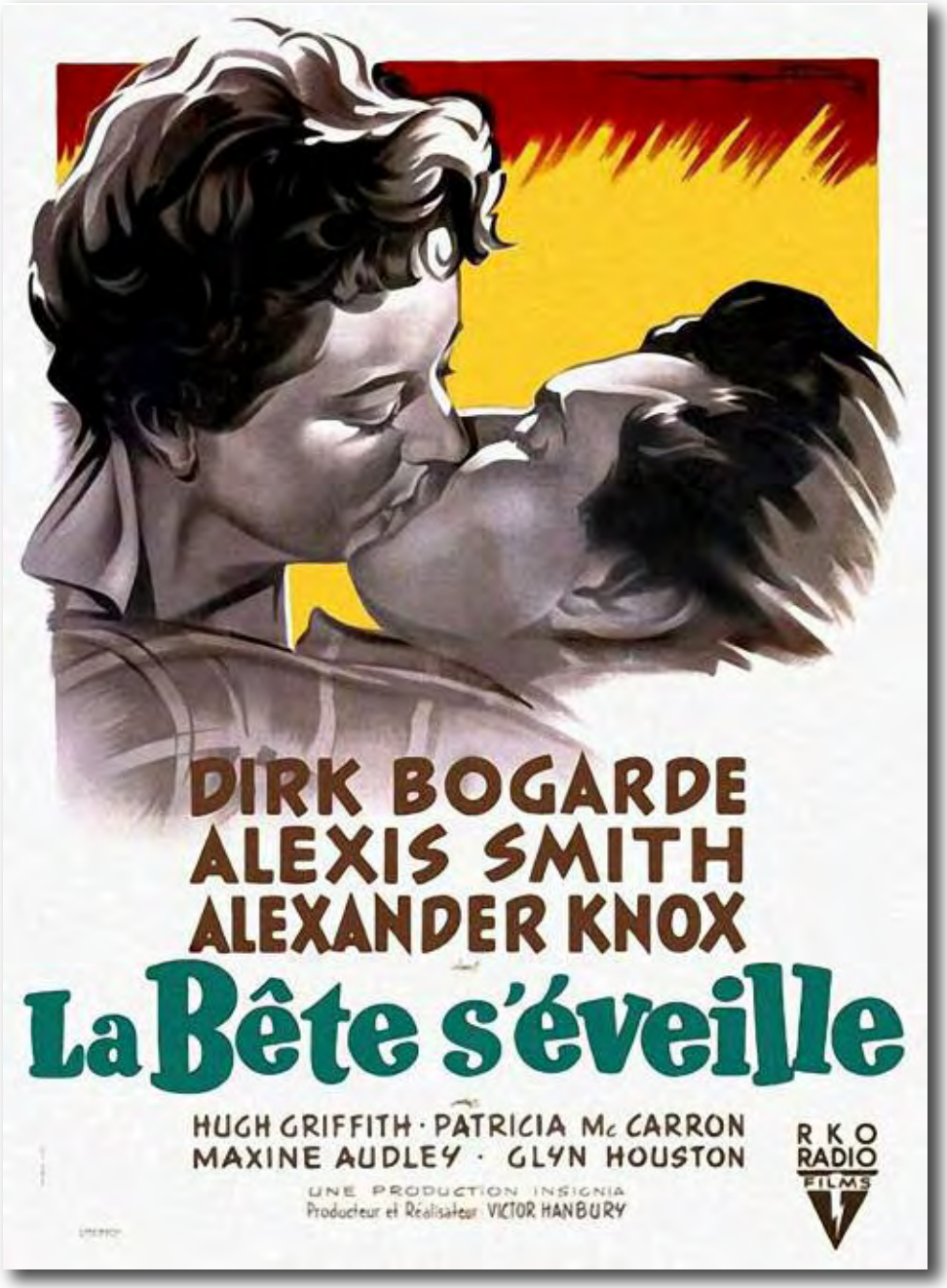
But while Joe (Richard Basehart) and Eddie (John Ireland) are archetypal ordinary guys who make one bad decision, the fate of the two Englishmen is less contingent on their individual circumstances than determined by their place in a rigid class system. Miles "Rave" Ravenscourt (Laurence Harvey) is handsome, idle and narcissistic; his wife paints him as an idealized polo-playing gentleman, but he's really a sociopathic liar and killer. Mike (Stanley Baker) is a washed-up boxer well aware of the exploitative nature of the fight game; after a lifetime of being pounded in the ring, he is determined to bring his savings up to a meager £1,000 and fights with a broken hand, which he loses to gangrene. He quietly absorbs injuries and injustice; when he learns that his wife has wasted all his money on bail for her brother, leaving him with nothing but scars to show for his career, his fury gutters out quickly, leaving him bitter but resigned.

His role in *The Good Die Young* was a breakthrough for Welsh-born Stanley Baker, who like many American movie stars found acting not only a path out of poverty, and a life in the coal mines, but a vehicle for the anger and truculence of a proud youth with no prospects. With features that look hewn out of rock, an imposing brow and jaw, and an air of (in Losey's words) "arrogance and machismo," Baker was first typecast as a heavy and largely restricted to films about warfare (ancient and modern). Two years after his understated but devastating performance in *The Good Die Young*, he made his first film with Cy Endfield, *A Child in the House* (1956), playing a crook with a loyal and adoring young daughter.

Endfield cut his teeth in progressive theater and got his entrée to Hollywood when his sideline as a magician caught the eye of Orson Welles. He directed two noirs, *Underworld Story* (1950) and *Try and Get Me* (1951, aka *The Sound of Fury*): scathing depictions of corruption in the press and the mentality of the lynch mob. Blacklisted by HUAC, he came to England in 1953 and directed crime movies starring American actors Arthur Kennedy, Sam Wanamaker and—ironically—Lloyd Bridges, a "friendly witness." But his strongest contribution to British noir was cast entirely with local talent; he both co-wrote and directed *Hell Drivers* (1957), a gritty, unsentimental but compassionate look at men and women working at a brutal, corrupt trucking outfit.

The grit in this case is literal. The drivers haul loads of gravel from one muddy pit to another through a countryside that's flat, soggy, bare and dismal. The film's *mise-en-scène* is all metal and rock, chain-link fences, clanking machinery, leather jackets, muddy boots. The rooming-house where the drivers live is a dark, cramped building with tacky flowered wallpaper. They eat in a cheap "pull-in" where they act like a gang of kids, hazing and bullying newcomers, teasing each other, showing off, toadying to their self-appointed leader.

Into this grim enclosed world comes Tom Yately (Stanley Baker), just out of jail and determined to go straight. It seems too easy for the applicant with a fake license and no references (who claims he's been "out of the country") to get hired by the mean, hard-ass manager Cartley (William Hartnell). Only later do we learn that Cartley and his foreman are padding the payroll, forcing the men to drive at unsafe speeds in order to do the work of five phantom employees. They want men



American actors Alexis Smith and Alexander Knox feared repercussions in the U.S. from working with suspected Communist Joseph Losey; hence, his use of the pseudonym Victor Hanbury on 1954's *The Sleeping Tiger*

like Tom, "drifters who let themselves be hustled for money," and who won't be in a position to make trouble. Tom seems to recognize this at his job interview, when he asks bluntly, "You're looking for a sucker, aren't you?"

Tom is reserved and wary, constantly suppressing his urge to fight back. This only makes him unpopular with the other drivers; when he refuses to join in a brawl between the truckers and townsfolk at a dance, they turn on him violently, dubbing him "yellow-belly." When Tom visits his mother and brother, their reception opens a window into his former life; we never learn what he went to jail for, but his brother is a cripple because of an accident he caused. The brother still looks up to him, but his mother refuses to forget the past, telling Tom, "Nothing you ever touched was clean...I wish you were still inside." Desperate to "make the grade" for once, he throws himself into the contest to drive the most loads in a day, which is always won by Red, the foreman, whose need to be top man amounts to a psychosis. The men's lumbering trucks embody their egos; all the frantic horn-honking and side-swiping is a cave-man battle for dominance among men who have no importance in the larger society.

Only one of the drivers is immune to the childish competition, an Italian everyone calls Gino (Herbert Lom) who came to Britain as a prisoner of war and—for reasons hard to fathom in this movie—liked it so much he stayed. He's mature, kind and philosophical, and he alone befriends Tom. He's in love with Lucy (Peggy Cummins), a flirtatious blonde poured into a pair of tight jeans, who works as Cartley's secretary and takes an instant fancy to Tom. Gino understands that Lucy needs to be a bombshell because she's lonely and insecure, but he doesn't seem able to realize that she only dates him out of pity. Showing up at the dance in a skintight dress and shamelessly vamping the men, she's pathetic in her need for attention. Tom fends off her advances, refusing to betray his friend, treating her contemptuously because he really wants her. When he finally breaks down and lunges to kiss Lucy's creamy white throat, it's with a face bruised and cut after a savage fight with Red. The moment is both startlingly sexy and poignant: it's the only contact he ever has with anything soft or beautiful.

Everyone is "fighting for something all the time," as Gino observes. Even if they're only quarrelling over the bathroom in their lodging-house, the men punch and claw and kick as though fighting for their lives. (Ma, the steel-corseted landlady, handles them like fractious schoolboys.) The film lays bare the exploitation of labor in inhuman conditions, without romanticizing the laborers. Trucking films form a punchy sub-genre of noir because the road is such a good symbol of the tortuous path to success. The driving sequences in *Hell Drivers* showcase Baker's intense, falcon-like gaze, unwavering yet alert to peril. "Suppose we meet something?" he asks his instructor as they careen along a narrow, wet, winding road on the trial run. "Suppose we don't?" the man shrugs: "Look on the bright side."

III. Waking the Tigers: Joseph Losey and the last noir years

Stanley Baker made four films with Joseph Losey, a sequence that took both star and director from post-war austerity to the baroque indulgence of the 1960's. Born in La Crosse, Wisconsin, where he grew up in a snobbish small-town milieu and attended the same high school as Nicholas Ray, Losey said that being blacklisted was a blessing in disguise, since it led to his career in Europe, where he felt freer from commercial constraints. But when he arrived in England in 1953 he was at low ebb, fearing his career was over and suffering psychosomatic physical attacks as a result of his persecution.

He had a low opinion of the British films he made in the 1950's, when he had no control over his projects and resented being typecast as a director of crime melodramas. Nonetheless, he stamped these films with his idiosyncratic style and deftly handled the volatile element of class, which sparks many of the stories. The scripts he was given reflect the features Losey had made in America, the last four of which were all noir.

Bitter, incisive pictures like *The Prowler* and *M* now have their champions—to some, they're his best work—but Losey was not among them. He divided his career between his early "message movies" and the "pictures of provocation" that began with the critically savaged *Eva* (starring Baker and Jeanne Moreau) in 1962. Though he called himself a "romantic Marxist," Losey was never inspired by social or political issues so much as by how class intertwines with sexual conflicts, manipulative and opportunistic relationships, and the ambition, corruption, and hypocrisy of individuals.

The script for *The Sleeping Tiger* (1954), Losey's first English feature, manages to be both improbable and pat, but the film, like the fascinating intruder who drives the plot, is at once ferocious and smoothly insinuating. A young hoodlum attempts to mug a distinguished psychiatrist in a dark street; by the simple expedient of twisting the thug's arm, the doctor overpowers him. Instead of turning him in to the police, Dr. Esmond (Alexander Knox) takes the boy into his home for six months as an experiment in rehabilitation. Frank Clemmons (Dirk Bogarde) keeps sneaking out to commit more robberies, knowing the doctor will defend him to the police; he sadistically bullies the Esmonds' maid, causing her to quit, and he spars with and then seduces the doctor's American wife Glenda (Alexis Smith). Despite all the evidence, the shrink sticks to his enlightened liberal view that the boy is merely the victim of a bad childhood, and that there is something in him worth saving.

This seems hopelessly naïve—but it turns out he's right, as in a sudden breakthrough he gets Frank to admit that he hated his father, who robbed and beat him. After this the vicious roughneck becomes a good son

Micheline Presle and Stanley Baker in Losey's *Blind Date* (aka *Chance Meeting*)

who bonds with his surrogate father on happy fishing trips, leaving the frustrated wife home filing her nails. The doctor has already warned that "all of us are capable of anything with the right provocation. Inside everyone there's a sleeping tiger." Make that *tigress*, as Glenda, in a series of predictable plot twists, accuses Frank of rape when he announces his intention to leave her, then deliberately smashes her car into a billboard.

That this billboard bears a large image of a snarling tiger seems a laughable bit of overkill, but for a second before she swerves the car Alexis Smith has a look of savage intoxication on her face that jolts the film from its melodramatic rut. This keeps happening: the film's dark, unsettling energy burns away the script's attempt to explain and contain it. The ambiguous and disturbing first half is let down by the conventional second half. Up until the big Freudian revelation, Bogarde is hard to pin down. He's not a working-class tough: his accent is refined, and his compulsive criminality is a personal rebellion, not an economic expedient. Installed in the doctor's mock-Tudor suburban villa, he's proud, rude and unimpressed. His treatment of the maid, who does have a lower class accent, and who vigorously disapproves of having a thief in the house, is violently and inexplicably nasty. He trips her while she's carrying a tray, insults and orders her around, and pours ink on her clothes when she has packed to leave.

The doctor (named Clive, like Robert Newton in *Obsession*, and a similarly unflappable cold fish) would say he is merely taking out on others the cruel treatment he received. But Losey is more interested in the way Glenda is drawn to and excited by his brutality, even as she disapproves of it. Her character is neatly explained by Frank early on as an empty, hungry woman who only pretends to be satisfied. This seems to be borne out, as she loosens up in a sweaty Soho jazz club where multi-racial couples dance in an erotic frenzy. But Glenda's unappeasable rage is what seethes from the movie; provocation refuses to be tidily packaged by a message.

In *Time without Pity* (1957) the villain is a successful car manufacturer (Leo McKern), a self-made man with a north-country accent and a high-modern apartment full of huge, bullying artworks. He married a frosty upper-class woman for status and the pleasure of breaking her, but salves his frantic loneliness with pricy working girls, one of whom he kills in a rage. A young man she was dating is convicted of the killing and sentenced to die; the show of humane, civilized kindness in the machinery of capital punishment is chilling. The film's hero is the boy's alcoholic, literary father (Michael Redgrave), who is released from a sanatorium with just twenty-four hours to save his son, if he can resist drowning his sorrows instead. With its drably impersonal settings—airport, highways, racetracks—and tone of shrill hysteria breaking through cold masks of repression, the film mocks the English traditions of stiff upper lips and cozy murder mysteries.

Once *Blind Date* (a.k.a. *Chance Meeting*, 1959) calms down from its confusing, hyper-stylized opening, it begins to unpick a snarled knot of class prejudice and sexual manipulation. Stanley Baker employs a Welsh accent as the intelligent, dogged, unglamorous police inspector with a persistent head cold, who has a prickly relationship with his suave, Old Etonian colleagues. He's annoyed by the stubborn, excitable Dutch boy he finds in the murdered woman's apartment, but can't help feeling a tie to him. Jan (Hardy Kruger) is a proud, bohemian painter but also the son of a coal-miner from an industrial region he re-envisions in his somber paintings. He's been seduced by a chic, married Frenchwoman (Micheline Presle) who played on his loneliness, telling him they were "two strangers in a foreign land." She fed him a story about being tied to a drunken, abusive husband; but the apartment where he goes to meet her, and stumbles into the murder, looks like the lair of a high-rent tart. As is typical with Losey, the interior of this apartment—a gaudy rococo fantasia with a dolphin-headed bathroom sink—not only reveals the character of its occupant but becomes a character in the drama.

Jan's lover turns out to be the wife of a respected diplomat, Sir Howard Fenton; she chose the boy to be the patsy in her plot to murder her husband's mistress. Baker is led to the truth by his resentment of his colleagues' snobbish determination to protect Sir Howard at all costs, and because as the son of a chauffeur he knows the selfish entitlement of women like Lady Fenton. Despite her ultimate confession that she fell in love with her victim, the film has no warmth. Losey never made a movie about a conventional love affair; class envy, perverse games of power, and what he called "the particular destruction and anguish and waste of most sexual relations" supplied the energy instead.

The Criminal (1960) was the last of Losey's crime dramas. He dismissed the original script as a re-hash of Hollywood prison-movie cliches, but it was reworked by Alun Owen, a writer with a gift for the vernacular who later penned the screenplay for *A Hard Day's Night*. The result is a film uneasily torn between studio-dictated genre plotting with ample doses of sex and violence, and detached, atmospheric stylization. It alternates between extremes of asceticism and decadence, as Johnny Bannion (Stanley Baker, taut and steely despite an unflattering Hitler hairdo) moves between a stark brick prison, a magnificently vulgar bachelor-pad, and a bleak snow-mottled countryside.

In the dank, oppressive jail he maneuvers skillfully through a complex social hierarchy. Outside, he takes up with a random woman left over from a loud, hazy party in his flat, where lavish nudes are painted on every available surface. He's double-crossed by his associates in a race-track heist but refuses to reveal where he hid the loot, despite beatings and the kidnapping of his girlfriend. The film deliberately abandons the crisp, tight plotting of old Warner Brothers prison flicks; it's more like watching the drifting and collisions of an ice field. A mournful ballad haunts the brutal action, coolly sung by Cleo Laine: "*All my sadness / All my joy / Came from loving a thieving boy.*" Bannion is a successful operator but a perpetual odd man out, surrounded by people yet fundamentally alone.

The Criminal was overshadowed on its release by another film that came out the same day: *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, one of the taboo-breaking "kitchen sink" dramas that dropped the cover of crime or thriller plots to openly express the disaffection of young working class men who rejected the gentility and middle-class values that dominated British cultural life. But while the topical movies of the "angry young men" remain tethered to a particular cultural moment, *The Criminal*, though it places its characters in a treacherous no-man's-land of changing values, draws back to present a broader, bleaker panorama of the noir eternals: greed, betrayal, alienation. Bannion achieves his bitter triumph by dying before he gets to the stash of money, leaving his enemies to dig vainly for it in a vast, empty field of snow. ■