



## Racism in *Pool of London* and *Sapphire*

Ray Banks



### “Passenger Opportunity to United Kingdom”

Tuesday 22<sup>nd</sup> June, 1948. The HMT *Empire Windrush*—once a German cruise ship named *Monte Rosa*, now a prize of the Second World War—docked at Tilbury with just under 500 passengers aboard. Britain was still reeling from the war, and The British Nationality Act of 1948 aimed to fill the gaps in the labour market with Commonwealth citizens—mostly from the Caribbean—some of whom had fought for the “mother country” only three years before. For many, the £28 ticket was the promise of a new, better life.

# Windrush Noir

Over at Ealing Studios, screenwriters T. E. B. Clarke and John Eldridge had been assigned *Pool of London*, a slice-of-life drama set on that dingy stretch of the Thames between London Bridge and Cuckold’s Point. The Pool was once the centre of the merchant shipping trade and a hive of criminality—the very first police force was formed at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century as a direct response to the theft and fraud in the Pool—but by the beginning of the 1950s, the docks were already in decline. It would be the perfect setting for the kind of gritty, realist drama Michael Balcon had pioneered in his tenure as head of the studio.





Pat (Susan Shaw) and Johnny (Earl Cameron) are *Pool of London's* controversial-yet-chaste lovers

But Clarke had other ideas. Much to Balcon's chagrin, he turned Eldridge's outline into a heist comedy about a Bank of England drone who relieves his employer of a fortune in gold bullion. Balcon assigned the new script—now titled *The Lavender Hill Mob*—to Charles Crichton, and reassigned *Pool of London* to Jack Whittingham, who had just written the crime melodrama *Cage of Gold* for Basil Dearden and Michael Relph. Dearden and Relph were already familiar with the setting—the Pool had featured in a key scene in their first film as director-producer team, *The Bells Go Down* (1943)—and they were keen to revisit the documentary techniques that had informed their biggest hit to date, the police drama *The Blue Lamp* (1950). *Pool of London* would be an opportunity to show the underbelly of London, racial tensions and all.

**“You wonder why one man is born white and another isn’t. And what about God? What colour is He?”**

Set over a weekend's shore leave, *Pool of London* (1951) follows Dan MacDonald (Bonar Colleano), merchant seaman and petty smuggler, who becomes embroiled in a daring dia-

mond heist orchestrated by vaudeville tumbler Charlie Vernon (Max Adrian). Dan's job is to smuggle the loot back to a Rotterdam fence, but when the job goes fatally wrong, Dan finds himself wanted by the police. Meanwhile, Dan's Jamaican shipmate Johnny Lambert (Earl Cameron) spends his weekend enjoying a fledgling, if ultimately doomed, romance with ticket taker Pat (Susan Shaw). Dan, aware that he can't board the ship without being searched, entrusts the diamonds to Johnny, who then becomes guilty by association. When Dan eventually realises that he can't let his best friend take the rap, he divests Johnny of the loot moments before the ship leaves and turns himself in to the waiting police.

*Pool of London* is in many ways the quintessential Ealing film. As Charles Barr says in his 1980 book, *Ealing Studios*: “If only one film could be preserved for posterity, to illustrate the essence of Ealing from the time before decadence set in, [*Pool of London*] would be a good choice, with its clear-cut embodiment of Ealing attitudes to women, violence, social responsibility and cinematic form.” While the diamond robbery provides the main narrative thrust of the film, *Pool of London* is no straight heist movie—its 85-minute run-time manages to pack in the heist plot,



*Pool of London* director of photography Gordon Dines made excellent use of London's bombsite locations



**The kindness of strangers:** Johnny Lambert (Earl Cameron in flashy tie) goes all in on a sucker drunk in Ealing Studio's *Pool of London* (1951)

the occasional comic vignette featuring the usual Ealing band of chirpy rogues, a thread of documentary realism and—perhaps most importantly—British cinema's very first interracial love story.

Balcan was wary of the material. "Michael Balcan didn't want to touch on any kind of racial problem," said Earl Cameron in a recent interview. "They had to treat it very delicately." Cameron's casting was key. While there had been black stars in British cinema before—most notably Ernest Trimmingham and Paul Robeson in the 1920s—Bermuda-born Earl Cameron was the first *bona fide* black idol of the post-Windrush era, thanks in no small part to his sensitive screen presence. He was, in short, the perfect lead for this potentially incendiary on-screen affair.

Even so, Dearden and Relph were keen to minimise controversy. The studio had a reputation for its prudish attitude toward sex and a mawkish streak when it came to women—as Bryan Forbes once said, "Sex was buried with full military honours at Ealing." Consequently, *Pool of London*'s interracial romance is chaste bordering on platonic, but it is contrasted effectively with Dan's courtship of dock clerk Sally. While Pat and Johnny touch only once in the course of their week-end together—when Pat jostles Johnny to get his attention in a bus

queue—Dan manages to finagle his way into Sally's room before you can say "pink gin and pleasant conversation." This contrast not only highlights the sweet nature of Johnny and Pat's nascent relationship, but also infers its subversion in the context of London's—and by extension, Britain's—latent bigotry.

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Because how can a relationship like this thrive in such a terrible place? "You wonder perhaps why I never set foot in this accursed city," says James Robertson Justice's brandy-soaked Trotter. "Behold from afar it gleams like a jewel. But walk within the shadow of its walls and what do you find? Filth. Squalor. Misery." For Johnny, Trotter's words become a perilous reality. While Dan's story is one of moral compromise and atonement, Johnny's is pure noir. He is an outsider who sees the opportunity for a better life, only to have it denied him by a society that will never accept him as an equal. He spirals into drunken self-loathing, unwittingly endangered by the diamonds he's carrying, and only narrowly

avoids being arrested (and most likely hanged) for a murder he didn't commit. And lest we think the characterisation of the police as serious, fair-minded individuals might result in justice for Johnny, any hope of understanding is dashed by Sally's line to Dan: "If they wouldn't believe you, they'll never believe him." In this society, the





The company you keep: the philanderer (Leslie Phillips), the smuggler (Bonar Colleano), and the patsy (Earl Cameron)



Earl Cameron's Johnny contemplates the rubble of his romance, unaware he's a wanted man

law sees guilt and innocence in black and white.

Racism is a large part of shore life for Johnny and while any abuse is delivered by clearly unsympathetic characters—a jobsworth commissioner, Dan's dance-hall harpy of a girlfriend, the sweaty proprietor of an after-hours drinking den—Johnny's reaction to it (or lack thereof) betrays his beleaguered existence. He knows that any attempt to defend himself is fated to fail, and so he is bound to internalise his anguish and wander slump-shouldered through the streets of London, kicking at litter. His only other option—the sea—might offer the semblance of equality, but it also entrenches him further as an outsider and dooms his dreams of self-improvement.

Cameron enjoyed rave reviews for his performance in *Pool of London*, but the film was largely overlooked in what proved to be a banner year for Ealing. Both *The Lavender Hill Mob* and *The Man in the White Suit* premiered to glowing reviews, but the studio's biggest hit was the Kenya-set *Where No Vultures Fly*, in which Bob Payton (Anthony Steel) fights European poachers and their native henchmen to conserve African wildlife. It would appear that, for the moment at least, the British public were more comfortable with colonial fantasy than domestic realism.

But the empire was crumbling. The 1956 Suez Crisis spelled the end of Britain as a major world power. The national humiliation was palpable. And with national humiliation came nationalist rage. Mass immigration became political catnip for the right-wing. Sir Oswald Mosley, Blackshirt founder of the pre-war British Union of Fascists, targeted the Windrush generation in West London with street

corner meetings and set up shop in Kensington Park Road; the fascist Arnold Leese bequeathed his Notting Hill house to Colin Jordan, who used it as a base of operations for his newly established White Defence League. "Keep Britain White" appeared on walls and pamphlets. Gangs of working-class Teddy Boys attacked black families in the area. And then, in the summer of 1958, it all came to a head.

**"Mind your own business, coppers. Keep out of it.  
We'll settle these niggers our way.  
We'll murder the bastards."**



Friday 29<sup>th</sup> August, 1958. Latimer Road tube station. A young Swedish woman named Majbritt Morrison got into a heated argument with her Jamaican husband, Raymond. A white crowd gathered and clashed with a group of Raymond's West Indian friends. By the following night, a rumour had spread through the white community that a black man had raped a white girl. Mobs of 500 and more took to the streets, smashing windows and belting racist slurs. It wasn't until a group of mostly Jamaicans retaliated with Molotov cocktails that the white mob retreated and the police moved in to make arrests. Despite the violence, there were no deaths, but the Notting Hill Riots were a local and national event thanks to television, and became a defining moment in post-war Britain. And while the disturbance was just as much a product of grinding poverty as it was overt racism, it was the latter that shouted loudest. Britain had once united with



its colonies to fight the fascist menace; now it was growing its own. The “mother country” was a myth.

By 1958, Ealing Studios was a studio in name only—the facilities had been sold to the BBC in 1955, and MGM had effectively taken over production duties at Borehamwood. The Free Cinema movement of the mid-1950s made Ealing’s drama-documentaries seem quaint by comparison, and what Kenneth Tynan once called Ealing’s “patriotic realism” would be downright unfashionable in the age of Angry Young Men and the burgeoning British New Wave. Though Dearden and Relph were involved with the last of Ealing’s output (Relph directed the sentimental Harry Secombe vehicle *Davy* with Dearden producing, and Dearden did uncredited work on Ealing’s only true noir movie *Nowhere to Go*), they had already moved over to Rank, where they had recently completed Britain’s gritty response to *The Blackboard Jungle*, the Liverpool-set juvenile delinquency drama *Violent Playground*. After the Notting Hill Riots, there was only one topic Dearden and Relph wanted to explore. “We plan to show this prejudice as the stupid and illogical thing it is,” they said in a production feature for *Kine Weekly* in December 1958. That production

would take a deep, disturbing dive into the fears of white Britain, this time masquerading as a whodunit.

**“Would you be pleased with a brass sovereign, Superintendent?”**

**If *Pool of London* whispered its criticism of Britain's bigotry, then *Sapphire* delivers its condemnation in a full-throated roar.**

*Sapphire* (1959) opens with the discovery of the eponymous young woman’s body on Hampstead Heath. She has been brutally stabbed to death. Superintendent Hazard (Nigel Patrick) and Inspector Learoyd (Michael Craig) first suspect *Sapphire*’s student boyfriend David (Paul Massie), but he has an alibi for the night in question. Further complications arise: the autopsy reveals that *Sapphire* was three months pregnant, and when her brother Dr. Robbins (Earl Cameron) arrives at the station, the police learn that *Sapphire* was mixed race, passing for white with her university friends by day and trawling the black jazz clubs at night.

This apparently promiscuous double life throws up another suspect in the form of Johnnie Fiddle (Harry Baird), her former dance partner. Johnnie’s subsequent flight from the law and his possession of what looks like the murder weapon would appear to confirm his





**Tulip's Club, where the lily skins and Johnnies jive to the beat of the bongos**

guilt, but Hazard's suspicions lie elsewhere, especially when David's alibi starts to crumble and it becomes clear that David's nice middle-class family are hiding a bloody secret.

If *Pool of London* whispered its criticism of Britain's bigotry, then *Sapphire* delivers its condemnation in a full-throated roar. Seven years later, racism is no longer confined to the unsympathetic underclass who populate the Pool, but has become an integral feature of an aspirational middle-class. Screenwriter Janet Green's previous work included the woman-in-peril crime dramas *Cast a Dark Shadow* (1955), based on her play *Murder Mistaken*, and *Eye-witness* (1956), as well as the police thrillers *Lost* (1956) and *The Long Arm* (1956), and she elegantly weaves the two genres together in *Sapphire* to explore and expose a white community's terror of miscegenation, first through the character of Sapphire herself, and then in the characterisation of the black male.

**"She wasn't any delicate flower, you know."**

Sapphire is barely seen and never speaks, and yet her presence haunts the film. She is the offspring of a white doctor and a black dancer—her parents a clear mix of respectable middle-class and exotic *other*—and represents the archetypal tragic mulatto, at once attractive to white men and doomed by her heritage. From her original status as victim, she swiftly becomes defined by her sexuality. Her murder is seen as a tragic (if somewhat inevitable) outcome of her apparent promiscuity, signalled by her red taffeta petticoat, her visits to jazz clubs, and her independence. A visit to the Tulip's Club confirms the bias—the "lily skin" girls frequenting the mostly black club appear as slaves to the "beat of the bongos." Most of the male clien-

tele go by the name of Johnnie (Johnnie Rags, Johnnie Tiger, Johnnie Fiddle) and so become a seething mass of sexual predation. It would be terrifying enough if they were strangers, but these men are sailors on shore leave; they are a permanent fixture of a settled community.

The racial violence in *Sapphire* is palpable. The police pursuit and apprehension of Johnnie Fiddle is notable for the problems it caused censors at the time. Dearden and Relph were instructed to cut scenes of Teddy Boys attacking a shop where Johnnie takes brief refuge—uncomfortably echoing recent events—and to lower the volume of the interrogation, which comes dangerously close to coercion, especially when the racist Learoyd takes the lead. An hour into the film, it's easy to believe that *Sapphire* could end with the hanging of an innocent man.

**"There's no assurance for me and my kind, Superintendent. I've been black for thirty-eight years. I know."**

Because even the innocent black male is a destructive force. His skin colour functions as deliberate provocation. Earl Cameron's Dr. Robbins—apparently made up to be "as dark as possible to get the contrast"—may be a respectable, educated member of the black middle-class, but his presence acts as a catalyst for prejudice wherever he goes. The most devastating example of this catalyst effect comes at the end of the film, where Robbins' handling of a doll prompts a hysterical reaction from the murderer. And it's here that the previous characterisation of the black community is revealed as canny misdirection.



**Deliberate provocation - Johnnie Fiddle (Harry Baird) and Sapphire (Yvonne Buckingham)**



***Sapphire* (1959) was an earnest attempt to challenge audience prejudice — "Oh David, whatever made you get mixed up with a coloured girl?" — and the middle-class terror of miscegenation (Shown here, left to right, English actors Yvonne Mitchell, Bernard Miles, Paul Massie)**

Just as Learoyd's simpleminded bigotry clouds his investigative skills, so the audience's assumption of black guilt is challenged when the murderer is revealed to be a doting mother of two, driven temporarily insane by the prospect of a "yellow brat" in the family. By placing the violence squarely within a (somewhat) relatable middle-class home, the film demands that the audience question their own bias. Although there are mitigating circumstances—David's sister Mildred is clearly unhinged, and Yvonne Mitchell's screen persona comes with the echoes of previous long-suffering roles—the message remains the same: unchecked prejudice leads to tragedy.

This message ultimately denies the audience the catharsis of resolution. The murderer might have been exposed and arrested, but the suspicion remains that at least one other member of the family knew about the crime, and may even have helped to dispose of the body. Order cannot therefore be restored while racism exists. And while Learoyd insists the mystery is solved, Hazard believes otherwise: "We didn't solve anything, Phil. We just picked up the pieces."

*Sapphire's* ambiguous approach won the film a BAFTA, but any glory was short-lived. In the following years, the rise of the British New Wave and the auteur theory further diminished Dearden and Relph's reputations; they were dismissed as exemplars of safe, bureaucratic British studio cinema, too squeamish to challenge the establishment of which they were a part. But without that establishment, there would be no British New Wave. Michael Balcon's preference for British social realism

over Hollywood tinsel established documentary verisimilitude as a key aesthetic of mainstream British cinema. He would also co-found Bryanston Films, which was instrumental in the release of *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960), *A Taste of Honey* (1961) and *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1962). For their part, Dearden and Relph remained committed to making realist drama that reflected experiences other than their own, and would continue to break ground with their exploration of criminalised homosexuality in *Victim* (1961) and the battle between medical ethics and religious fundamentalism in *Life for Ruth* (1962).

Horace Ové would eventually break through with *Pressure* (1975), widely regarded as Britain's first feature film to document the black experience. Until then, Dearden and Relph's *Pool of London* and *Sapphire* represented earnest, considered attempts to challenge audience prejudice. While some critics have accused Dearden and Relph of



**Gordon Heath as Paul Slade, the seething counterpart to Dr. Robbins in *Sapphire***

political timidity for presenting the problem rather than answering it, both films portray racism as a learned behaviour—most notably in *Sapphire*, where the children are prejudice-free—and both acknowledge that any answer to the "race problem" would be trite at best. Instead, they take a position echoed by Dr. Robbins: "I see all kinds of sickness in my practice, Superintendent. I've never yet seen a kind you can cure in a day." Ultimately, Dearden and Relph felt that their duty was to provide the diagnosis; it was up to society to treat itself. ■





As Netta Longdon, Darnell slyly schemes to seduce a smitten Laird Cregar in *Hangover Square*

the hands of the coy coquette. “All for you,” she coos in his ear. “There’s nothing I wouldn’t or that I couldn’t do.” With a sigh and a smile, the sly seductress soothes Bone’s bouts of jealousy, cuddling and cajoling him in a voice dripping with honey: “George, you’re cross with me. Make me comfortable.” Netta wraps her fingers around Bone’s heart and snaps it like a twig. Yet, who can blame the blustery Bone for his infatuation? Netta is irresistible.

The film is a showcase for Darnell’s dark, distinctive beauty. Fox’s ace lensman Joseph LaShelle lights her in subtle chiaroscuro, focusing on her flawless profile, bee-stung lips, and bedroom eyes. The camera loves her, and so do we. Netta’s a merciless minx. She coldly dumps

Bone when he’s no longer useful to her, sending him into a murderous rage. Her sweetness turns sour as she glares at the heartbroken composer with eyes of ice: “George, sometimes you can be such a bore.” Yet, Darnell makes Netta likeable, infusing her with a girlish glow, a radiance that barely conceals her desperation for attention and admiration. Darnell understood Netta’s neediness. Sharing a sad vulnerability, the actress and her character were kindred spirits.

*Hangover Square* holds a pivotal place in Darnell’s filmography. Her acclaimed performance prompted Zanuck to extend her Fox contract for another year. *Time* magazine labeled her “Hollywood’s most rousing portrayor of unhousebroken sex.” The flattery encour-







**Eyes on the prize:** In *Fallen Angel*, Darnell turns men into mush. Left and bottom right, with Dana Andrews; top right, with Bruce Cabot, Andrews and Charles Bickford

aged the actress. “They’ve never paid much attention to me before,” she asserted. “I’ve had to act, appear and behave older than I was ever since I came to pictures. The main difference is that now I’m old enough to know how.” Despite the plaudits, Darnell was always unimpressed with Hollywood’s *hauteur*. Her *Hangover Square* co-star Faye Marlowe described her as “a sweet, wonderful person. . . unpretentious.” During World War II, Darnell ignored the trappings of Hollywood. She preferred entertaining servicemen and volunteering for the American Red Cross.

In late January 1945, Darnell learned that her next studio assignment would be *Fallen Angel*, a moody, masterful noir helmed by the tyrannical Otto Preminger. She understandably detested the director. Still, under his supervision, she delivers a definitive performance as Stella, a stunning-but-cynical waitress working in a small-town diner (to prepare for the role, Darnell actually waited tables at the Fox commissary). Eric Stanton (Dana Andrews), a penniless itinerant, steps off a bus, steps into Pop’s Diner, and is immediately smitten by the sexy, sultry Stella. He’s not alone. Pop (Percy Kilbride) and local cop Mark Judd (Charles Bickford) are equally obsessed with her. Stanton wants Stella. Stella wants security, so Stanton woos and weds the town’s wealthy spinster June Mills (Alice Faye). After he grabs June’s fortune, he’ll grab Stella. The scheme goes south when Stella turns up murdered. Suspects are everywhere.

*Fallen Angel* belongs exclusively to Darnell. Her canny, carnal exterior doesn’t belie a bitter disillusionment with the cheap losers

who’ve used and abused her. Men slaver over her, but she repays their attention with an insouciant scowl, casually brushing back her hair as she languidly munches a hamburger and steals cash from under Pop’s nose. Her smoldering chemistry with Andrews lingers in the air, but she’s too smart to fall for his character’s sweet talk. Instead, she spits spitefulness at him: “You talk different, sure, but you drive just

like the rest. You got into town with one dollar in your pocket. You’re a fake.” Stanton’s sexual advances leave her cold. Stella may be flirty, but she’s not dirty: “That’s for kids, but not for me. Not anymore.” Darnell blends Stella’s icy cynicism with an innate sadness. She mournfully recalls her impoverished childhood: “My old man came from a long line of drunks. My mother ran a boarding house.” The despair is reflected in her eyes, in the way she stares at the bare walls of Pop’s Diner like a prisoner awaiting parole. She’s trapped in a tank town and she knows it.

Darnell’s smoky, sensual Stella was a cinematic sensation. Darryl Zanuck, still captivated by her, ordered Preminger and Joseph LaShelle to highlight Darnell’s distinctive eroti-

cism (bruising the ego of co-star Alice Faye, who promptly quit Fox and abandoned the film industry for 17 years). Dana Andrews hailed Darnell’s world-weary performance as “the best thing in the picture.” Even cranky critic Bosley Crowther was impressed, applauding the actress as “. . . beautiful and perfectly cast as the sultry and single-minded siren.” In his commentary on Fox’s *Fallen Angel* DVD, Eddie Muller notes that Darnell’s Stella became a paradigm for such noir vamps as Rita Hayworth, Joan Bennett, and Ava Gardner.

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Here opposite Rex Harrison, Darnell's exquisite profile is a joy to behold in Preston Sturges' *Unfaithfully Yours*

**FALLEN ANGEL** may have rejuvenated Darnell's career, but her personal life plummeted. Her unhappy marriage to "Pev" Marley resulted in renewed depression and a dangerous dependence on alcohol. She had a brief fling with Howard Hughes before returning to the Fox lot to replace a too-young Peggy Cummins in the florid romantic drama *Forever Amber* (1947). The movie was a box office hit, but Darnell hated the picture, hated her role in it, and hated her forced reunion with the despicable Otto Preminger. Darnell's despondency was compounded by her inability to bear children. In January 1948, she and Marley adopted a baby daughter, Lola. The joy of adoption was lost on Darnell, and her demanding work schedule made her ill-suited for motherhood. That same year, she co-starred in Preston Sturges' *Unfaithfully Yours*. Bejeweled and beautifully attired, Darnell never looked lovelier. It's understandable that her allure would drive jealous husband Rex Harrison to contemplate a series of methodically planned murders, each of which dissolves into mirthful mayhem.



Though the film depicts Darnell as little more than a gorgeous confection, Sturges captures her warmth, elegance, and charm in a role that veered radically from her work in *Fallen Angel*.

It took Joseph L. Mankiewicz to reinvigorate Darnell's range as a comedic and dramatic actress. In *A Letter to Three Wives* (1949), her character, Lora Mae Hollingsway, struts the sets with style and panache delivering Mankiewicz' scorching dialogue with near-demonic delight: "Anybody wants me can come and get me. This ain't a drive-in." When a radio advertiser offers to put her husband, a wealthy department store magnate (Paul Douglas), into millions of homes for half-an-hour a day, Lora Mae quips: "He doesn't spend that much time in his *own* home!" Brassy, sassy, and subtly salacious, Lora Mae is *Fallen Angel*'s Stella with a polished veneer—worldly, but not world-weary. She knows how to live large, but she hasn't forgotten her poverty-stricken roots. Darnell owns *Letter*, deftly juggling comedy and pathos, easily outshining a wholesome Jeanne Crain





Richard Widmark's abuse doesn't dampen Darnell's dignity in Joseph Mankiewicz' *No Way Out*



and a wry Ann Sothorn. The artistic rapport between Mankiewicz and Darnell was unmistakable (when the director needed to elicit a look of disgust from the actress, he astutely showed her a photo of Otto Preminger in a Nazi uniform). *Letter* vaulted Mankiewicz to Hollywood's top tier and rewarded Darnell with renewed confidence in her artistry. By the time the film wrapped, Mankiewicz and Darnell were wrapped in each other's arms. The actress and her director had fallen in love, and the two began a six-year relationship. Their romance was no secret, though Mankiewicz would only speak of Darnell as "a marvelous girl with very terrifying personal problems."

Mankiewicz' searing *No Way Out* (1950) is marked by Darnell's last great film performance. The movie is a bold hybrid of noir and social commentary, and Darnell provides the picture's heartbeat with her nuanced portrayal of Edie Johnson, a callous racist whose redemption becomes crucial to the film's finale. Edie's moral fiber is tested when she's caught between two polar opposites: her bigoted brother-in-law Ray Biddle (Richard Widmark), shot while attempting

a robbery, and Luther Brooks (Sidney Poitier), the doctor assigned to save Biddle's life. Neither actor is required to stretch much. Poitier's Brooks is a tightly wired picture of moral rectitude, ethically obligated

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to spare a vicious racist who spits slurs at him. Widmark's psychotic Biddle recalls *Kiss of Death*: he's Tommy Udo with a KKK card. *No Way Out* is truly Linda Darnell's film. Stripped of glamour, she plays Edie Johnson as slatternly and trashy. She's a perfect fit for the messy dump she lives in and the backwater town she comes from. Her face is lined with rancor. Yet, Darnell imbues Edie with pride and dignity. We see it in her poised body language, her confident walk, her defiant attitude. She tosses off Mankiewicz' corrosive dialogue with remarkable aplomb: "I'm a carhop at a drive-in. *Anything wrong with that?*" When Brooks tells her she's better than the bigots she grew up with, she retorts: "Yeah, I've come up in the world. I used to live in a sewer. Now I

live in a swamp." As Biddle begs Brooks to save him from bleeding to death, Edie spews venom: "Let it bleed," she tells Brooks. "Tear it some more. Let it bleed fast." It's Darnell who pushes and prods



Darnell literally holds the upper hand as she practices her golf swing with her first husband “Pev” Marley



Overloaded with OCD, a psychotic Jack Palance is about to consume a terrified Linda Darnell in *Second Chance*

the picture into noir’s outer edges. She digs deeply beyond her surface beauty, revealing a woman burdened by bitterness, bad men, and bad luck. “I’m a female bum in *No Way Out*,” she told reporters. “It’s a good role. I do everything—get drunk, go on a couple of crying jags, and get slapped by Richard Widmark.” She marveled at Mankiewicz’ writing and direction, calling *No Way Out* “the only good picture I ever made.” It also represented her last inspired performance, her last notable noir, and her final collaboration with Mankiewicz.

**DARNELL’S AFFAIR** with Mankiewicz continued, despite his refusal to leave his wife for her. Her fragile ego went into freefall. An acrimonious and expensive divorce from “Pev” Marley left her nearly broke. Two more luckless marriages followed. Forced to maintain a brutal work schedule, Darnell became an absentee mother to her daughter. “Mother and I were never really close until I was older,” recalled Lola Marley. “We missed all the fifteen years before, and I think that’s sad.” Her final forays into film noir were undistinguished and unworthy of her. In *Night Without Sleep* (1952), she effortlessly exudes charm, but the script spirals into mediocrity. In 1952, the persistent onslaught of television forced Fox to cancel Darnell’s contract, and her depression festered into bitterness. As a free agent, she allowed Howard Hughes to personally cast her in Republic’s *Second Chance* (1953), uniting her with noir alumni Robert Mitchum, Jack Palance, and director Rudolph Maté. Unfortunately, she’s given little to do but cuddle with Mitchum and cower from Palance. As film work dried up, Darnell moved into television and even formed a nightclub act—but alcoholism, depression, and bankruptcy continued to plague her. She was devastated when Joseph Mankiewicz selected Ava Gardner for the lead in 1954’s *The Barefoot Contessa*. Darnell was convinced that Mankiewicz had written the script for her. She severed all ties with him, but her self-esteem was destroyed. Failed marriages and a thieving business manager had drained her finances. Her exquisite face and figure became marred by alcohol and junk food. She was only 32 when

she mournfully reflected on her life and career: “I am told that when surface beauty is gone, the real woman emerges. My only regret will be that I could not have begun it earlier—that so many years have been ruined because I was considered beautiful.”

Near the end of both *Hangover Square* and *Anna and the King of Siam* (1946), Darnell’s characters are consumed by fire. These scenes were eerily prescient. Darnell had a lifelong fear of fire, and harbored a premonition that she would die in flames. On April 8, 1965, she was staying at the Glenview, Illinois, home of her best friend Jeanne Curtis. Around 5:00 a.m. on April 9, a fire quickly spread through the house. Darnell helped Curtis and her daughter escape through an upstairs window before inexplicably bolting downstairs toward the front door. Firefighters found her wrapped in a blanket in Curtis’ living room. Ninety per cent of her body was covered with second- and third-degree burns. One of Hollywood’s most beautiful faces was disfigured beyond recognition. Frantic efforts to save her life were unsuccessful. Darnell’s final words were whispered to a priest who asked her if she wanted to receive the last rites of the church: “You’re goddamn right I do!” She died on April 10, 1965 at the age of 41. The cause of the fire was never determined, but speculation is the fire started from a cigarette. That evening, before the fire, Darnell and Curtis had finished watching *Star Dust* on television.

Neither her tragic life nor her cruelly ironic death could erase Darnell’s legacy as an actress. In her best films, she etched indelible, incisive portraits of shrewd, tough women who knew that physical beauty was ephemeral, providing no protection against the hard knocks of everyday life. Linda Darnell left this world with one certainty: she was much more than just another pretty face. ■

*For more information on Darnell’s life and legacy, read Ronald L. Davis’ book *Hollywood Beauty: Linda Darnell and the American Dream* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).*





# FRANK FENTON'S HOLLYWOOD NOCTURNE

Alan K. Rode

*“Every so often in the annals of Hollywood critiques, there appears a fulsome treatise executed by some literary figure of the hour who has gone to Movieland to do a writing chore. Properly dined and cocktailed by the town’s past-masters in the art of adulation, the great man savors a robust stimulation of the ego; and invariably he writes a memoir.”*

—“The Hollywood Literary Life” by Frank Fenton

**F**rank Fenton never got around to writing a memoir. With a resume of over 60 feature films and television shows (and a profusion of uncredited and unproduced work) over a 40-year career, he was too busy for self-reflection.

Fenton was establishing himself as a proficient scenarist of B-films when the above-quoted article appeared in the November 1938 issue of *The American Mercury*. He would pen several other fictional short stories about the Hollywood movie scene whose posturing he mocked. Another Fenton piece, “Boy Meets Gorilla,” was published in

*Collier’s* the following month. His story of a Hamilton, Ohio, hick who is transformed into an acclaimed Hollywood writer-producer after saving a movie star from a gorilla on the set of a South Seas potboiler was a spot-on satire of Tinseltown pretentiousness.

Fenton’s professional outlook (along with a fondness for booze) resembled that of Robert Mitchum, for whom he wrote some of the actor’s most memorable dialogue. Like the laconic movie star, Fenton never hesitated to mock the suits that signed his checks—even as he cashed them.

Much of Fenton’s work has become overlooked, forgotten, or unavailable. Some of his best writings were uncredited script rewrites, extensive polish jobs, or original stories that were adapted by others. Fenton established an emblematic standard for cynical dialogue and innovative plotting in some of the best film noirs and Westerns, despite few people remembering who actually crafted the words. He is frequently confused with another Frank Fenton, a character actor who enjoyed an overlapping career in film and television.

Frank Edgington Fenton was born in Liverpool, England, on February 3, 1903. He arrived in America with his family at the age of three and was raised in the Ohio heartland. Despite erroneous claims on the internet (and a similar Ohio immigrant lineage), Fenton was not the brother of Leslie Fenton, a British actor who incurred the wrath of Jack L. Warner after he eloped with Ann Dvorak in 1932.





Writer Frank Fenton, 1903 - 1971



John Fante (left) and Frank Fenton — a pair of lifelong pals who shared an affinity for writing about Los Angeles

Fenton was American-bred, but he never abandoned his British roots. His son Mark Fenton remembered, “Dad never became an American citizen—he always carried a green card.” The younger Fenton said his father would “toast the Queen every evening with a glass of Cutty Sark.”

His father, John Fenton, was listed in the 1920 census as a shoe manufacturer. In addition to Frank and his two sisters, the Fenton household included a 36-year-old female servant and Fenton’s maternal grandmother, Mary Edgington. The elder Fenton was apparently well off enough for son Frank to attend college. After graduating from Ohio State University, Fenton journeyed to Los Angeles and remained there for the rest of his life. A film buff as well as a student of classical literature, he dreamed of writing for the movies and was drawn to Hollywood like the proverbial moth to the flame.

Fenton’s earliest film credit was an original story for the 63-minute programmer *Behind Jury Doors* (1932). He co-wrote *Dinky* (1935) with his pal John Fante, which the pair sold to Warner Bros. Fante would become renowned for his 1939 semi-autobiographical novel *Ask the Dust*, about a struggling Depression-era writer—Arturo Bandini, and considered to be the definitive Los Angeles novel. His “Bandini quartet” of stories, along with screenplays for *Full of Life* (1956, based on his novel), *Jeanne Eagels* (1957), and *Walk on the Wild Side* (1962) earned Fante a great deal of late-career and posthumous acclaim. During the Depression, he and Fenton were just another pair of hungry writers attempting to scratch out a living in the City of Angels.

Fenton and Fante remained lifelong friends even after the former began working with Lynn Root. Root was a Broadway actor who ditched treading the boards to take up writing. He would eventually hit it big with his play *Cabin in the Sky*, adapted into a major 1943 MGM production with an all-star African-American cast. Fenton and Root began with a couple of flop plays. They sold one of them, *Stork Mad*, to 20th Century-Fox, which turned it into a Jane Withers comedy. The pair gained a professional toehold by cranking out three more Withers features for Fox.

From 1937 to 1946, Fenton and Root collaborated on over 20 original stories and screenplays. Many of their scripts became leanly produced RKO programmers, usually for *The Saint* or *The Falcon* series.

A prototypical entry was *The Falcon Takes Over* (1942). Shot in 20 days for \$140,000, it was the first screen adaptation of Raymond Chandler’s work. Based on *Farewell, My Lovely*, the not-yet-famous author received \$2,012.70 from RKO for the rights.

Fenton and Root shifted the locale from Los Angeles to Manhattan and compressed Chandler’s mystery into a 65-minute feature starring George Sanders as the Falcon and a padded Ward Bond as Moose Malloy. Although much of Chandler’s story and characterizations had to be tossed in order to streamline the plot (while also getting the script by the censor’s office), the film was permeated with the amusing dialogue that became a Fenton trademark. RKO appreciated the results and remade Chandler’s yarn two years later to greater acclaim as *Murder, My Sweet* (1944) starring a repurposed Dick Powell.

