

DURYEA 1949



Shady, Beady-Eyed Amorality in All Shapes and Sizes | Carl Steward

To suggest that Dan Duryea essentially played one note of nastiness throughout his numerous roles in film noir is, well, an obvious slap in the face.

In movies released in 1949 alone, arguably his most prolific and potent year in the genre, the great Duryea played four distinct shades of shady. He is best remembered that year, of course, for his role as dour, despicable Slim Dundee in the seminal *Criss Cross*, which is on the favorites list of virtually every noir aficionado.



Duryea's face betrays some characteristic cruelty in this publicity shot from *Manhandled*

But one could make the strong case that Duryea's performances in his three other 1949 films—the much admired *Too Late for Tears*, the much scorned *Manhandled*, and the much overlooked *Johnny Stool Pigeon*—were just as good or better, and each one wholly diverse and dynamic from the next, even if the films themselves didn't measure up to the Robert Siodmak masterpiece.

In fact, one might submit that Duryea's very best performance of '49 came in the worst film of the bunch, Lewis R. Foster's *Manhandled*, something of a *Springtime for Hitler* of noir. Despite a far-fetched, discombobulating plot, a ridiculously miscast Dorothy Lamour, and an ending that slapsticks itself to nowhere, Duryea delivers a gem in the mishandled Paramount production.

Dan plays the wacky and wonderful Karl Benson, who chews up the scenery for more than an hour and a half as a gum-snapping, bowtie-wearing sleazeball who is something of a bouillabaisse of all the fast-talking, dame-slapping characters Duryea played in noir. In other words, he is the Dan Duryea many of his fans love the most. He brings in full force that familiar wise-guy whine, that ever-endearing smarmy grin, and the callous lope and mannerisms of the shyster too cool for his own good.

Duryea's Benson is an ex-cop who's been kicked off the force for reasons we can only suspect, and now, he's holed up in his office masquerading as a private dick with his pet hamster – that's right, a hamster. He's a cheap creep, to be sure, but lovable nonetheless in a sort of grown-up Eddie Haskell way. He's a two-bit schemer who interjects himself into a larger scheme—a murderous jewel heist.

Perhaps the most compelling aspect of the film is that Karl figures out the crime before the cops do, yet outsmarts himself when he kills the actual murderer—in one of the most grisly scenes in noir, no

less—in the quest for a paltry \$10,000 insurance reward.

Naturally, Duryea not only gets in one of his trademark dame slaps, he actually cold-cocks Lamour twice, the second time after holding her over the ledge of a tall building in an aborted attempt to fake her suicide.

By the time that semi-suspenseful moment transpires, though, the film has already become quite a bit too much. There is so much comic relief and dysfunctional plot laying that *Manhandled* almost unfolds like a noir parody. If it's viewed as such, it becomes much more palatable. In addition to Lamour, who was pregnant at the time and would subsequently take a long hiatus from Hollywood, the funky casting also includes a youthful-looking Sterling Hayden (a year before *The Asphalt Jungle*) and the always eclectic Art Smith.

But the most fortunate accident of *Manhandled* by far is that Foster, most noted for directing some of Laurel and Hardy's most memorable 1930s one-reelers, gave Duryea every opportunity to take over the film as the oily cad Karl. He pronounces words like "truth" as "trut" " and offers up lines like, "You're not talking to a cluck, Charlie. You're talking to a guy who knows all the angles." In short, Duryea drives the film the entire way, including when he drives his car into a brick wall with some poor sap between, pumping the gas pedal a few times for effect.

That scene shows Duryea is at his darkest, but it's a mere mo-





helpless housewife has interfered with his perfect pinch, Duryea's Danny becomes spellbound by her audacity to not only keep the money but spend it on herself. He repeatedly calls her "Tiger" and subsequently falls for her, perhaps believing that she's just the right kind of con artist to be his love partner.

But he then gets sucked into a murderous plot against Jane's husband Alan Palmer (Arthur Kennedy), and suddenly realizes—too late—he's not that hardened of a criminal. Even though he's forced to comply with her scheme, he has no stomach for the murder and realizes he's gotten in too deep, particularly when he wises up to a plan for his own murder that goes awry.

When a claim check for the bulk of the cash turns up missing and Jane forces Danny to go out and procure some poison to take out her sister-in-law Kathy, he returns with the poison but as an altogether beaten man. He's unshaven and inebriated, and it's a scene where Duryea really shines. One of Hollywood's all-time most convincing on-screen despondent drunks, Dan instantly turns Danny into a sympathetic character because he's so pathetically at the end of his rope.

Even he doesn't realize how far gone he is, however, until Jane finally recovers the full satchel of cash and turns up at his flophouse apartment, where he's pickled to the gills. He has one brief, desperate moment of redemption and triumph until he swallows that one last drink—the one Jane has doctored with cyanide.

ment of dastardly behavior. Most of the time, Dan is popping his Wrigley's and playing the charming, back-alley rogue. Alas, the two character schematics don't really go so well together, so when he's finally taken down at the end, it's wholly anticlimactic. It would have been so much a better picture had Duryea's Benson actually gotten away with his mischievous machinations ... along with his hamster. They steal the show, if not the jewels.

WHEN WE FIRST MEET DURYEYA'S

Danny Fuller in *Too Late for Tears*, he is still the sharp-tongued and bow-tied huckster masquerading as an investigator. When Danny confronts Lizabeth Scott's Jane Palmer, who has accidentally intercepted his blackmail payoff from an insurance scam and decides she wants to keep it, he has the upper hand and gives her the back of his in pursuit of the cash.

But over the span of the next 90 minutes, the money-lusting black widow Palmer spins such a cruel web around Fuller, duping him in as a conspirator to her husband's murder, Duryea's character begins a slow, agonizing descent into despair until she ultimately puts him out of his misery.

Director Byron Haskin's independently produced *Too Late for Tears* is a Scott star vehicle. She is one of the most devious and ultimately diabolical *femme fatales* in noir. But it is Duryea's performance that gives the film its noir texture and makes Scott's role so memorable, as he is methodically ground by her into a spineless nub of a man once brimming with confidence and virility.

At first perturbed that this seemingly



Deadlier Than The Male: Femme fatale Lizabeth Scott stares down Dan Duryea in the memorable *Too Late for Tears*



THAT'S JUST TO REMIND YOU... YOU'RE IN A TOUGH RACKET NOW!

Tough? . . . you've got to be tough with dames like her! Here's dramatic tension that screams from the screen!



ALAN was late in learning that she was the kind of woman who doesn't do anybody any good!



BLAKE knew her . . . "Now we'll make a deal—my way", he said.



DANNY: "You know Tiger, I didn't know they made them as beautiful as you, or as smart, or as hard."

IN ONE TERRIFYING MOMENT SHE KNEW IT WAS TOO LATE...

"TOO LATE FOR TEARS"

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LIZABETH SCOTT
DON DE FORE
DAN DURYEA
TOO LATE FOR TEARS
WINT STROMBERG

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—M. P. DAILY

"Taut entertainment... sure 'box-office'!"
—SHOWMAN'S TRADE REVIEW

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—DAILY VARIETY

"Fascinating!"
—FILM DAILY

"Stromberg Click! Exciting melodrama packed with the kind of thrills that send audiences out talking... bids for big box-office."
—HOLLYWOOD REPORTER

UNITED ARTISTS PICTURES

It's Grade-A noir Duryea from beginning to end, playing a single character, but one in which we see a spellbinding metamorphosis into many characters as we travel along on his gradual ride to hell.

JOHNNY STOOL PIGEON takes a reverse course. Johnny Evans (Duryea) is a hardened, hollow-eyed Alcatraz convict who has spent three years doing hard time on The Rock, but he's being viewed as a possible ticket into a large-scale West Coast narcotics ring.

He is approached in prison by an old nemesis, federal agent George Morton (Howard Duff), who offers a deal—24 hours on the outside to show him a few things that might convince him to play along. Duryea's Evans is more than dubious, snuffing out a cigarette on a tabletop and spitting his vehemence.

"I'll rot in this place forever before I become a stool pigeon for a copper," says Johnny.

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But the allure of the outside world is too much for him. He goes along with the agent, who promptly takes him to a San Francisco morgue, where he is shown the corpse of his wife, a victim of a heroin overdose.

Evans is finally convinced to go along with Morton on an undercover assignment to secure a drug deal that cracks the narcotics ring. They travel to Vancouver to meet with a distributor (the always reliable weasel, Barry Kelley), but in the process, they also encounter Terry Stewart (Shelley Winters, in her saucy sexpot era), who has been dispatched to the mob bar by Kelley to schmooze the newcomers and try to pry information from them.

Winters falls for the Duff character, not realizing he's an undercover cop, while Duryea's Johnny almost immediately starts carrying a torch for Terry. Terry just wants to get out of town, and quite conveniently, Duff and Duryea are given instructions to consummate a drug deal at a dude ranch outside of her hometown of Tucson.



A familiar sight: a gun-wielding Duryea in *Johnny Stool Pigeon*

Winters' wrong-side-of-the-tracks appeal begins to thaw Johnny back to his old wise-cracking gangster self as they arrive at the dude ranch, even though Winters' character continues to prefer Duff's bogus undercover thug.

For a brief time, one doesn't really know if Duryea's character is going to follow through with Duff's plan or not, and the agent starts to believe Johnny may be conspiring against him with drug lord Nick Avery (a wonderful against-type performance by John McIntire). It turns out one of Avery's gunmen (a mute played by a boyish Tony Curtis) recognizes Duff as the agent, so it's a moot point anyway.

Duff thinks he is a dead man when Duryea lays out an ingenious plan to Avery for smuggling a drug shipment across the Mexican border—he and the Curtis hood will kill him in Nogales, and he'll be shipped back into the U.S. in a coffin, with the drugs inside.

It all comes to a head a little too predictably when Duryea instead shoots Curtis, and agents subsequently swarm to the deso-



late site where McIntire believes he'll grab the drug haul and bury Duff the narc. The ring is busted and the reformed Duryea steals away with Winters on his arm.

Johnny Stool Pigeon was a solid noir programmer helmed on the cheap by William Castle and it shows its warts. Since it was made at Universal, it even steals the theme music from *Criss Cross* for its opening sequence and a few action scenes. That said, the players never give less than their best effort, and Duryea gives just as committed a performance as he did in his other 1949 efforts, within the boundaries of a pedestrian script.

If nothing else, *Johnny Stool Pigeon* offered Duryea a contrasting character turn – a bad guy who goes straight. After being tortured so badly by Scott in *Too Late for Tears*, it's actually refreshing to see him get the girl and walk away with a wave and a smirk.

IN A PERFECT WORLD, Duryea's diverse four films from 1949 would be packaged together somehow, either as part of a festival program or a DVD box set that not only demonstrate his ranges of character development on the wrong side of the law, but also more acutely reveal his consistently high performance level in spite of the varying quality of the respective films.

Criss Cross, to be sure, provides a highly accessible and striking example. *Too Late for Tears* does as well, and could take on even greater significance in the much-anticipated restoration by the Film Noir Foundation (premiering at NOIR CITY 12 in January 2014) that will once and for all exile the battered, choppy prints fans of the film must accept for now.

Manhandled and *Johnny Stool Pigeon*? They may continue to languish in fuzzy black-market obscurity for the time being – neither has received any kind of home video treatment – but the hope is that the importance of Dan Duryea to any noir film he appeared in necessitates a more rightful and prominent place in his canon.

After all, you can't fully appreciate his skill until you see all of the man's shades of shady. ■