



Senior's Matinee

# They Drive by Night

## They Drive by Night

Director: Arthur Woods

©/Production Company:

Warner Brothers First National Productions

Executive Producer: Jerome J. Jackson

Screenplay and Dialogue: Paul Gangelin,

James Curtis, Derek Twist

Based on the novel by: James Curtis

Photography: Basil Emmott \*

Editor: Leslie Norman \*

Art Directors: Peter Proud, Michael Relph \*

Music Director: Bretton Byrd

Sound: Leslie Murray, H.C. Pearson \*

Dialogue Director: Anthony Hankey

Studio: Teddington Studios

Cast:

Emlyn Williams

(Albert Owen 'Shorty' Matthews)

Anna Konstam (Molly O'Neil)

Allan Jeayes (Wally)

Ernest Thesiger (Walter Hoover)

Jennie Hartley (landlady)

Ronald Shiner (Charlie, café proprietor)

Anthony Holles (Murray)

Billy Hartnell (bus conductor)

Kitty De Legh (Mrs Wally)

Joe Cunningham (Detective Pryor)

Yolande Terrell (Marge)

Julie Barrie (Pauline)

Bernard Miles (police detective at billiard hall) \*

Iris Vandeleur (flowerseller) \*

United Kingdom 1938©

84 mins

\* Uncredited

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**SPOILER WARNING** The following notes give away some of the plot.

*They Drive by Night* is undoubtedly the finest work of director Arthur Woods; a dark film that, although critically well received upon first release, was also unfortunately quickly forgotten. The film had to wait another twenty years or more until it finally began to enjoy reappraisal and to be rightly hailed as a major stylistic and thematic breakthrough, attracting interest in critical circles, not simply for its skill as a highly entertaining and well crafted thriller, but for its realism in respect to both characterisations and settings.

Based on a 1938 novel by James Curtis, a writer who set his crime stories in working-class settings characterised by drabness, corruption and brutality, the film adaptation, if it had adhered faithfully to the novel, would inevitably have been mired in censorship difficulties. With a story featuring prostitution, attempted rape and police brutality, it is little surprise that the BBFC of the period would not have countenanced the passing of a script featuring such elements. Although the general story of Shorty going on the run following the murder of his girlfriend was retained, the script inevitably played down the more controversial aspects of the novel. However, despite the changes and omissions the final film retains the general spirit of the novel through the drabness of the settings, the attack on the young woman by a lorry driver (although played down from that in the novel), the character of the maniacal killer, and the sheer fatalism that pervades most of the film. By and large it gets things past the censor that is quite surprising for a film, especially a British film, of the period.

This fact was conveyed in the review of the *Motion Picture Herald*, when it concluded that, 'this canvas of rain and windswept highways, of dingy snack bars and hard-boiled cockney artisans, is both fascinating and convincing: the low life element has seldom if ever been handled with more naturalness and sympathy, whether by directorial treatment or individual portrayal'. Similarly, *Today's Cinema* believed the film to have 'the stamp of truth', owing to 'the cleverness of the character-drawing [and] the conviction of the dialogue and atmosphere, to say nothing of the staging and photography'. The *New Statesman* observed that 'this film shows a welcome tendency to abandon the imaginary world of mock-Tudor country houses in order to study English life in all its oddity and variety'. Graham Greene, writing in the *Spectator*, and one of the most enthusiastic of the film's champions, argued that the 'dialogue, acting and direction put this picture on a level with the French cinema – the settings for the first time in an English low-life story are not romanticised, and for once we are not conscious of the brooding auntie-like presence in Carlisle House [i.e., the BBFC]'. It was this very naturalism in performance and realism in staging as highlighted in the above reviews that was to draw the film to the attention of a new generation over twenty years later.

Major contributory factors to the success of the film are the excellent and believable performances from the two male leads. The film's star, Emlyn Williams, first came to recognition as a playwright in 1930 with

## Events

### **Total Recall: Illusion & Forgetfulness: 50**

#### **Years of Bernstein Cinemas**

Mon 5 Jan 18:10

#### **Preview: Slumdog Millionaire + Q&A with Danny Boyle**

Mon 5 Jan 18:15

#### **Sam Peckinpah and the Western: An Introduction**

Tue 6 Jan 18:10

#### **Generations of Love**

Thu 8 Jan 14:00

#### **Cold War Fashion**

Thu 8 Jan 18:10

#### **The Flipside presents: New York Freak Out! Chappaqua + The Fugs**

Thu 8 Jan 20:30

#### **The Guardian Interview with David Hare**

Tue 13 Jan 20:40

#### **Preview: Bolt 3D + Q&A with John Lasseter**

Wed 14 Jan 18:30

#### **Free Seniors Matinee: They Drive by Night**

Thu 15 Jan 14:00

#### **Preview: Milk + The Guardian Interview with Gus Van Sant**

Fri 16 Jan 18:30

#### **TV Preview: Being Human (Episode One) + Q&A with Russell Tovey, Toby Whitehouse & Matt Bouch**

Fri 16 Jan 20:00

#### **Visions for the Future: Quadrophenia**

Sat 17 Jan 17:00

#### **Preview: The Curious Case of Benjamin Button + The Guardian Interview with David Fincher**

Sun 18 Jan 16:00

#### **Course: From the Hollywood Blacklist to the British New Wave**

Tue 20 Jan - Tue 24 Mar 18:30-20:30

#### **Out at the Pictures: Julia**

Tue 20 Jan 20:40; Sat 31 Jan 17:50

#### **The League of Gentlemen: Ten Years After Highlights**

Wed 21 Jan 18:30

#### **The League of Gentlemen in Conversation**

Wed 21 Jan 20:30

#### **Course: Black Britain**

Thu 22 Jan 18:30-20:30

#### **Out at the Pictures: Cockles and Muscles**

Crustacés et coquillages

Thu 22 Jan 18:30; Fri 30 Jan 20:45

#### **BUG 11: The Evolution of Music Video**

Thu 22 Jan 20:45; Wed 28 Jan 20:45

#### **Preview: Encounters at the End of the World + The Guardian Interview with Werner Herzog**

Mon 26 Jan 18:20

#### **Passport to Cinema: McCabe & Mrs Miller**

Mon 26 Jan 18:20

#### **BBC FOUR World Cinema Awards 2009**

Tue 27 Jan 20:00

#### **Ingrid Bergman Rarities**

Thu 29 Jan 18:10

#### **Extended Run: Barry Lyndon**

Fri 30 Jan 14:00, 19:00; Sat 31 Jan 15:40, 19:30

#### **African Caribbean Matinee: Cuba: An African**

**Odyssey** Cuba: une odyssée africaine

Sat 31 Jan 14:00

*A Murder Has Been Arranged*, and then as an actor as the deranged Lord Lebanon in the 1931 production at Wyndham's Theatre of Edgar Wallace's *The Case of the Frightened Lady* (making his film debut in the role in 1932). With his fascination for murder and the criminal mind, Williams' went on to write in 1935 what was to become one of his most popular plays, *Night Must Fall*, in which he himself starred as the mad killer who carries around the head of one of his victims in a hat-box. Williams was also later to write books on Dr Crippen and the Moors Murders.

The role of the maniacal killer would therefore have appeared at first glance to have been perfect casting considering the actor's inclination for such roles, but as the hunted Shorty Matthews, Williams 'gives an arresting performance', as the *Cinematograph Exhibitors Association Report* phrased it. Williams' soft features could either convey fragility or sly villainy, and here the former is employed to make the audience empathise with Shorty as he becomes increasingly bedraggled, exhausted, confused and desperate. There is no deliberate attempt to make the character of Matthews sympathetic, he is a crook who inhabits an underworld of petty criminality, but the performance of Williams rises above conventional stereotypes (of which he himself had been associated) and helps to make the audience root for the character.

As good as Williams is, the film is memorable above all for the *tour de force* performance of the cadaverous Ernest Thesiger in the role of Walter Hoover, a 'student of psychology'. He had been acting on the stage since 1909, and in films since 1919, when he made his debut as William Pitt in *Nelson*. Although it is for his two roles for James Whale that he is largely remembered today, Horace Femm in *The Old Dark House* (1932), and Dr Pretorius in *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935), that of Hoover in *They Drive by Night* is almost their equal.

In a press release for *Caesar and Cleopatra* (1945), in which Thesiger was then appearing, it was stated that the actor's favourite film role was Walter Hoover, and, although coming into the film comparatively late in the proceedings, he certainly makes the most of the opportunity with which he has been presented. With every bodily movement as precise as his diction, Thesiger is a joy to behold and listen to, whether conversing with dance hall hostesses or holding forth in a public house. The character of Hoover is certainly unhinged, but, as played by Thesiger, not obviously so; but if any lesson can be learned from watching *They Drive by Night*, it is do not trust a man with 'Sex in Prison' on his bookshelf.

John Oliver, Curator (Fiction), BFI National Archive