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CAST

Dan Duryea Martin Blair
June Vincent Catherine Bennett
Peter Lorre Marko
Broderick Crawford Capt. Flood
Constance Dowling Mavis Marlowe
Wallace Ford Joe
Hobart Cavanaugh Jake
Freddie Steele Lucky
John Phillips Kirk Bennett
Ben Bard Bartender
Junius Matthews Dr. Courtney
Marion Martin Millie

CREW

Directed by **Roy William Neill**
Written by **Roy Chanslor**
Based on the Novel by **Cornell Woolrich**
Produced by **Tom McKnight, Roy William Neill**
Editor **Saul A. Goodkind**
Director of Photography **Paul Ivano** A.S.C.
Music by **Frank Skinner**
Art Directors **Martin Obzina, Jack Otterson**
Director of Sound **Bernard B. Brown**



BLACK ANGEL SWANSONG OF A NEGLECTED MOVIEMAKER

by Philip Kemp

These days, the name of Roy William Neill probably rings few bells. As a filmmaker he was prolific, directing well over a hundred films in America and Britain between 1917 and 1946; and of these he also produced several and scripted more than a few. He was respected for the stylishness and meticulous skill of his work and liked by the actors and technicians he worked with. But he never quite made it into the A-list of directors, and since his relatively early death his name has largely been forgotten. Unjustly so, perhaps.

He was born, it's generally believed, in Ireland – or just off the Irish coast to be exact, in Dublin Harbor on board a ship of which his father was the captain. His birth name was Roland de Gostrie. Worth mentioning, though, that some sources – notably the *Arthur Conan Doyle Encyclopedia* – insist that he was born in San Francisco and that R. W. Neill was his original name. At all events it seems, from an interview he gave in 1939, that he grew up in San Francisco; by 1915 he was in Hollywood, working as an assistant to the then prominent director/producer Thomas H. Ince, who notably directed and produced *Civilization* in 1915. Neill directed his own first film in 1917, and went on to direct some 50 silent movies, almost all of them now lost.

After directing one of the first full-color silent movies, *The Viking* (1928) – which has survived – for MGM, Neill moved to Columbia at the start of the sound era and stayed there until the mid-30s. Among the best films he directed in this period were *The Black Room Mystery* AKA *The Black Room* (1935), with Boris Karloff in a dual role as an evil baron and his benevolent twin brother, and *The Lone Wolf Returns* (1935), with Melvyn Douglas as a debonair jewel thief. But then, apparently frustrated by the Hollywood studio system, he moved to Britain



for the rest of the decade. In an interview with the British journal *Film Weekly*, he blamed the lush Southern California climate for the lack of challenges he felt in the movie capital. “There’s nothing stimulating about the place,” he told his interviewer. “You feel you want a keen wind to whip up your mind and set it working at full speed. [...] Film-making is losing its vitality in Hollywood.”

Of the 14 films Neill directed in the UK, the most successful was the lively period melodrama *Doctor Syn* (1937), with George Arliss in his final screen role as a ruthless smuggler masquerading as a country vicar. It was made for Gainsborough, who offered Neill what might, but for ill luck, have been his passport to fame. The studio had bought the rights to Ethel Lina White’s novel *The Wheel Spins* with Frank Launder and Sidney Gilliat attached as screenwriters. Their screenplay, called *Lost Lady*, was completed in August 1936 and Neill readily agreed to direct it. A second unit was sent to Yugoslavia, under assistant director Fred Gunn, to shoot some location scenes. But Gunn broke his ankle in an accident; the Yugoslav police, investigating, found a copy of the script and passed it to the authorities who, considering it offensive to their country, expelled the unit. Gainsborough put the project on hold. The next year Alfred Hitchcock, finishing *Young and Innocent* AKA *The Girl Was Young* (1937), asked the studio if they had any scripts that might suit him. *Lost Lady*, slightly rewritten and re-titled *The Lady Vanishes* (1938), became the finest of Hitch’s pre-war movies.

Despite his misgivings about Hollywood, Neill returned there in 1941 and signed up with Universal for the rest of his career. For them he made, among others, an entry in their second horror cycle, *Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man* (1943), with Bela Lugosi and Lon Chaney Jr; a high-camp swashbuckler with Maria Montez, *Gypsy Wildcat* (1944 – co-scripted, unexpectedly enough, by James M. Cain); and the series for which he’s now best remembered, the last 11 of the Sherlock Holmes films with Basil Rathbone and Nigel Bruce, of which *The Scarlet Claw* (1944) – which he co-scripted – is generally reckoned the standout. In his biography of Rathbone, Michael B. Druxman noted that “the suspenseful screenplay by Roy Neill and Edmund L. Hartmann was almost a horror story, and Neill’s imaginative direction [...] turned the film into a minor masterpiece of that genre.”

Rathbone greatly enjoyed working with Neill who, he recalled in his autobiography, was “endearingly known to his company as ‘Mousie’. [...] There was a nominal producer and some writers also,” he added, “but Roy Neill was the master and final hand in all these departments.” But by the last entry in the series, *Dressed to Kill* AKA *Sherlock Holmes and the Secret Code* (1946), the actor had had enough of playing the Great Detective, feeling that the character was swamping his career, and bowed out. Universal then offered Neill an adaptation of a 1943 novel by Cornell Woolrich, *The Black Angel*.

With film noir much in vogue for Hollywood B-movies, Woolrich’s novels provided ideal material. Along with Jim Thompson and James M. Cain, he was one of the best-known purveyors of hard-boiled pulp fiction (often under his *nom de plume* of William Irish), and his novels had recently been adapted for *Street of Chance* (1942), *The Leopard Man* (1943), *Phantom Lady* (1944) and *Deadline at Dawn* (1946). Later on, his work would furnish the basis, along with much else, for Hitchcock’s *Rear Window* (1954) and Truffaut’s *The Bride Wore Black* (*La mariée était en noir*, 1968).

In his study of film noir, *In a Lonely Street*, Frank Krutnik notes that whereas the protagonists of ’30s crime movies such as *Little Caesar* (1931), *Public Enemy* (1931) and *Scarface* (1932) deliberately – even rationally – choose a criminal way of life to achieve wealth and power, by the next decade American cinema’s view of criminal psychology has changed. “There’s a sense that the protagonists of these films are not totally in control of their actions but are subject to darker, inner impulses – at times they seem driven into direct transgression of the law by some fatal flaw within themselves.” This would certainly apply to many of Woolrich’s novels, *The Black Angel* included. It’s told in the first person: our narrator is Alberta Murray, 22-year-old wife of Kirk Murray, who’s arrested for the murder of his mistress, Mia Mercer. After he’s convicted and sentenced to death, Alberta, despite his infidelity, is set on proving his innocence.

It’s she who, at the start of the novel, discovers Mia’s murdered body; finding the woman’s address book, she tracks down four of her contacts. Her quest takes her down some terrifyingly dark alleys, into “a world of jungle violence [...] of strange hidden deeds in strange hidden places, of sharp-clawed treachery



and fanged gratitude, where compunction and conscience were just other words for weakness and used as such.” Woolrich’s depiction of the seediest and most vicious aspects of the New York underworld is grippingly vivid.

Roy Chanslor’s script takes some liberties with the original. The action is moved from New York to Los Angeles where, as in the novel, the action kicks off with the discovery of the body of a murdered woman; here it’s chanteuse Mavis Marlowe (Constance Dowling), a mercenary *femme fatale* whose married lover, Kirk Bennett (John Phillips), visits her apartment on the evening of her death. So it’s he, rather than his wife, who discovers her body; he’s arrested for her killing and found guilty. His wife Catherine (June Vincent), determined to clear his name, enlists the help of the singer’s ex-husband, alcoholic pianist Marty Blair (Dan Duryea). In the novel the despairing Marty vanishes early on, possibly a suicide, and it’s another man, Ladd Mason, who helps the wife and becomes attracted to her; the screenplay amalgamates these two characters.

Neill’s film (which drops the definite article from the novel’s title) qualifies as his only excursion into film noir; even so, it’s rather less dark and sordid than its source material. It is, though, as Andrew Sarris noted in his essay *Beatitudes of B Pictures*, “a very erotic movie for the 1940s.” There’s more than a hint of masochism in Woolrich’s portrayal of his heroine, constantly exposing herself to danger; and the film nods to this as Cathy puts herself at the mercy of two sinister individuals whom she suspects of being involved in Mavis’s murder: night-club owner Marko (Peter Lorre at his most louche, a cigarette permanently dangling from his lower lip), and his slab-jawed strong-arm man, Lucky (Freddie Steele).

Meanwhile the growing attraction between Cathy and Marty is played out in a pattern of deflected glances and tentative gestures, as well as in the songs he writes for her; for she’s an ex-professional singer, and as cover for their investigations they form a double act. (Duryea learned piano for his role, and his hands weren’t doubled; while Vincent, whose on-screen singing was usually dubbed, was on this occasion allowed to use her own singing voice. They both make a convincing job of it.) This central musical element in the plot – songs by veteran songwriting partners Jack Brooks (‘That’s Amore’) and Edgar Fairchild – ingeniously picks up on a hint in the novel when the down-and-out Marty is

referred to as ‘Heartbreak’ because of his drunken yearnings for his ex-wife. In the film this becomes the title of a song he wrote for her which became her breakthrough hit, and is playing on the phonograph when she’s murdered.

Black Angel was the first film to give Dan Duryea a lead role – and, also for the first time, he wasn’t cast as an out-and-out villain. He could of course play the baddie superbly; at his best he projected (as his biographer Mike Perros put it) a “patented blend of menace, sleaze, confidence and superficial charm” more effectively than almost any other actor on the screen. (The “superficial charm” was a crucial element, making us believe – as in Fritz Lang’s *Scarlet Street* [1945] – that he could viciously beat and abuse a woman and still count on her devotion.) But in Neill’s film he plays a far more sympathetic and ambiguous role – just how ambiguous we don’t find out until the end of the movie.

Critical response to Duryea’s performance was warm. *The Hollywood Reporter* affirmed that “Duryea has won the right to stardom and attains it with *Black Angel*,” and the *Los Angeles Examiner* enthused: “We said for a long time that Duryea was star material, a romantic figure, and now he proves it [...] he turns a mediocre picture into something darned interesting to watch.” There’s teasing ambiguity, too, in Lorre’s role as the night-club owner, his key motivation proving to be something quite other than at first appears. (The relatively inexperienced June Vincent recalled Lorre as being exceptionally patient and helpful in their scenes together.) Broderick Crawford, newly back from his military service, plays a tough but sympathetic LAPD officer – a preview of his role as Police Chief Dan Mathews in the long-running TV cop series *Highway Patrol* (1955-59).

Neill, as ever, directs with unpretentious fluency, right from the opening scene where the camera cranes smoothly up from the POV of Marty Blair, lounging wistfully on an LA street corner, to the lighted window of his ex-wife’s apartment in the swish Wilshire Building. Elsewhere Paul Ivano’s unobtrusively mobile camera makes room for some deftly executed montage sequences: early on, a brief flurry of press headlines and courtroom shots as Kirk is sent for trial; later, a longer near-surrealist sequence as Marty glimpses the truth through his tormented alcoholic hallucinations. The dialogue borrows little of Woolrich’s grimly laconic exchanges, but hits some enjoyably hard-boiled notes of its own.



Marko, when the thuggish Lucky has ventured an opinion: "I don't slug and you don't think – is that a deal?"

As can be gathered from the *Los Angeles Examiner*'s reference to "a mediocre picture," apart from praise for its cast, *Black Angel* enjoyed relatively indifferent reviews on its initial release. It would be an exaggeration to say that its reputation has since blossomed, but over the years Neill's film has picked up its share of appreciative comments. In Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward's classic 1980 survey *Film Noir*, Blake Lucas notes that the "unusual casting of Duryea [...] makes the dramatic thrust of the story even more interesting [...]. He remains the most sympathetic character in the film and far worthier of the heroine than her weak and disloyal husband, the 'innocent' Bennett." Lucas goes on to observe that "The encouragement given to art directors and photographers in B films is very much in evidence in *Black Angel*."

More recently, in his online review, Derek Winnert called *Black Angel* a "complex, stylish, satisfying top-drawer 1946 film noir mystery thriller," adding that "The resourceful cast, handsome production and the atmospheric, film noir-style direction by Neill combine to give it an attractive urgency." And in his definitive biography of Cornell Woolrich, *First You Dream, Then You Die*, Francis Nevins wrote that "if a single Woolrich feature could be preserved for future generations, and all the rest had to be destroyed, *Black Angel* is the one I would opt to keep." No small praise.

Black Angel was Roy Neill's final film. In December 1946, a few months after completing it, he died suddenly of a heart attack while on a visit to London. He was 59.

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ORIGINAL REVIEWS

You might be among those mystified by *Black Angel* (at Loew's Criterion), until nearly the end. If you are not, you won't be bored, anyway, because Dan Duryea, who was Joan Bennett's no-good boyfriend in *Scarlet Street* [1945] is on hand to play a drunken pianist with considerable skill; June Vincent will probably worm her way into your heart as a lovely singer who is trying earnestly to save her husband from the gas chamber, and director Roy William Neill, who recently sharpened his technique on a series of Sherlock Holmes thrillers is there to spin his story smartly and with keen suspense.

Black Angel, in other words, is an inviting mystery thriller particularly for those who don't try to out-guess screen detectives. Most of the way, in fact, it even seems to be an airtight murder yarn with the murderer of a blackmailing blues singer safely stored away in a California prison. All the clues prove that June Vincent's jailed husband killed good looking Constance Dowling. But he insists that the real culprit stole the girl's heart-shaped broach, and that if you find the jewel you find the murderer. The police, in the person of Broderick Crawford, can't. So Miss Vincent takes up the hunt with Dan Duryea, the dead woman's husband who bought the broach in the first place, and their trail leads to the night club that Peter Lorre runs on Hollywood's Sunset Strip. Where Lorre is, there is sure excitement. *Black Angel* is no exception.

Wallace Ford and Hobart Cavanaugh do well in supporting roles, and Edgar Fairchild and Jack Brooks contribute several serviceable torch songs, among them 'Heartbreak' and 'I Wanted to Be Talked About'.

Herbert Cohn, Brooklyn Eagle, September 26th, 1946

Black Angel stars Dan Duryea, whose bad men, notably in *The Woman in the Window* [1944] and *Scarlet Street*, were something wonderful to behold since they were not in the ordinary groove. Dan has the face of a complete heel; furthermore he knocks the gals around with that lovely knuckle cracking sound that's so romantic. This time he runs true to form, although to be sure he's a weakling rather than out and out rascal... hence the title *Black Angel*. This boy can really act.

Hollywood (principally the Sunset Strip) forms the locale with Dan as a pianist-composer whose wife is two (or three or four) times his. His usual recourse after her rebuffs is to go on a binge from which he awakens only when he has to.

After one such alcoholic stupor, he finds that the lady has been murdered and that one of his main rivals, whom she has been blackmailing, is held for the crime. The suspected man's wife convinces him that the wrong guy is to pay the penalty, though, and together... he, the husband of the murdered woman, and she, the wife of the condemned, set out to find the real solution. Incidentally, it's a novel one. As a matter of fact, I don't recall ever encountering it on the screen before. You'll like this one, therefore, I think. It's just a little odd in story detail and treatment, and is distinguished by excellent characterizations from Duryea himself, June Vincent, Peter Lorre and Brod Crawford. Brod is certainly getting a reputation for playing believable officers of the law, isn't he? And what a relief not to encounter a single so-called "dumb detective" giving out with low comedy touches.

Hazel Flynn, Valley Times, August 13th, 1946

Dan Duryea's coming back to town and bringing June Vincent and Peter Lorre with him.

The new merchant of menace, who hit a new high for feminine fan mail on the strength of his work in *The Woman in the Window* and *Scarlet Street*, will be starred for the first time in Universal's *Black Angel*, which opens at the Rialto Theatre next week.

The melodrama initiates a somewhat new field for Duryea. Although he is still a heavy and manages to throw his weight around with considerable authority, he does not have a chance at romantic scenes with Miss Vincent in which he neither slaps nor kicks her. In fact, she is undecided about Duryea and he is seemingly unable to do anything about it. Action piles on action in the film which has one of the most notable surprise endings ever given a motion picture.

Miss Vincent returns to the screen and stardom after time off to have a baby. Lorre again comes through with one of those performances which have made him one of the most sought-after stars in Hollywood.

Others in the cast, all chosen carefully by Universal to provide outstanding support for Duryea in his first starring role under its banner, are Broderick Crawford, Constance Dowling, Wallace Ford, Hobart Cavanaugh and Freddie Steele.

Roy William Neill both directed and co-produced with Tom McKnight.

Anonymous, The Camden News, April 5th, 1947



ABOUT THE RESTORATION

Black Angel has been exclusively restored by Arrow Films and is presented in its original aspect ratio of 1.37:1 with mono audio.

An original nitrate combined 35mm fine grain positive and dupe negative were scanned in 2K resolution on a Arriscan at NBC Universal.

The film was graded and restored using a combination of these two scanned film elements at Pinewood Studios, London. Picture grading was completed on a DaVinci Resolve and restoration was completed using PFClean software.

The audio was remastered from the restored combined mono track by NBC Universal.

Restoration supervised by **James White, Arrow Films**

Pinewood Studios Group:
Rebecca Budds, Michael Davis, John Pegg, Jon Mann, Darren Rae, Jashesh Jhaveri, Lucie Hancock, Rob Langridge, Jason Stevens

NBC Universal:
Peter Schade, Tim Naderski, Jefferson Root, John Edell

All materials for this restoration were made available by NBC Universal.





PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and Booklet Produced by **James Blackford**
Executive Producers **Kevin Lambert, Francesco Simeoni**
Technical Producer **James White**
QC **Nora Mehenni, Alan Simmons**
Production Assistant **Samuel Thiery**
Blu-ray Mastering and Subtitling **The Engine House Media Services**
Design **Obviously Creative**

SPECIAL THANKS

Alex Agran, Pat Bauman, Philip Kemp, Alan K. Rode, Esme Pitts,
Jon Robertson, Neil Sinyard



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