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## CAST

STEVEN GERAY AS HENRI CASSIN

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EGON BRECHER AS DR. BONCOURT

THEODORE GOTTLIEB AS GEORGES

## CREW

DIRECTED BY JOSEPH H. LEWIS

WRITTEN BY MARTIN BERKELEY, DWIGHT BABCOCK

BASED ON A STORY BY AUBREY WISBERG

PRODUCED BY TED RICHMOND

MUSIC BY HUGO FRIEDHOFER

CINEMATOGRAPHY BY BURNETT GUFFEY





## AN INSPECTOR FALLS

by David Cairns

The cinema of Joseph H. Lewis fits perfectly Manny Farber's definition of termite art: "It always goes forward eating its own boundaries, and, likely as not, leaves nothing in its path other than the signs of eager, industrious, unkempt activity." Working in every possible genre (Billy Wilder and Howard Hawks liked to claim they did, but Lewis really *did* make noirs, comedies, war films, musicals, horror movies, westerns, historical dramas), he fails at conventional auteurism by virtue of his versatility. Entire books written about his oeuvre have failed to identify the essential "authorial signature," perhaps because critics so often look for thematic unity rather than stylistic obsessions. Lewis was a director who really was a director, not a frustrated writer. He received one story credit in his whole career. He filmed what they put in front of him. But he could tell when it was good, and when the material aroused his appetite, he fell on it like a ravenous dog.

You can see Lewis having fun on some of the early B-pictures he helmed: *Invisible Ghost* (1941), with Bela Lugosi smothering a victim filmed from their point of view, a blanket blacking out the frame; in the mobile long takes of *Secrets of a Co-Ed* (1942), and in innumerable eccentric framings in his many westerns, which earned him the nickname "Wagon Wheel Joe."

"You didn't have actors; you had cowboys who owned a horse, they'd have a line to speak, but they *couldn't* speak. But that was how you made it. And I thought to myself, "How can I distract the audience from this?" – and I found a way. I had a whole truckload of wagon wheels. I put a wagon wheel in front of the camera: you looked at it – it was an artistic shot – and before you could analyze the scene, it was over."

The first time Lewis got his hands on a superior story was *My Name Is Julia Ross*, and he scored a hit with it that impressed his bosses at Columbia, even though he went over budget and over schedule to do so, effectively transforming the modest thriller from a B to an A by sheer imagination and force of personality. (He also elevated his leading lady, Nina Foch, to brief stardom.)

The movie is a psychological thriller in which a psychopath who has killed his wife, aided by his enabling mother, kidnaps the heroine and attempts to brainwash her into assuming the role of the murder victim, all so that he can eventually stage an accidental-looking death

for her to get him off the hook for his previous murder. It's a slightly absurd idea, but so are most Hitchcocks, and Lewis serves it up with a Hitchcockian flair. As always, many of his best touches were a creative response to limited funds, such as when he observes his heroine over the villain's shoulder, most of her face eclipsed to emphasise her frightened eyes, while he pontificates scarily to her. As Lewis described the scene to Bogdanovich, he had simply run out of time to shoot this long speech, and came up with an idea that allowed him to cover it in a single shot rather than the usual back-and-forth between two angles.

Noticed by studio boss Harry Cohn, Lewis was gifted with another good story, the result of which you hold in your hands. *So Dark the Night* was the brainchild of Aubrey Wisberg, a novelist, screenwriter, producer and director, and his short story was adapted by two other thriller specialists. Dwight V. Babcock was a *Black Mask* pulp hack and a friend of Raymond Chandler, but Martin Berkeley is the more interesting one, for all the wrong reasons. In the fifties he was accused of having been a member of the Communist Party, which he at first denied, before caving in and naming... everyone he could think of. Some sources say 161 names. HUAC investigators were advising him to *stop* naming names, he was naming *too many*. But, having suddenly discovered he was a rabid anti-communist, Berkeley couldn't stop himself. A kind of stool-pigeon's logorrhea had him in its icy grip.

In some ways, Berkeley seems the man best suited to writing *So Dark the Night*, a tale of unconscious impulses, secrets kept from the self, mental breakdown manifesting itself as both crime and investigation, a murderous ouroboros swallowing its own storyline.

(Lewis recalled working on the script with his screenwriter from *Julia Ross*, which would bring Muriel Roy Bolton, B-thriller specialist, into the fold also.)

The story of this film (and here's where you should stop reading if you haven't watched it yet; go ahead, I'll still be here when you get back) deals with a workaholic homicide detective who finally takes an overdue vacation, stumbles on a double murder, and takes over the investigation, only to find, like Oedipus, that the trail leads to his own door.

It's a simple plot twist, and the film doesn't wholly depend on it. In fact, the suspicions mount so quickly and the reveal comes so early that when I first saw the film I half-expected a double twist: what if he *didn't* do it, and someone was framing him? I think I'm glad now they didn't go down that route.

One reason is that the lead actor, Steven Geray, is so sympathetic. Making him the killer becomes the most interesting option, and it allows him to finally triumph by getting his man. Geray was an Austro-Hungarian emigré whose mild manner usually got him cast as





effete Europeans or occasionally sinister continentals, even Nazi spies. He could be a sort of pound-shop Peter Lorre in that regard, but not so mercurial, eccentric or macabre. Often he played genuinely nice fellows, as he is here, if we overlook the murdering part.

Lewis always described his directing choices as creative responses to practical limitations. Here, he had to create a French village on the backlot where no such set existed. He combined pieces of existing structures, including one bombed-out town from a war movie, and by judiciously positioning foreground objects (always his speciality, hence his nickname) was able to create a sense of depth and of streets and buildings continuing out of frame, where in reality they petered out into nothing.

When the murdered woman's parents learn of her death, Lewis shot the scene in an unconventional wide view, leaving their reactions to the audience's imagination. Again, his motivation was, in a sense, pragmatic.

As Lewis told Peter Bogdanovich, in his only long interview, "I got on the set and rehearsed it and said, 'Oh no, no, no – impossible – how can I supply dialogue to meet this kind of a situation?' So I threw out all the dialogue and, you recall, I put the camera outside of the house. Way in the background was a big window that was cut up into about sixteen little panes, and *there* you saw the mother busy polishing some silverware or something, and in runs this little Frenchman – in extreme long shot – he runs through the house, disappears behind a wall, then reveals himself in front of the window. They're two tiny figures now, and he's talking, of course, but you can't hear it. We were shooting it without recording. And the only sound you hear is the shattering noise when she drops that silver platter. And that's all you see. The audience, again, supplied the emotion."

One loves Lewis already for the punchy vigour of his style and his eccentric stylistic mannerisms, but one loves him more here for his emotional reticence, his discretion, protecting his actors and audience from a potentially messy emotional display. (Billy Wilder also cautioned that scenes of characters receiving bad news were always best presented from behind. But extreme long shot will do.)

OK, other aspects of the film aren't as delicate. The hunchbacked quasi-village idiot character (played by comic monologist Brother Theodore) really shouldn't be dressed like a medieval bellringer. It seems the French setting got the costume designer thinking over-literally, but somebody (i.e. Lewis) should really have stepped in. Of course, the only reason the movie is set in France is to avoid offending American cops with a story about a homicidal homicide detective; otherwise Lewis could have saved himself the design problems and just set the story in Bedford Falls or Anytown, USA.



"I signed my name to every frame of film," said Lewis, and true to his word begins with a striking track-in on a ringing phone: when a hand reaches in to finally grasp the receiver, the composition strikingly resembles the starting point of Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, another story of a detective losing his head over a woman. And then we're way up high, observing through a ceiling fan, in a typical Lewis tricky composition. Eye-catching camera placement could be a defense against bad acting or bad writing, or just a way to hold a shot longer than you could otherwise get away with, an important consideration when the schedule's tight. It's remarkable that most B-pictures seem unaware of this trick, but then most B-picture directors didn't have Lewis's imagination or skill.

Of course, Lewis' fondness for prominent foreground objects that block part of the frame will be very useful when he has to set the rest of his movie in a French village that doesn't exist.

The way we read stories is interesting. So, a movie about a detective going on holiday should start us grumbling, "But we want to see the detective *at work!*" Instead, we immediately surmise that murder will follow Geray's Inspector Cassin to his bucolic getaway, familiar with all those Hercule Poirots where someone will turn up conveniently murdered minutes after the sleuth checks in. Of course, here there's a good reason why the crime follows the crime-solver...

Love interest peeping from behind hanging laundry – first one hand, then two, then just the eyes, then half the face. Lewis, deprived of grand wide shots, makes do with less, reducing actors to fragments, thereby actually *increasing* their impact. When she sizes up our hero, it's as a series of detail shots of his car, thereby typing her as somewhat mercenary. (It's significant that Lewis was originally in charge of shooting inserts and pieces for montage sequences, so creating story and character out of details was second nature to him.)

The central hotel set is built with a cutaway wall so the camera can glide like a ghost from outside to inside. A garden wall eliminates the need for scenery, though it does create a slightly claustrophobic version of the French countryside. As with Lewis's other tricks, this is all about economy *and* aesthetic interest at the same time. Lewis's cinematographer, Burnett Guffey, had followed him from *My Name Is Julia Ross* and would rise irresistibly onto A pictures. A short while later his camera would be wafting from room to room for the great Max Ophüls in *The Reckless Moment*. He would shoot *Bonnie and Clyde*, mostly under protest, and win an Oscar for it.

The great Cassin is made idiotic by love to an almost Clouseau-like degree, but the ambience is more like Clouzot—a small town filled with gossip, bickering and mysteries





(and anonymous letters) just like in *Le Corbeau*. Well, maybe not as harsh as that; Columbia had no wish to have their movies banned in France. And, despite his cluster of scribes, Lewis can't get his cardboard Frenchies to assume real dimensionality, so the pre-murder build-up must rely on the elegance Lewis and his technicians can apply to it, and to the audience's ability to anticipate trouble ahead.

Lewis' shots start to go full noir even before the body is found. As Foster Hirsch puts it in *The Dark Side of the Screen*, "Lewis presents this absorbing but hardly unusual study of schizophrenia with a calculated visual design, the character's psychological schism telegraphed through a series of mirror shots and reflections as well as a consistent frames-within-the-frame motif. Space is broken up by doors, windows, beams, railings, bars, low ceilings. Visually trapped within the image, the detective never occupies space that is open and clear; he is pushed into the frame, photographed behind windows and doors, as space seems to close in on him. This sense of encumbrance is magnified as he comes closer to confronting his double-ness."

Of course, Cassin isn't schizophrenic in any medically accurate sense: he has movie madness, the duality of man writ large. A Dr. Monet gives his impression (sorry) of the case, dispensing what Orson Welles called "dollar-book Freud," to explain Cassin's weirdly compartmentalised consciousness. (It seems to be a point of honour for Hollywood screenwriters, who were all in therapy themselves, to make their psychiatrist characters as unconvincing and inaccurate as possible. Note how the windy analysis of the shrink in *Psycho* doesn't actually fit the facts as we've seen them. Same here.)

All this bravura works as both natural accompaniment to a gripping whodunnit, and as analog for the hero's disintegrating mind. *Noir* eats itself. Always a highly self-conscious style, prone to overt symbolism, now every trick comments on itself, as genre convention and psychological symptom.

Dramatic irony: Cassin has staged the perfect crime, then suppressed all knowledge of it, but he's such a master detective he can reconstruct the crime flawlessly. He goes forward, eating his own clues. Worse, in his fugue state, he kills again in attempt to cover his tracks. Hollywood had just botched Patrick Hamilton's psychological thriller *Hangover Square* the previous year, but the serial-killer additions grafted on by 20th Century Fox formed a clear antecedent to *So Dark the Night's* amnesiac protagonist, a man who is simultaneously guilty and innocent. In one of his loopyest moments, Lewis pulls a theatrical lighting change on Geray/Cassin's face, illuminating his sinister side by spooky underlighting, the visual equivalent of the internal "click!" sound that signals the personality switches of Hamilton's tortured protagonist.



Things get stranger still when Cassin is about to commit his fourth murder: a close-up of his hand grasping a poker, in a deliberate echo of the opening shot. Then, a shot of a different kind, stopping him cold. A reverse angle shows his superior officers, arrived by magic, standing outside, a bullet-hole in the window between them. The impermeable barrier between the two halves of Cassin's mind is broken, and the truth can penetrate.

As the window swims in and out of focus, Cassin sees his own image in it, a movie projection of himself earlier in the story. He smashes the window, falls dying, and declares the case closed, somewhat presumptuously claiming credit for his own execution. And then the commissioner of police and his pal just walk sadly away, ignoring Cassin's concussed victim, because walking sadly away in a high-angle shot is what you do in this kind of situation at the end of a crime film, whether it makes sense or not. The one psychologically-rounded character slain, the movie can revert safely to genre conventions, such as saying "The End."

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## ABOUT THE TRANSFER

*So Dark the Night* is presented in its original aspect ratio of 1.37:1 with mono audio. The film was transferred in High Definition and supplied to Arrow Films by Sony Pictures Home Entertainment.

## PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and booklet produced by: **Francesco Simeoni**

Associate Producer: **Liane Cunje & James Flower**

Executive Producer: **Kevin Lambert**

Technical Producer: **James White**

QC: **Nora Mehenni**

Blu-ray authoring: **Visual Data Media Services**

Subtitling: **The Engine House Media Services**

Artist: **Tonci Zonjic**

Design: **Obviously Creative**

## SPECIAL THANKS

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