

NOIR'S UNSUNG HEROES

**PERCY
HELTON**

By Eric Beetner
Special to the Sentinel

Short in stature, stoop-shouldered, and often peering through thick glasses, Percy Helton stood toe-to-toe with many of the best noir performers of the '40s and '50s. Much of Helton's charm comes from his voice, a strange squeak not unlike a leaky balloon. This hoarseness came about at an early age from a stage role that required him to shout and scream night after night. When the play finished its run and his voice didn't return to normal, he became forever relegated to supporting roles.

His film debut was in 1915's silent *The Fairy and The Waif* (he was the waif) but his noir debut came in 1947 with *Larceny*, featuring John Payne, Joan Caulfield and the always reliable Dan Duryea. Helton is



Percy Helton

Charlie, a charming and kindly old hotel clerk, the only bright spot in a story of double-crossers and cheap hoods out to fleece a WWII widow.

Helton was himself a WWI veteran (earning a distinguished service cross), but performing was the only life he ever really knew since his childhood, when he was featured in his father's vaudeville act. In 1931 he married a gal named Edna and they took that "til death do we part" thing seriously.

Helton is featured in small roles in a surprising number of noir classics (21 in all) such as *Call Northside 777* (1948), *Thieves' Highway* (1948) and *Criss Cross* (1949) where he plays that Noir stalwart: the bartender who knows all the dirt.

That same year Percy Helton was ringside for one of the great boxing films of all time, *The Set-Up*. Director Robert Wise's clever use of real time makes *The Set-Up* a nonstop ticking clock of suspense. Percy Helton fit right in to the sweaty locker room of the boxing hall as Stoker's ring man, Red. In his tank top and greasy comb-over he dishes out tired advice to Stoker as he and

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**FNF & UCLA ARCHIVE TO
RESTORE THE PROWLER**

*Work Begins on Pristine New
Version of 1951 Masterpiece*

LOS ANGELES, CA—One of the greatest but least-seen noirs, 1951's *The Prowler*, is being restored through a joint effort of the Film Noir Foundation and the UCLA Film and Television Archive. The collaboration agreement was reached in early April, and work on the project has already begun. If all goes according to plan, the restored film will be available for its "re-premiere" at NOIR CITY 6 in San Francisco.

Although *The Prowler* has been screened several times in recent years, the 35mm print being used is the only one known to exist, prompting FNF founder Eddie Muller to remark, "We're thrilled to resurrect *The Prowler* before that last surviving print dies a gallant death." The film, independently produced by Horizon Pictures and originally distributed by United Artists, has never been issued on VHS or DVD and rarely, if ever, appears on television.

Written by the blacklisted Dalton Trumbo (Hugo Butler acted as his front) and directed by the soon-to-be-blacklisted Joseph Losey, the film stars Van Heflin as sociopathic cop Webb Garwood, whose pursuit of lonely housewife Susan Gilvray (Evelyn Keyes) leads to murder. Horizon Pictures was a short-lived production company formed by producer Sam Spiegel and silent partner John Huston (Keyes' husband at the time).

"The UCLA Film & Television Archive is ecstatic about this new preservation partnership with the FNF," said UCLA motion picture archivist Todd Wiener. "The Foundation's enthusiasm and tireless efforts in raising awareness for noir cinema preservation is vitally important on so many levels. *The Prowler* is a perfect title to initiate this new partnership, particularly since the Archive recently acquired pre-print materials that appear to be in excellent shape."

The project will be directed by UCLA restoration specialist Nancy Mysel. She has also initiated a search of the archive's extensive holdings for other neglected noirs that may be ripe for restoration in collaboration with the Film Noir Foundation.



Van Heflin and Evelyn Keyes in *The Prowler*.

"There are some interesting elements in the archive," said Muller, "Just waiting to be turned into projectable 35mm prints."

The UCLA Film and Television Archive is internationally renowned for its pioneering efforts to preserve and showcase not only classic but also current and innovative film and television. Additionally, the Archive is a unique resource for media study, with one of the largest collections of media materials in the United States—second only to the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.—and the largest of any university in the world. Its vaults hold more than 270,000 motion picture and television titles and 27 million feet of newsreel footage. The combined collections represent an all-encompassing documentation of the 20th century.

Under their arrangement, UCLA will handle the physical restoration work, while the FNF acts in a marketing and fundraising capacity. A significant portion of the restoration budget will come from the net revenue earned by the NOIR CITY film festival in San Francisco. Author and FNF member James Ellroy has also made a significant contribution, having cited *The Prowler* as one of his favorite films.

Emigrés and Film Noir

FRITZ LANG

By Marc Svetov
Special to the Sentinel

Insurmountable destructive human forces unleashed by vast criminal networks, opposed to as well as collaborating with the police force—these criminal gangs, led by sociopaths plotting against civilized society, are Fritz Lang's specialty. So many of his films are populated by the sexually abnormal: psychopaths, sadists, masochists, murderers, suicides, even child murderers: it's a veritable pantheon of perversion.

One source of Lang's pessimism is his cultural inheritance; he was the first to film *Die Nibelungen*, the German national saga, a bleak vision of a dysfunctional royal family and the inevitable cataclysm coming from mythic Destiny affecting entire nations. His vision of the future was *Metropolis*, where again we encounter plans for conspiratorial, diabolical forces let loose by a psychotic inventor. The ending is softened—where Labor and Capital meet—but essentially, as with all of Lang, the defeat of evil is only



Fritz Lang

temporary.

Mixing unusual angles with bizarre close-ups, Lang employed an arsenal of unique shots as he ordered take after take, exasperating his collaborators, treating the actors like scenery. His crews were always on the verge of mutiny.

His visual style—chiaroscuro lighting, shadows, streaks, vast pools of darkness, brilliant light; his imagery and themes

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**SEATTLE TO
BE LATEST
"NOIR CITY"**

SUMMER IN SEATTLE tends to sunny skies—a welcome respite for Rain City inhabitants—but the Film Noir Foundation will infuse the Northwest movie mecca with darkness this July 6–12th, when Noir City inhabits SIFF Cinema, the beautiful new state-of-the-art cinema operated by the folks who put on the Seattle International Film Festival. The 400-seat theater is located in the Seattle Center, and boasts impeccable picture and sound.

Noir czar Eddie Muller will be on hand to introduce many of the programs. Highlights include rarities that have never been available on tape or DVD like *I Love Trouble*, penned by TV legend Roy Huggins (*77 Sunset Strip*); *Pushover*, featuring Kim Novak's movie debut as a gangster's moll opposite Fred MacMurray's smitten sap; and Phil Karlson's signature film *99 River Street*; plus a gorgeous brand new restoration of the Technicolor noir *Leave Her to Heaven* starring the magnificently deadly Gene Tierney.