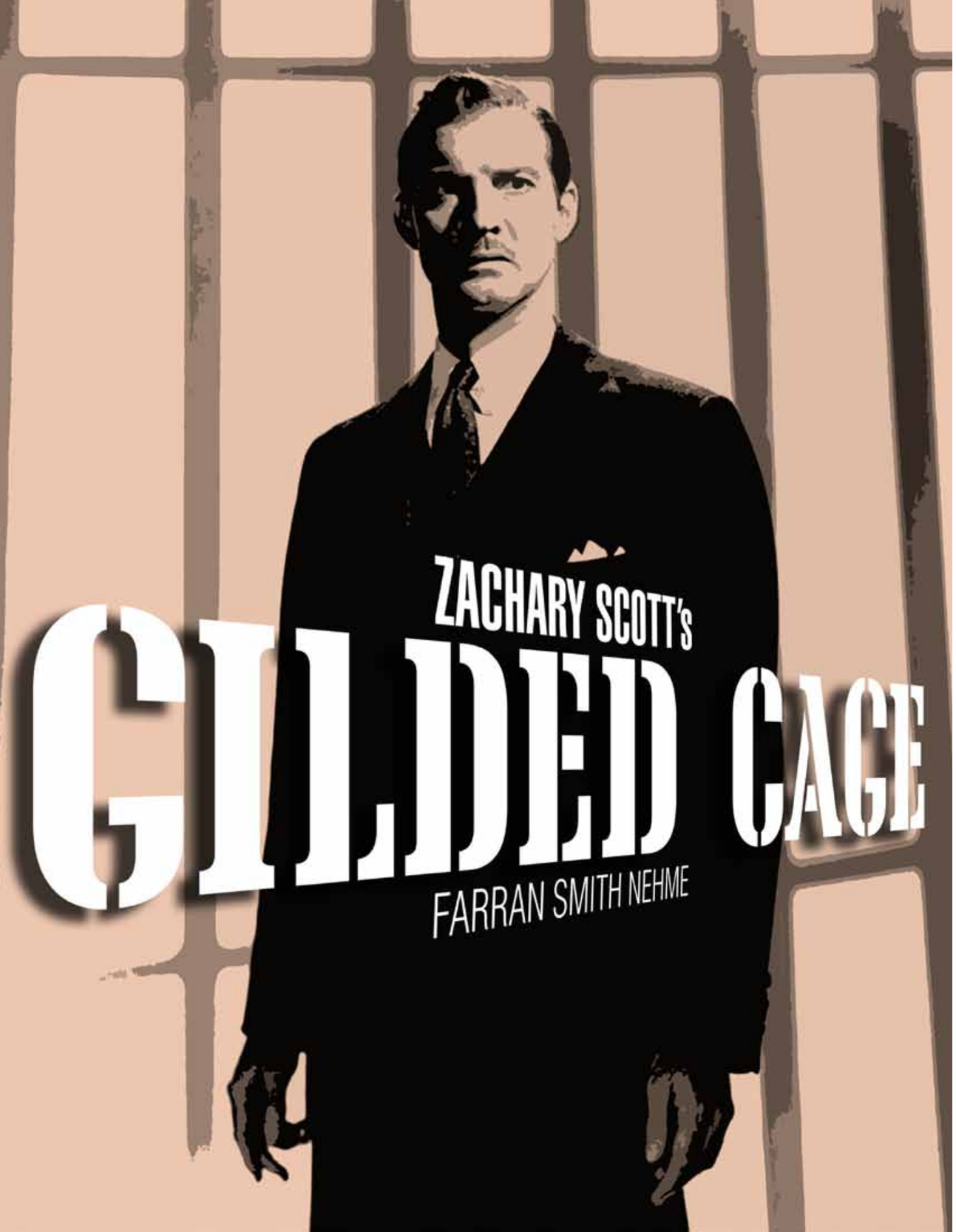

Mildred Pierce: And just what do you do?

Monte Beragon: I loaf. In a decorative and highly charming manner.

Mildred Pierce: Is that all?

Monte Beragon: With me, loafing is a science.

–Mildred Pierce

Zachary Scott spent most of his career in what he called crime pictures. After a striking debut as the icy-hearted title character in *The Mask of Dimitrios* (1944), he played one exquisite exception—the struggling tenant farmer in Jean Renoir's *The Southerner* (1945)—only to find himself defined by his next role: Monte Beragon, the smooth, sneaky, negative-cash-flow aristocrat who seduces mother and daughter in *Mildred Pierce* (1945). Thereafter came Westerns, comedies, even a couple of musicals. But mostly, Scott kept playing the same part. Whether or not he straightened up by the last reel, his typical character was either vaguely or explicitly upper crust, in need of a better income, and engaging in shady activity to keep himself in polished shoes and well-tailored suits.

And Scott, under contract to Warner Bros. during the key years of his career, learned to hate it. When reporters from the fan magazines came to call, he'd talk about how much fun it was to play a villain. Off-screen, Scott was initially compliant, but soon began besieging producers' offices, trying to alter his typecasting.

It was an uphill battle. Golden Age Hollywood didn't much care about your true background or personality. If you looked wholesome, then wholesome was what you played, which is how incorrigible gambler and womanizer Mickey Rooney made Andy Hardy movies until there was no hiding the dissipation on his face. Scott, on the other hand, really was an old-money scion; it was the criminal inclinations that existed only in the studio's imagination. He was born in Austin in 1914. His surgeon father was a direct descendant of George Washington, his mother the product of one of the oldest ranching families in Texas. As detailed in Ronald L. Davis's 2006 biography *Zachary Scott: Hollywood's Sophisticated Cad*, when Zachary was four years old, oil and gas were discovered under his father-in-law's land. The royalties were eventually divided among the family members, and Zachary Scott could depend on a regular check whether or not he was acting.

At age thirteen Scott told his parents he wanted to be an actor, and they reacted in the time-honored way: by praying he'd snap out of it. He attended the University of Texas, dropped out, hopped a freighter to England, and began learning his craft in repertory theater. When he returned, he was good enough to be cast in small parts on Broadway, where Hollywood noticed him. The early days were charmed ones. His 1944 debut came as the title character in *The Mask of Dimitrios*, adapted from Eric Ambler's excellent novel. Directed by Jean Negulesco, who was also making his first feature, the film costars Peter Lorre and Sydney Greenstreet and plays almost as an exercise in pure style, the Warner artisans and back lot conjuring locales from a Bulgarian nightclub to the Venice Simplon-Orient-Express.

You don't need a big part to make a splashy screen debut, but it helps if your character is the one nobody can stop talking about. Dimitrios is presumed dead at the movie's open, but from there he is seen in successive flashbacks as his trickery puts a hangman's noose around an innocent vendor, breaks the heart of Faye Emerson, and blackmails a clerk into selling military secrets. Greenstreet, who had risen to stardom just three years earlier with a bravura supporting turn in *The Maltese Falcon*, was generous with advice, and Scott creates a memorable criminal, as smooth as he is amoral. Such was the studio's faith in their new contract player that Scott received second billing, below Greenstreet and above Lorre.

Scott's future seemed assured when he won the title role in only his second film, *The Southerner*. It claimed prizes at Venice and Cannes, landed an Oscar nomination for Renoir, and garnered excellent reviews. But it was the 1945 adaptation of James M. Cain's *Mildred Pierce* that provided the quintessential image of Zachary Scott: Monte Beragon, in a tuxedo, taking four or five bullets straight to his chest and diving onto the plush carpet, his last breath one word: "Mildred . . ." Beragon was certainly a louse in the novel, but Ranald MacDougall's script gave us a super-louse. The Warner Bros. costume department went crazy with seventeen costume changes for Monte, making the character perhaps the greatest clotheshorse, male or female, in all of noir. And Michael Curtiz, though Scott doesn't seem to have liked the director any more than anyone else did, gave the actor an intense, doe-eyed appeal. While Veda Pierce (Ann Blyth) is one of the more obvious vipers in the noir canon, Monte at first seems—*seems*—to feel real attraction for Joan Crawford's Mildred. Only gradually, like Mildred, does the audience come to learn Monte will happily destroy a life without mussing his shirt or spilling a drop of his martini.

Scott couldn't have known that there is sometimes a downside to a perfect performance: they want you to deliver it again. And again, and again.

Danger Signal (1945) in hindsight was just that: Scott as another smooth-talking sociopath taking in another mother and daughter (plus a kid sister for good measure). Directed by Robert Florey and lensed by the genius James Wong Howe, the film boasts a fantastic opening that shows Ronnie Mason (Scott) smoking a cigarette while

Zachary Scott and Joan Crawford listen attentively to director Michael Curtiz during production of *Mildred Pierce*. Scott's portrayal of Monte Beragon would forever change his career

Louis Hayward and Diana Lynn appear stunned by Scott's sinister suavity in the 1948 Eagle-Lion "epic" *Ruthless*

his female companion appears peacefully asleep. It's only when he removes her wedding ring that we realize she's dead. The close-up of Scott, cigarette dangling, as he coolly assesses the ring is the most frightening thing in the movie. In fact, Mason's scenes tend to be the best; Scott didn't like playing a serial killer, but he was awfully good at it. Slowly but surely, he was being typed. In *The Unfaithful* (1947), directed by Vincent Sherman, he had the cuckolded-husband part in a softened-up spin on *The Letter* (1940). Being a nice (albeit stubborn and wounded) guy was a break from the villains, but Scott correctly perceived that Warner's highest-budgeted productions were going forward without him.

He was loaned out to Eagle-Lion for one of his best roles, as the self-made tycoon Horace Vendig in *Ruthless* (1948). Eagle-Lion was technically a Poverty Row outfit, but the project landed a talented cast that included Louis Hayward as Vendig's long-suffering friend, Scott's old mentor Sydney Greenstreet as his sexual and business rival Mansfield, and Lucille Bremer as Mansfield's wife Christa, whom Vendig inevitably beds. Director Edgar G. Ulmer got a bigger budget than usual as well as a high-quality script by the soon-to-be-blacklisted Alvah Bessie (who found his name left off the credits). Laced with flashbacks like the masterpiece it's often compared with, *Citizen Kane* (1941), *Ruthless* traces a similar arc for Vendig. He starts with a soul and gradually discards it, betrayal by betrayal.

For much of his Hollywood career, Scott wore a gold hoop earring off-screen ("Two would be ostentatious," he explained), and while he was married twice and had a daughter, he never seemed to care that his precise sexual proclivities were subject to gossip. Nor did he avoid parts that hinted at twisted debauchery; on the contrary, he excelled at them. Early on in *Ruthless* Vendig is humiliated by the Mansfields, and the silky pleasure he takes later in degrading

> **"Maybe Scott saw brighter horizons for 1949. If so, he was gravely mistaken. He was about to have the worst year of his life.**

Scott tussles with perpetual noir weasel Elisha Cook Jr. in Warner's 1949 release *Flaxy Martin* (left); the same year, he reunited with *Dimitrios* co-star Sydney Greenstreet (right) and Joan Crawford in *Flamingo Road*, which reunited much of the *Mildred Pierce* team

Christa hints at deeper inclinations than mere revenge. Then there is Mallory (Diana Lynn), the alluring young woman who triggers lust in Vendig from the moment they meet. There is a distinct possibility—though for the sake of the Breen Office the dialogue rules it out—that Mallory might be Vendig's own illegitimate daughter by his abandoned first love, also played by Lynn. The suggestion is there in the possessive way Scott eyes Lynn and in how Ulmer frames them together. Vendig has gloried in breaking taboos, after all; what does another one matter?

Meanwhile, back at the Warner ranch, Scott was dealt another couple of criminals to play. In *Whiplash* (1948) he is Rex Durant, the abusive and insanely controlling husband of Laurie, a singer played by Alexis Smith. The twist is that Rex, an ex-prizefighter, is in a wheelchair, having been crippled in his last bout. Scott's native elegance works against accepting him as a boxer, but his performance as a man who has channeled his sex drive into sadism—"I always win," he says—is intriguingly sinister. It was a low-budget production, and Rex's ultimate fate is a mixture of horrifying and ludicrous, but the character had layers for Scott to explore.

Flaxy Martin (1949) found Scott as another high-class guy keeping low company, in this case Virginia Mayo's title character. Her mobbed-up showgirl is one ice-cold customer even by noir standards. But Mob lawyer Walter Colby (Scott) loves Flaxy and concocts a cockamamie scheme to take a murder rap for her; naturally, she double-crosses him. If you're an actor in a noir, you always want to be the guy who gets to push around Elisha Cook Jr., and Scott does, both verbally ("Will you kindly take your legal advice back to the sixth grade?") and physically, in a major rooftop brawl. Scott had also learned the pleasures of small gestures in these "mellers." Walter's contemptuous little push to a pleading Flaxy, with the back of the hand in which he's holding a scotch, is classic.

Still, *Flamingo Road* (1949), which re-teamed Scott with Crawford and Curtiz, his key collaborators from *Mildred Pierce*, was better news in every way. The budget was decent; Robert Wilder's screenplay of his own hothouse novel offered some big scenes for Scott's character; and in the cast and ready to consume the scenery for lunch was Scott's old friend Sydney Greenstreet. Crawford plays Lane Bellamy, a carnival dancer who washes up in a corrupt Florida town and proceeds to upend the local establishment. Fielding Carlisle (Scott, graced with another snooty handle) falls in love with Lane, but must marry a vacuous local deb in order to preserve his hopes of becoming governor. "All the characters are either crooked, engaged in adultery or illicit sex, as well as in criminal attempts to frame one another," read the Breen Office's accurate and delightful plot summary. Naturally the studio had to clean it up a bit, but enough sleaze survived to make *Flamingo Road* one of Scott's most beloved films as well as a personal favorite of melodrama maestro Rainer Werner Fassbinder.

What's more, *Flamingo Road* was a hit. Maybe Scott saw brighter horizons for 1949. If so, he was gravely mistaken. He was about to have the worst year of his life. It started out well enough in the spring, with Scott going to Film Classics to make *Guilty Bystander*, his fourth and best film with Faye Emerson. For once he was free of the threadbare-socialite routine. Scott is Max Thursday, an alcoholic ex-cop whose wife has left him and taken their son. Life has spiraled down to a gig as the house detective in a flophouse run by Smitty (Mary Boland, splendid in her final film role). Emerson plays ex-wife Georgia, who turns to Max in desperation when their son goes missing. Depression and drink were two things Scott knew well, and he throws himself into every sordid scene of self-pity and lashing out. Made just as Hollywood was discovering alcohol addiction as opposed to well-lubricated good times, *Guilty*

Scott went the indie route in 1950, making the grungy *Guilty Bystander* for Film Classics on location (with Kay Medford) in New York

Bystander knows going on the wagon is agony for Max even if he fears for his son's life. The diamond-smuggling plot device gets tortuous, but Max's struggle never feels phony. His major scene with Smitty, which should not be spoiled, is a marvel of high-tension reveals. (One reason *Guilty Bystander* doesn't have a better reputation is that it's been circulating for years in appalling video versions. Director Nicolas Winding Refn, a fan of the film, has financed a digital restoration to be offered free via his website, byNWR.com.)

It was a terrific performance. But in a very noir twist, while Scott was on location, his wife, Elaine, was falling in love with John Steinbeck. The two met while they were both houseguests of Ann Sothern. By the time *Guilty Bystander* wrapped and Scott had rented a house in Malibu for the family, Elaine announced that she was leaving him for the *Grapes of Wrath* guy. Years later, daughter Waverly recalled to biographer Davis that when the bombshell was dropped, Scott stood in their living room yelling "*John Steinbeck?!!?*" in disbelief. The denial phase lasted a while, until Elaine filed for divorce in November.

Days later, Scott went rafting on a rubber boat off Topanga Canyon with his good friend, actor John Emery. A riptide capsized the craft, Scott hit his head on a rock, and Emery had to swim for shore with his unconscious friend in tow. The injuries kept Scott in the hospital for days, and the recuperation period was long enough to add to Jack Warner's displeasure with his recalcitrant contract player.

Scott's prospects grew dimmer. He had run the gamut of ways to piss off the studio brass. He borrowed against his salary, asked for loan-outs, pestered them to change the type of roles he was offered. Elaine had charged "mental cruelty" when asking for a divorce, and the filing included embarrassing revelations such as the dinner party where Scott threw an ashtray at a wall. And there were the absences: a "cold" here, a "bump on the head" there, "exhaustion," a plain old no-show. Give or take a few accurate excuses, Jack Warner knew exactly what this spelled: Scott drank, and it was

> "He had run the gamut of ways to piss off the studio brass. He borrowed against his salary, asked for loan-outs, pestered them to change the type of roles he was offered.

The actor ably modeled a "wife-beater" T-shirt on loan to MGM for 1950's *Shadow on the Wall*, in which he was accused of killing his wife (Kristine Miller); back at Warner in 1951, he was another callous cad opposite Ruth Roman in *Lightning Strikes Twice*

getting worse. Stars at their zenith can get away with that kind of behavior, sometimes. Scott wasn't a star.

With characteristic cold blood, Warner Bros. began to ease him out. Scott knew what was happening, but he was in no shape to fight it. He was loaned out to MGM to make *Shadow on the Wall* (1950), playing an architect falsely accused of murdering his wife. Scott has good scenes early in the film: he gets to play the charming daddy to daughter Gigi Perreau and has a bang-up marital row with his gorgeous, conniving wife (Kristine Miller). But the script soon shuffles his character aside to focus on the real killer—played by Ann Sothern, the woman who had inadvertently precipitated the breakup of his marriage. Scott, still the Texas gentleman underneath, gave no sign of holding it against her. The movie performed well, but Warner Bros. remained set on making Scott someone else's problem. His next film, Nicholas Ray's *Born to Be Bad* (1950), was made at RKO. Scott is Curtis Carey, the filthy-rich fiancé of Donna (Joan Leslie), who's rapidly lured away by the charms of Christabel, played with bitchy élan by Joan Fontaine. Once Scott had been the *homme fatal*, the cad that women couldn't help falling for. Now he was the patsy. Graced with Ray's distinctive direction, it's a delicious tale of underhanded schemes among the rich and sort-of bohemian, even if it flopped and no one enjoyed making it. But for Scott, it was another signpost on the road out of Hollywood.

"REQUIEM FOR A NUN"—Ruth Ford (left), Zachary Scott and Bertice Reading in William Faulkner's play based on his own novel. At the Golden Friday night.

Lightning Strikes Twice (1951) tolled the bell for Scott's Warner Bros. contract. It has a beautiful noir look courtesy of director King Vidor and cinematographer Sidney Hickox, especially in the death-row opening (Richard Todd's character has been accused of killing his wife) and a highly romantic thunderstorm. The oddball but rather entertaining film takes a facsimile of *Rebecca*'s (1940) plot and characters and plops the whole thing in the Texas desert. The cast includes Mercedes McCambridge in her film debut as well as some rococo dialogue from screenwriter Lenore Coffee. Fourth-billed Scott plays Harvey Fortescue Turner, yet another in the actor's long line of ritzy character names. Harvey shows up nearly an hour into the running time, establishes his playboy bona fides, recites a little poetry, falls for Ruth Roman's female lead, and that's about it. The skimpy role must have been hard on Scott, just a half-decade past being one of the brightest newcomers on the lot. Ten days after *Lightning Strikes Twice* wrapped on March 25, 1950, writes Davis, Scott was paid $7,500 severance and let go.

It was a blow, but it didn't send Scott into a self-destructive spiral, as happened many times with other actors. He soon remarried, to actress Ruth Ford, and adopted her daughter Shelley. In later years he began to consider himself more of a stage actor; together with

In Luis Buñuel's *The Young One* (1960), Scott had his last great turn as a racist gamekeeper tormenting a black musician (Bernie Hamilton)

Ford, he bought the rights to William Faulkner's *Requiem for a Nun* (1951) and a play version was brought to Broadway. His subsequent film career had its good moments, notably an excellent noir-inflected Western, *The Secret of Convict Lake* (1951); *Flame of the Islands* (1956), a rather fun Yvonne De Carlo vehicle from Republic Pictures; and some interesting crime pictures made in England, including *Wings of Danger* (1952), *The Counterfeit Plan* (1957), and *Man in the Shadow* (1957).

The standout in Scott's later film work is *The Young One* (1960), one of Luis Buñuel's few English-language films, a haunting fable of isolation and racism. Scott plays Miller, a gamekeeper on a Southern island who tangles with the black jazz musician Traver (Bernie Hamilton), sheltering there after being falsely accused of raping a white woman. Scott's part is a through-the-looking-glass pendant to *The Southerner*, with Miller as unsavory and lecherous as the Renoir movie's farmer was decent and kind. Biographer Davis says Buñuel was hard on the cast, the kind of director who yelled to get what he wanted, but Scott understood—"he told me ... I was too camera-wise"—and was proud of how the film turned out. For much of his life, Scott had readily named Jean Renoir as the greatest director he ever worked with, and now he added Buñuel, though *The Young One* was and remains a prickly film, underappreciated even by the director's admirers. Though the stage work continued, including a pleasurable stint as Professor Higgins on tour with *My Fair Lady*, *The Young One* was his last significant movie. Zachary Scott died of brain cancer in 1964, just a few months after being diagnosed.

His refinement of taste was no act, but it may have blinded him to the quality of much of his own work. Film noir is beloved by modern audiences, but at the time it wasn't exactly prestigious. An A-list production with a literary source, like *The Mask of Dimitrios* or *Mildred Pierce*, was one thing, but to Scott and many other actors, so-called crime melodramas were predictable and disreputable. In 1948 Scott campaigned hard for a loan-out to MGM to play the male lead in *That Forsyte Woman* (1949), based on a novel by then-well-regarded John Galsworthy. The actor was heartbroken when the role went to Errol Flynn. He couldn't have known that *That Forsyte Woman* would eventually gather dust alongside other white elephants, while any number of the noirs he made after—*Ruthless*, *Whiplash*, *Flamingo Road*, *Guilty Bystander*, heck, even *Flaxy Martin*—would be giving pleasure to audiences decades later. ■