



Lincoln Film Society

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Patron: Jim Broadbent
Registered Charity No. 1156478
Friday April 12th 2019

The Wages of Fear (PG)

dir: **Henri-Georges Clouzot**

Starring: **Yves Montand, Charles Vanel, Vera Clouzot**

Synopsis: Mario, Jo, Bimba and Luigi are stuck in the isolated oil town of Las Piedras, desperate to get out. When a massive fire erupts at one of the SOC oil fields, the only way to deal with it is to cap the well using nitroglycerine. The company foreman O'Brien, recruits the 4 as truck drivers, offering them \$2,000 each to move the highly volatile explosive the 300 miles to the fire. The drivers are forced to deal with a series of obstacles. One truck explodes, killing Luigi and Bimba. The remaining truck arrives at the fire. Mario manoeuvres it into position but runs over Jo, fatally injuring him. Mario collapses, exhausted. Recovering, he drives back, where a party has been organised to celebrate his return, but the truck comes off the road, killing him.

When the great French thriller "The Wages of Fear" (1953) was first released in America, it was missing parts of several early scenes -- because it was too long, the U.S. distributors said, and because they were anti-American, according to the Parisian critics.

Now that the movie is available for the first time in the original cut of director Henri-Georges Clouzot, it is possible to see that both sides have a point.

The film's extended suspense sequences deserve a place among the great stretches of cinema. Four desperate men, broke and stranded in a backwater of Latin America, sign up on a suicidal mission to drive two truckloads of nitroglycerin 300 miles down a hazardous road. They could be blown to pieces at any instant, and in the film's most famous scene Clouzot requires them to turn their trucks around on a rickety, half-finished timber platform high above a mountain gorge.

Their journey also requires them to use some of the nitroglycerin to blow up a massive boulder in the road, and at the end, after a pipeline ruptures, a truck has to pass through a pool of oil that seems to tar them with the ignominy of their task. For these are not heroes, Clouzot seems to argue, but men who have valued themselves at the \$2,000 a head that the oil company will pay them if they get the nitro to the wellhead where it is needed.

The company, which significantly has the same initials as Standard Oil, is an American firm that exploits workers in the unnamed nation where the film is set. The screenplay is specific about the motives of the American boss who hires the truck drivers: "They don't belong to a union, and they don't have any relatives, so if anything happens, no one will come around causing trouble." There are other moments when the Yankee capitalists are made out as the villains, and reportedly these were among the scenes that were trimmed before the film opened in this country.

The irony is that the trims have been restored at a time when they have lost much of their relevance, revealing that the movie



works better as a thriller than as a political tract, anyway. The opening sequence, set in the dismal village where unemployed men fight for jobs, is similar to the opening of John Huston's "The Treasure of the Sierra Madre" (1948), even down to the detail of visiting the local barber. But while Huston used his opening to establish his characters and work in some wry humor, Clouzot creates mostly aimless ennui.

Although eager to establish his anti-American subtext, he reveals himself as a reactionary in sexual politics with the inexplicable character of Linda (Vera Clouzot), who does menial jobs in the saloon. She is in love with one of the local layabouts (Yves Montand, in his first dramatic role), who slaps her around and tells her to get lost, and she spends most of her time sprawled on the ground, although always impeccably made up. There is no apparent purpose for this character, apart from the way she functions to set up such lines as, "Women are no good." If the opening sequences, now restored, have a tendency to drag, the movie is heart-stopping once the two trucks begin their torturous 300-mile journey to a blazing oil well. The cinematographer, Armand Thirard, pins each team of men into its claustrophobic truck cab, where every jolt and bump in the road causes them to wince, waiting for a death that, if it comes, will happen so suddenly they will never know it.

Clouzot does an especially effective job of setting up the best sequence, where first one and then the other truck has to back up on the unstable wooden platform in order to get around a hairpin bend in the trail. The first truck is used to establish the situation, so we know exactly what Montand is up against when he arrives at the scene: Rotten timbers break, the truck begins to slide sideways, a steel support cable gets caught on the side of the truck, and we are watching great technical work as it creates great fiction.

When William Friedkin remade "The Wages of Fear" as "Sorcerer" in 1977, he combined this scene with a later one, in a jungle setting, to create a sequence where a truck wavers on a vast, unstable suspension bridge. Friedkin had greater technical resources, and his sequence looks more impressive, but Clouzot's editing selects each moment so correctly that you can see where Friedkin, and a lot of other directors, got their inspiration.

One thing that establishes "The Wages of Fear" as a film from the early 1950s, and not from today, is its attitude toward happy endings. Modern Hollywood thrillers cannot end in tragedy for its heroes, because the studios won't allow it. "The Wages of Fear" is completely free to let anything happen to any of its characters, and if all four are not dead when the nitro reaches the blazing oil well, it

may be because Clouzot is even more deeply ironic than we expect. The last scene, where a homebound truck is intercut with a celebration while a Strauss waltz plays on the radio, is a reminder of how much Hollywood has traded away by insisting on the childishness of the obligatory happy ending.

Roger Ebert, 1992

Credits

Mario	Yves Montand
Jo	Charles Vanel
Luigi	Folco Lilli
Bimba	Peter Van Eyck
O'Brien	William Tubbs
Linda	Véra Clouzot
Hernandez	Dario Moreno
Smerloff	Jo Dest
Camp chief	Antonio Centa
Bernardo	Luis De Lima
Director	Henri-Georges Clouzot
Screenplay	Henri-Georges Clouzot, Jérôme Geronimi
Cinematography	Armand Thirard
Music	Georges Auric
Editors	Madeleine Gug, Etienne Muse, Henri Rust
Art direction	Réne Renoux
Sound	William Robert Sivell

France 1953. 131 mins

Another View

Unemployed men from various parts of Europe populate an unnamed South American town. [Yves Montand](#) is Mario, a Frenchman, who spends his days sitting around talking with other expats, drinking, trying to make a buck here and there and flirting with the local floozy, Linda ([Vera Clouzot](#)), who appears to be the only young woman in the whole town and the only one who is overacting like mad (*it should be noted that Vera is the director's wife so that explains a lot. But I will give her a pass. It was her first film*).

One day Jo ([Charles Vanel](#)) arrives by plane, and being another French guy, he and Mario quickly become friends. Jo is on the run from something and hopped the first plane that would take him \$500's-worth away from where he was. Both Jo and Mario are dead broke, so they try to figure out how to make some money and no matter if it's illegal or not.

Meanwhile, a big fire breaks out in an American oil field 300 miles away. Bill O'Brien ([William Tubbs](#)), the American owner of the local oil business, needs some men to drive some nitroglycerin over a mountain pass to the burning oil field so the workers can set off dynamite to staunch the fires. Mario and Jo are first in line. It's a dangerous trip over 300 miles of rugged, mountainous roads where the slightest bump could explode the nitro. The trip needs to be done quickly and, despite the danger, the men in this town are desperate and willing to risk their lives to make this trek for the money. And O'Brien is happy to exploit these men because they are considered expendable if something bad happens - "No one will come around causing trouble."

Two trucks will make the journey with two men in each truck. Mario and Jo are in the first largest truck, with two other lost souls, Bimba ([Peter Van Eyck](#)) and Luigi ([Folco Lilli](#)), following as back-up in another. As Jo tries to start the truck, it won't start, clearly an omen of what's to come. T

Thus begins the second half of the film: the tense journey with all kinds of obstacles that need to be overcome.

I am constantly amazed and happy by this little (*or big*) project I have undertaken (*to see all of the movies in the book "1001 Movies*

You Must See Before You Die"), because I am introduced to some really wonderful movies I would never have necessarily wanted to see...and this would be one of them. As I always say, I don't really like movies about a bunch of men doing manly stuff, but I have to say this film is riveting. The characterizations are superb (*except for Linda*) as is the script, and the black and white cinematography is exquisite.

For a two and a half hour movie about guys driving trucks on a dangerous South American road, the film moved along fast and furious and kept my attention throughout. The ominous music added to the tension and you find yourself rooting for these guys, even though they are not very nice guys, but you do it because they are clearly being exploited (*by American oil interests*) because of their desperation. The suspense lies in the question, "Will they make it?" And with the money they will make, will they get out of that hell hole of a town? Where will they go? What will they do? Will they turn their lives around? Or will it all be for nothing?"

This showcases some of Yves Montand's early work before he became known as a suave leading man. This role is a far cry from the French bon vivant he became in romantic comedies where he romanced Marilyn Monroe and then broke her heart, and it's a wonderful performance.

Rosie the Reviewer

Our next screening: Friday April 19th, 7.30pm Shoplifters (Japan 2018 Cert 15)

Kore-eda Hirokazu has become something of a Society favourite with films like *Our Little Sister* and *Like Father, Like Son*. His films are rooted in the dynamics of the family, and *Shoplifters* is no exception. Osanu and Noboyo find and take in a young girl who appears to be a street waif, but their apparent desire to do a good deed masks a more sinister intent, as bit by bit the secrets that the family conceals from the outside world are gradually revealed.

Programme news

Our 2019-20 season of films has been chosen, subject to availability. 3 slots will be left for new releases and there is one classic, which we'll be asking members to select from a short-list.

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| 1. 3 Faces. Iran 2018. | 13. Foxtrot. Israel/France, Switzerland/Germany 2017. |
| 2. American Animals. USA 2018. | 14. The House By The Sea. France 2017. |
| 3. Arctic. Iceland 2017. | 15. The Guilty. Denmark 2018. |
| 4. Birds of Passage. Colombia 2018. | 16. Happy as Lazzaro. Italy 2018. |
| 5. Blindspotting. USA 2018. | 17. In Between. Israel 2017. |
| 6. Border. Sweden 2018. | 18. An Imperfect Age. Italy 2018. |
| 7. Burning. S Korea 2018. | 19. Rafikii. Kenya 2018. |
| 8. Capernaum. Lebanon/USA 2018. | 20. Return of the Hero. France/Belgium 2018. |
| 9. Cold War. Poland/UK/France 2018. | 21. Sometimes Always Never. UK 2018. |
| 10. Dawson City: Frozen Time. USA 2016. | 22. Woman at War 2018 Iceland/France/Ukraine. |
| 11. Dogman. Italy 2018. | |
| 12. Free Solo. USA 2018. | |