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Depraved, seamy, deranged: Film noir as it's meant to be

P. E12

Fox Film Noir

Fox, \$15

FOX Home Entertainment's second installment in its new Film Noir DVD series features three vintage titles, including the 1947 cult classic "Nightmare Alley."

Nightmare Alley

A long-standing rights dispute between the film's producer, George Jessel, and Fox kept this grim masterpiece from VHS release — though bootleg copies are available on eBay — and it's rarely seen on TV. That's helped "Nightmare Alley," one of the bleakest noir films that Hollywood produced after World War II, achieve cult status.

When the film was released, audiences avoided it, even though star Tyrone Power received his best-ever reviews for a role of complexity and depravity.

Jules Furthman penned the uncompromising script; Edmund Goulding directed with a master hand. Lee Garmes supplied the evocative black-and-white cinematography.

Based on the novel by William Lindsay Gresham — his only successful work — "Nightmare Alley" examines the seamy side of carnival life. Power plays a greasy charmer named Stan Carlisle who works with a washed-up medium, Zeena (a strong Joan Blondell), and her "rum dum" husband in a low-rent traveling carnival act. By using a secret code, she and her husband had been hits on the nightclub circuit before alcohol and infidelities ruined their careers. When Stan learns about the code, he romances Blondell and persuades her to teach him the code to beef up their carnival act. After Stan marries a naive circus performer (Coleen Gray) who also knows the code, the pair leave the circus and end up becoming headliners at a nightclub. But when an ambitious shrink (Helen Walker) enters Stan's life, she manipulates him and causes his downfall.

Gresham's life parallels

Stan's downward spiral in the story. He became an abusive alcoholic — his wife divorced him and later married C.S. Lewis — and he committed suicide in 1962 in the hotel where he had written "Nightmare Alley."

Extras: Astute commentary from film noir historians James Ursini and Alain Silver.

The Street With No Name

Fox made several documentary-style noir films, following the 1945 Oscar winner "The House on 92nd Street" with the likes of 1947's "13 Rue Madeleine," 1948's "Call Northside 777" and this entertaining 1948 thriller. Lloyd Nolan reprises his "House on 92nd Street" role as the no-nonsense FBI agent George Briggs, who sends a bright young agent (stoic Mark Stevens) to a teeming metropolis called Center City to infiltrate a murderous organized crime gang led by an asthmatic, germ-phobic psychopath played to perfection by Richard Widmark.

Penned by Harry Kleiner, the film was directed by veteran William Keighley.

Extras: Ursini and Silver supply compelling historical commentary but keep mispronouncing the director's last name — maddeningly turning "Keelee" into something like "Keglay."

House of Bamboo

Sam Fuller's remake of "The Street With No Name" — this time called "House of Bamboo" — was released in 1955. Now, Robert Stack is the undercover agent infiltrating a gang of ruthless American thugs that not only runs a lucrative protection business in Tokyo but also robs U.S. military ammunition and supply trains. Robert Ryan plays the nattily dressed kingpin who rules the organization with an iron fist. The film is shot in color and CinemaScope, with brilliantly staged action sequences and Japanese locales.

Extras: A commentary track from Ursini and Silver and silent behind-the-scenes footage shot by Fox Movietone News.

— SUSAN KING



REMAKE: Shirley Yamaguchi in "House of Bamboo," director Samuel Fuller's 1955 version of "The Street With No Name."