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*Against All Odds*: something old, little new

## Où Sont les Film Noirs D'antan?

By Andrew Sarris

**AGAINST ALL ODDS.** Directed by Taylor Hackford. Screenplay by Eric Hughes, based on the 1947 film *Out of the Past*, written by Daniel Mainwaring (a/k/a Geoffrey Homes), from his novel *Build My Gallows High*. Produced by Hackford and William S. Gilmore. Released by Columbia Pictures.

Of late there have been critical rumbles about movie-remakers who fail to give adequate credit to the original source. Such a complaint cannot be leveled against director-producer Taylor Hackford and scenarist Eric Hughes vis-à-vis the 1947 film noir cult classic *Out of the Past*. Hackford, particularly, seems to have been inspired in his mimicry by a genuine affection for an old movie and an old genre. He has even cast Jane Greer, the luscious Lilith of the original, as the very attractive mother of the new temptress played by Rachel Ward. Unfortunately, Hackford has probably failed to come up with another outrageous hit on the order of *An Officer and a Gentleman* with its shrewd mixture of patriotic sentiment topically diluted with antiracist and antisexist elements, and topped off with a generous serving of the most audacious Boy-Meets-Girl-My-Prince-Will-Come sentimentality. Indeed, when the newly commissioned flying officer played by Richard Gere marched into a factory, swept up the Debra Winger character from the assembly line into his arms, and took her off into the wild blue yonder of never-never land, I heard the sound of sniffing from very grown-up women all around me in the screening room. I concluded then and there that Hackford, whatever his flaws, had a firm grasp on the old-fashioned emotions in the deceptive guises of the new.

His legerdemain, however, has deserted him in *Against All Odds*. For one thing, the vintage film noir plots of the '40s were never noted for economy, compression, probability, and logic. In this respect, *Out of the Past* was a lulu in its own right, starting with a flashback that takes about half the movie, and then twisting itself into a pretzel of double crosses worthy of the Borgias. The guilt-

ridden, downbeat ending limited the movie's popularity at the time, and it was only in revisionist retrospect that it achieved its modish reputation. In his review of *Out of the Past* in *The Nation* of April 24, 1948, the late James Agee was brief by necessity since he was "reviewing" no fewer than 24 other movies in that same issue: "*Out of the Past*. Conventional private-eye melodrama. More good work by Musaraca, largely wasted. Kirk Douglas, wasted as usual. Bob Mitchum is so very sleepily self-confident with the

endearing. Jane Greer, on the other hand, can best be described, in an ancient idiom, as a hot number."

Agee has become retroactively notorious in certain revisionist circles for his extreme obtuseness where film noir was concerned. By the same token, he was often susceptible to the point of gushy naïveté to the warmer, more wholesome sentiments of that era. For Agee, even an acknowledged noir classic such as *Double Indemnity* came perilously close to being "trash," whereas much of *Since You*

*In the Hollywood and America of the '40s, the fulfillment of our desires led us inevitably to the brink of danger.*

women that when he slopes into clinches you expect him to snore in their faces."

Toward the end of the year before, Agee had reviewed the same film (*Time*, December 15, 1947) with the same oddly outsized aversion to Mitchum's remarkably laid-back style long before its time: "*Out of the Past* (RKO Radio) is a medium-grade thriller about a not-very-smart young man (Robert Mitchum) who is hired to hound down the runaway mistress (Jane Greer) of a hard guy (Kirk Douglas). Mitchum finds the girl, sets up housekeeping with her, and lets himself in for no end of melodramatic consequences. Fairly well played, and very well photographed (by Nicholas Musuraca), the action develops a routine kind of pseudo-tension.

"When he performs with other men (most memorably in *The Story of G.I. Joe*), Robert Mitchum is a believable actor. But it seems to be a mistake to let him tangle—as a hero, anyhow—with the ladies. In love scenes his curious languor, which suggests Bing Crosby supersaturated with barbituates, becomes a kind of sexual complacency that is not

*Went Away* stirred him deeply. No one today would even remotely consider remaking *Since You Went Away*, or, for that matter, anything of its cuddly-homey ilk. But the dark, dirgelike testaments of the '40s continue to tantalize many modern filmmakers, perhaps as much for the wrong reasons as for the right ones.

It may be that Agee lacked the morbidity and the somewhat retarded romanticism that make *Out of the Past* so enduringly appealing to a certain type of moviegoer. I happen to believe that Agee never responded to the fantasy and mythology of the noir genre on any level. He was still celebrating life and hope when all around him on the screen were the beginnings of death and despair. *Out of the Past* was in some ways the most nihilistic of the Hollywood romances, certainly one of the very few in which all the major characters are killed by the final fade-out. The action unfolds very much in the manner of Wagner's *Tannhäuser*, with the male protagonist torn in the beginning between a semibucolic existence running a filling station with marriage in the offing to a very nice girl (Vir-

ginia Huston) and a dark past as a private eye mixed up with seductively evil people who have risen from the lower depths to the tallest skyscrapers. Mitchum tells the nice girl (Huston) all about the bad girl (Greer). He had been hired to bring the bad girl back to her charmingly evil lover (Kirk Douglas). He had pursued her to Mexico, located her, had become infatuated with her, and then had discovered too late how truly despicable she was. The beauty of the film is that we become infatuated with her too, and yet are wryly amused by Mitchum's weary reaction to something that he and we should always have known: that she was too beautiful to be true, and that in the Hollywood and America of the '40s the fulfillment of our sweetest desires led us inevitably to the brink of danger and damnation. There is more to a good movie than theme and zeitgeist, of course, and *Out of the Past* clicks in so many different ways that all its homicidal convolutions end up making us feel gently sad about the hopelessness of our illusions, yet exhilarated by all the wit and grace of the doomed creatures on the screen.

The first mistake made by Hackford and Hughes in updating this period material is in upscaling the characters. The protagonist (Jeff Bridges) is now a prominent pro football player right out of *North Dallas 40*, and the temptress (the aforementioned Rachel Ward) is a wealthy heiress involved with her underworld lover (James Woods) just for kicks. There is no "nice" girl in the remake. Nor does the "bad" girl turn out to be that bad. She's just a little mixed up, largely because of problems with her mother (Jane Greer three and a half decades after *Out of the Past*) and her stepfather (Richard Widmark, himself a pioneer of '40s noir, beginning with the high giggle of his Tommy Udo in *Kiss of Death*). But *Against All Odds* finds itself becalmed in the more relaxed decadence of the '80s in California and a very touristy Mexico. Money, sex, drugs come too easily in this milieu to generate the obsessive yearning of '40s noir. Also, the censors have departed, along with the fearful guilt of the '40s.

Hackford and Hughes have added a few cynical twists of their own about the corruption in professional sports and environmental politics, but they stop far short of the devastating nihilism of either *Chinatown* or *Body Heat*. The ending is an unsatisfying muddle of sweet and sour, neither upbeat enough for the masses, nor downbeat enough for the mandarins. And the ample displays of skin magnificently burnished by the Mexican sun are as tedious here as similar displays were in *An Officer and a Gentleman*.

I read in an interview somewhere that Hackford claimed that he had tried to get Widmark to "stretch" his characterization, and the no-nonsense veteran actor resisted, at least, at first. For my own part, I cannot, see what there was to stretch. It is like adapting a medieval morality play for the Ethical Culture Society. Once the guilt and fear and, yes, faith, are gone, you might as well toss out the deterministic contrivances of the plot and start from scratch with a more open-ended narrative.

*Against All Odds* is almost *Scarface* all over again, but not quite. Hackford has avoided thus far at least the hazards of big-star megalomania. What he has not avoided on this occasion is the disconcerting aimlessness of his time and place. Curiously, Mitchum, who seemed so somnolent to Agee in *Out of the Past*, now crackles with electricity when he falls into Greer's arms (despite her warnings) with that most unconditional of '40s declarations: "Baby, I don't care." We didn't need nude scenes back then to fill in the rest. We were hooked, and some of us loved that feeling of delicious, delirious complicity in our own downfall. *Où sont les films noirs d'antan?* ■

**MORE GREMLINS:** Dianne Wiest was misspelled "Weist" repeatedly last week, an *idée fixe* not of my own devising. Also: "Oscar-olger" should have been "Oscar-ogler."