

PAST ISSUES



Dan Duryea - Charming Villain

By Frank Dolven

Dan Duryea was typecast by his own skill. He was almost too good at creating disturbing portraits of pathological villains, especially in film noir roles. In real life, he was an old-fashioned family man, the opposite of his screen persona.

He was born in White Plains, New York, on January 23, 1907, and was educated at Cornell University, Ithaca, New York. In the 1930s he worked in advertising before finding his true calling.

He made his acting debut on Broadway in Sidney Kingsley's *Dead End*. He won critical acclaim for his role as the weakling "Leo Hubbard" in Lillian Hellman's *The Little Foxes* on Broadway in 1939. Hollywood scouts took notice of his remarkable performance. Soon he was playing "Leo" in William Wyler's film version of the play.

With his slicked-back blonde hair and malicious smile, he became the premier louse of the movies. He developed a repertoire of understated body language with a shrug of the shoulders, a slight raising of the eyebrow, a twitch of the mouth, and a subtle "take-it-or-leave-it-or-go-to-hell" movement of the hand. Duryea became a master, playing to the camera, "as he wielded his reedy, high voice like an irritating, cutting scimitar," one critic wrote.

He left many gems among performances in over 70 films spanning 47 years. Film buffs especially remember him for his odious treatment of women. In an interview with Hedda Hopper in the early '50s, Duryea gave a very interesting answer when Miss Hopper asked how he prepared for roles.

"Well, first of all," he replied, "Let's set the stage or goal I set for myself when I decided to become an actor ...not just 'an actor' but a successful one. I looked in the mirror and knew with my "puss" and 155-pound weakling body, I couldn't pass for a leading man, and I had to be different. And I sure had to be courageous so I chose to be the meanest SOB in the movies ... strictly against my mild nature as I'm an ordinary, peace-loving husband and father. Inasmuch as I admired fine actors like Richard Widmark, Victor Mature, Robert Mitchum, and others who had made their early marks in the dark, sordid, and guilt-ridden world of film noir; here, indeed, was a market for my talents. I thought the meaner I presented myself, the tougher I was with women, degrading them, slapping them around in well produced films where evil and death seem to lurk in every nightmare alley and behind every venetian blind in every seedy apartment, I could find a market for my screen characters."

Hedda answered: "My God, Daniel, that you did and you are the best woman hater next to Cagney that I have ever seen on the screen!"

She continued: "How in the world did you prepare or 'get-up' for these obnoxious parts?"

"At first it was very hard as I am a very even-tempered guy ... but I used my past life experiences to motivate me as I thought about some of the people I hated in my early as well as later life ... like the school bully who used to try and beat the hell out of me at least once a week ... a sadistic family doctor that believed feeling pain when he treated you was the birthright of every man inasmuch as women suffered giving birth ... little incidents with trade-people who enjoyed acting superior because they owned their business, overcharging you. Then the one I used when I had to slap a woman around was easy! I was slapping the over-bearing teacher who would fail you in their 'holier-than-thou' class and enjoy it! And especially the experiences I had dealing with the unbelievable pompous 'know-it-all-experts' that I dealt with during my advertising agency days ... almost going 'nuts' trying to please these 'corporate heads' until I finally got out of that racket!"

When asked who was one of his favorite actresses to work with, he replied: "Joan Bennett ... she was a true professional and so easy to work with in the two films we made with Eddie Robinson: *The Woman in the Window* and *Scarlet Street* ... and I found her very attractive and before you ask, Hedda, no, I did not have an 'affair' with her or any other of my co-stars ... for one very good reason: I was very happily married and never broke my vows."

Both of these films were directed by one of the very best ... Fritz Lang. Lang and Duryea had a fine relationship. They respected each other. This led to two of their biggest hits, both co-starring the same successful trio: Edward G. Robinson, Joan Bennett, Dan Duryea. Lang called Duryea "one of the best actors" he ever directed, in his press release of *The Woman in the Window*.

Duryea was easy to work with, a carefully prepared "quick study" who knew his lines. He was the sort of actor who helped keep the director's schedule running smoothly, on time, and under budget.

Woman in the Window is a true classic, a fascinating variation on the themes of temptation and guilt. Robinson, a middle-aged intellectual, sees his family off on a vacation and passes a window displaying a painting of a beautiful woman. He's startled when the model suddenly appears next to him reflected in the glass. He buys the young woman (Joan Bennett) a drink and sees her home. Her hulking boyfriend arrives in a jealous rage and fights Robinson. As he struggles for his life, Bennett hands him a pair of scissors, and he kills the boyfriend in self defense. The plot thickens as Duryea weasels his way into the picture to blackmail Robinson. Critics liked the film and fans enjoy it to this day.

Duryea's next Lang film is another classic, with some calling it one of the best films noires ever made. Critic David Thomson wrote: "In striped suit, bow tie, and straw hat, the Duryea of *Scarlet Street*, directed by Fritz Lang, is a delicious villain. A sly man, he creeps up on malice as if it were a cat to catch and is unable to prevent a giggle cracking his high pitched voice: a door-to-door salesman just waiting

for bored wives ... a four star bell ringer!"

In typical Fritz Lang fashion, *Scarlet Street* is a disturbing film in which a common man, caught in a web of evil, succumbs first to vice and then to murder. In this one, Joan Bennett and Dan Duryea are certainly two of the most casual villains, reeking of a heady sense of their own sin. The plot keeps your attention as Edward G. Robinson plays a lonely man, tied to a shrewish wife and a dreary cashier's job. All that sustains him is his devotion to painting. When he meets Bennett, he becomes infatuated. She encourages his attentions, believing that he is a famous and wealthy artist. Egged on by her con-man lover (Duryea), she persuades Robinson to set her up in a lavish apartment where he can paint her portrait. The poor cashier must embezzle company funds to pay for Bennett's luxuries.

This has to be Bennett's raciest performance. She is the ultimate sex object wrapped in her see-through plastic raincoat like a bon-bon in cellophane ready for consumption. Duryea, too, is sexy, in a disgusting way. With his slick, oily butterscotch hair and straw boater, he drawls an insinuating, "Hello, Lazy Legs" to a spraddle-limbed Joan. Lang cynically invests them with an irresistible allure and an energy that makes Robinson's fall seem not only believable but inevitable. *Scarlet Street* sends a chilling message that those who live in the imagination are easy victims in a cruel world.

Duryea kept busy through the '40s with some of his best work as the bad guy, but he was never dull, even when called on to be friendly. Universal's *The Black Angel* (1946) was a breakthrough for Duryea as he is allowed to play a character with a romantic side. Critics thought this film was a modest but imaginative effort with an ingenious script. This first-rate whodunit had a top-drawer cast for a "B" film with June Vincent, Peter Lorre, Broderick Crawford, and Constance Dowling. The slam-bang plot has Duryea's treacherous wife, Dowling, leave him. He becomes an alcoholic, and when he goes to her apartment to see her, he is refused entrance on her orders. Later, his wife is found murdered. Duryea is the logical suspect, but he was sleeping in his room at the time of the crime. John Phillips, one of Dowling's lovers, who went to her apartment to retrieve incriminating letters before they were sent to his wife (June Vincent), is convicted of the crime. Despite her husband's unfaithfulness, Vincent believes him innocent and enlists the aid of Duryea, who remembers a stranger leaving Dowling's apartment the night of the murder. This was Peter Lorre, a shady nightclub owner, who hires Duryea and Vincent to perform in his club. They take the job, hoping to find an important clue to the murder, a jeweled heart-shaped brooch that Duryea had given to Dowling. The movie was very imaginative and had viewers glued to their seats.

Another memorable Duryea film of the time was an excellent crime drama, *Criss Cross* (1948) starring Burt Lancaster, and Yvonne DeCarlo. Lancaster plays an armored car guard with designs on a cargo of ready cash. Duryea plays a gambler with syndicate connections. Yvonne DeCarlo is Burt's ex-wife playing around with

Duryea, making for a tragic triangle of film noir.

Manhandled (1949) has Duryea co-starring with Dorothy Lamour, Sterling Hayden, and Irene Hervey. Crooked private eye Duryea tries to pin a murder rap on innocent Lamour with Hayden on her side. It was one of the best of low-budget Pine-Thomas films. Film critic Robert Porfirio writes: "With Dan Duryea in the main role of Karl Benson, a crooked private eye, Manhandled might have been a true classic in that series of thrillers dealing with the degraded cop or investigator. As it is, due to the extremely convoluted plot and slack direction, the film lacks suspense, and it never develops the true potential of its characters and locales. However, the opening dream sequence and the scene in which Benson crushes Redman with his car is quite evocative of the noir style and rates a middle of the road place in that genre with two and three quarters stars,"

Duryea's Too Late For Tears (1949) was even better. Director Byron Haskin did well with Lizabeth Scott, Don DeFore, Arthur Kennedy, and Kristine Miller. The film offered an atmospheric tale of honest and dishonest characters and what happens when a bag full of cash is dropped into the car of greedy bad girl Scott and nice guy husband Kennedy. DeFore is a mystery man, and Duryea is at his best as a heavy. Director Haskin brings it all together as the wife resorts to increasingly desperate measures to keep her newly found fortune. Usually a good gal, Lizabeth Scott practically steals the film from her co-stars!

Dan Duryea opened 1950 with a non-bad guy part with United Artist's The Underworld Story, featuring Michael O'Shea and Gale Storm. We have Duryea as a has-been journalist finding a job in a small town newspaper, and then tracking down the murderer of a newspaper magnate's (Herbert Marshall) daughter-in-law. This was a surprisingly good gangster yarn and an attention-holder as Duryea uncovers corruption. Critics gave it three stars.

Next up for Duryea was a nice little crime-drama, One Way Street, with a fine cast of James Mason, Marta Toren, William Conrad, and Jack Elam. Turgid crime drama chronicles what happens after Doctor Mason strips Duryea of \$200,000 and his moll (Toren). Well done and worth a watch. Critics gave it three stars.

Dan Duryea took a break from movies in 1952 when he made a successful syndicated television series titled China Smith, playing an easygoing soldier of fortune who fought injustice in the East. This series ran on tv from 1952 to 1955, and even as late as the '70s his estate got residuals from this series on re-runs throughout the world.

Outside of crime films, Duryea was a superb western bad guy with his impudent face, and phony charm. He enlivened such westerns as Along Came Jones, Winchester '73, Six Black Horses, and the excellent Black Bart (1948). Many critics consider Black Bart the best western Duryea made. The storyline was simple, and the production values and color photography were first rate. Yvonne DeCarlo attempts to step between Duryea and Jeffrey Lynn in their plot to overthrow the Wells Fargo Company. Duryea is great as he dons a "Zorro-like" outfit complete with cape, whip, and mask to rob every

coach sent out by Wells Fargo. DeCarlo falls in love with Dan and discovers who he really is. The climax was well done, and the critics gave it three stars. It was a box office winner.

His next good western had him playing a powerful, dynamic part of a kill-crazy gunfighter trying to wipe-out Jimmy Stewart in the Universal classic Winchester '73. Dan's part was not large, but when he shows up on screen the film moves into high gear. Duryea had a lot to do with this film's four star rating.

In 1951 Duryea made a very calm and sedate western about the famous outlaw-turned-lawyer Al Jennings titled, Al Jennings of Oklahoma from Columbia. Jennings was still alive at the time, and the screenplay came direct from Jennings' own book. This Technicolor film glorified rather than censored the outlaw's actions. It had an excellent cast with Gale Storm as his faithful wife, Dick Foran as Al's brother, and Guinn Williams as an outlaw. Though it seemed to be a lame duck western with little action, the public made it a surprise success.

With Universal's 1953 Ride Clear of Diablo, Dan Duryea gave one of his most memorable performances as a flamboyant gunman helping Audie Murphy track down the killers of his father and kid brother. Here is a strong western tale of vengeance. Audie Murphy played his part very low key, and Duryea played his part with great flair, as if he enjoyed being on the good side for a change.

Duryea made two above average westerns in the '60s which are fondly remembered by western fans. In 1962, Universal gave us Six Black Horses, starring Audie Murphy, and Joan O'Brien. The film is memorable for the sheer beauty of the Utah locations. O'Brien plays a widowed woman whose husband was killed by Duryea. Audie Murphy plays an unemployed wrangler, whose life was once saved by Duryea, and who falls in love with O'Brien. A simple tale, but told well.

One of Duryea's last westerns is the interesting, but forgotten, Taggart (1965). Here we have top starred Tony Young being pursued by hired killer Dan Duryea. The film has strong sexual content in the shape of Elsa Cardenas, a hussy who double crosses husband Young and takes off with Duryea in search of a lost gold mine. It was a beautifully photographed color film, and you are kept interested the whole 85 minutes running time. Duryea seems to look tired in this one and made only one more western, The Bounty Killer. He then hung up his spurs.

Duryea made some excellent crime films in the late '50s, including the hard-hitting melodrama Slaughter on 10th Avenue (1957) which focused on criminal activities on New York's waterfront. Richard Egan starred as a D.A., and Jan Sterling was his wife with Duryea giving a commanding performance as Walter Matthau's lawyer. It rated three stars and did well at the box office.

Duryea's fine performance as head of a burglary ring helped spark in Columbia's 1957 hit The Burglar. Sexy Jayne Mansfield plays his half sister. Also unforgettable is his tough sergeant in Battle Hymn, and his role in 1965's Flight of the Phoenix in which he plays a

bespectacled passenger on a crashed plane who nervously supports the lanky hero, Jimmy Stewart.

Duryea's personal life provided little grist for the gossip mills. He married Helen Bryan on April 15, 1932. The couple had two sons: Peter, born July 14, 1939, and Richard, born July 14, 1942. The Duryeas were married 35 years before Helen died from a heart ailment on January 21, 1967.

Duryea closed out his career playing Eddie Jacks on TV's Peyton Place in the 1967-8 season. On June 8, 1968, Dan Duryea died of cancer in Hollywood, little more than a year after his wife's passing.

Duryea created a unique type of screen villainy. Richard Widmark and Lee Marvin became bigger stars playing similar roles, but not even they could replace Duryea in a film. He was a weird blend of weakness and menace, sex and slime, evil and smiles. This is all the more remarkable since in real life he was just Dan Duryea, husband and father. A charming man.

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