

Early wolves on Wall Street in 'Force of Evil'

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For the House Un-American Activities Committee, writer and director Abraham Polonsky was easy, ripe-red pickings. He never hid his Marxist ideology or his affiliations with the American Communist party. When the time came to name names, at least for his compliant film industry colleagues, Polonsky could've been named by any number of them. The dishonor fell to actor Sterling Hayden, and Polonsky was blacklisted in 1951 after refusing to testify. He didn't direct again for nearly two decades.

Prior to the blacklisting, though, he wrote the great John Garfield boxing drama "Body and Soul" (1947) and went on, also under Garfield's own company banner of Enterprise Productions, to write and direct the singular *noir* "Force of Evil" (1948), also starring Garfield. "Body and Soul," an Oscar-nominated hit, and the flop "Force of Evil" remain two of the nerviest indictments of American capitalism ever produced in this country. As part of "The Left Front in Film," Block Cinema of Northwestern University has begun a survey of leftist movies made during the 1930s, '40s and '50s.

Film critic and historian J. Hoberman comes to town March 8 to introduce "Body and Soul." This weekend, meantime, at 2 p.m. Saturday, Block Cinema will screen a handsomely bleak 35 millimeter print of "Force of Evil," in which Garfield plays a numbers racket lawyer — a wolf of Wall Street, prosperous post-WWII division — trying to keep his older brother (Thomas Gomez) away from the ethical muck and ruthless business practices that made Kid Brother rich.

The mob schemes to make a killing on July 4, fixing the numbers so that every ordinary citizen who bets 776 strikes it rich, thereby bankrupting the legitimate banks and paving the way for a legalized lottery. The rich will get richer; the working-class, *bupkus*. Garfield's Joe Morse tries to get his numbers-running brother out in time to avoid getting wiped clean of his homegrown bank's holdings. But Leo doesn't trust him and answers his question with a speech of singular

poetic nuttiness: "I am sensible. I am calm. I'll give you my answer, calmly and sensibly. My final answer? My final answer is no. My final answer is finally no. And then, because he really means it: "The answer is no. Absolutely and finally no. Finally and positively no. No! No! No! N-O!"

Morally, "Force of Evil" is scrupulous about reminding audiences that for every thief, a victim goes without. It's instructive to see Polonsky's stubbornly polemical film in the context of Martin Scorsese's "Wolf of Wall Street," which displays scant interest in the financial or collateral human costs of its protagonist's merry bad behavior. Scorsese, an ardent preservationist, helped finance a restoration of "Force of Evil" not long ago; he holds the film and Polonsky in high regard, and much of "Body and Soul," which was directed by Polonsky's fellow traveler Robert Rossen, served as an inspiration for Scorsese's own "Raging Bull."

As for Garfield, Hoberman put it this way: "He was the Brando before Brando. He was a working-class hero; that was his persona." Garfield, pressured to testify before HUAC, died of a heart attack at 39. Although "Body and Soul" got by with the public, "Force of Evil" did not. The Chicago Tribune's sniffy review of the latter (by an unidentified reviewer, going by the name Mae Tinee) was typical of the day: "The lines are affectedly arty and entirely idiotic, and the members of the cast behave as tho they'd been smoking marijuana."

MGM recut it, to the bone, and dumped it like a body in a river. Which is exactly where "Force of Evil" ends up. With composer David Raksin's daringly optimistic music behind the action, Polonsky ultimately delivers Joe Morse from his own money-grubbing evils, at last. "A great lost talent," Hoberman says of Polonsky. Block's "Left Front in Film" series acts as a companion piece to the Block Museum of Art's "Radical Art in the 'Red Decade,' 1929-1940" exhibition, which continues through June 22.

For more information on "The Left Front in Film," go to www.blockmuseum.northwestern.edu. Movies on the radio: Michael joins "Filmspotting" co-hosts Adam Kempenaar and Josh Larsen this week, 11 p.m. Friday and midnight Saturday on WBEZ-FM (91.5). The longer podcast version of the show can be found at filmspotting.net.

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