



Raoul Walsh Season

Eden Court Cinema
Tuesday 11th October
2016 at 7.15pm

Review by Tony
Janssens (InFifa),
film notes compiled
by Mark MacLennan
(InFiFa).

Pursued

1947, USA, B&W, Drama / Western, Running time: 101 mins. Rating: PG

Cast: Theresa Wright, Robert Mitchum, Dean Jagger, Alan Hale, Judith Anderson

Written by Niven Bush; Director of photography: James Wong Howe

Music by Max Steiner. Produced by Milton Sperling

In the territory of New Mexico at the turn of the twentieth century, Jeb Rand (*Mitchum*) hides from his pursuers in an abandoned house. He tells Thor Callum (*Wright*), who has brought him food and water, that while hiding there, he has recalled events that may explain what has gone wrong with his life: As a child of four, Jeb is rescued from the same house by Ma Callum (*Anderson*), who takes him and her own children, Thor, who is three, and Adam, who is the same age as Jeb, away from the area.

As he grows, Jeb is troubled by indistinct and frightening memories of the events before Ma took him in. One day, when Jeb is eleven, his horse is shot out from under him. Jeb believes that Adam is responsible, and the two boys fight about it. When Ma learns what happened, she confronts Grant Callum (*Jagger*), her brother-in-law, who, unknown to Jeb is the man who shot his horse.

Although Grant has vowed to avenge his brother's murder, he eventually agrees to return to Santa Fe, convinced that Jeb will turn Ma against him by his very nature.



When Ma returns home, she advises Jeb to forget the past and love his new family, but despite her wishes, his memories continue to haunt him. Several years later, when the territory declares war against Spain, Grant tries to coerce Jeb into joining the army, in hopes that he will be killed. Later, when a toss of the coin determines that Jeb, not Adam (*Rodney*), will fight, Jeb does sign up but returns a hero. Grant then turns Adam against Jeb. Angered by Jeb's lack of interest in the farm, Adam offers to buy him out, but another toss of the coin sends Jeb away with nothing. When Jeb promises Thor that he will return for her, Adam insists that he will never let her marry Jeb. Thor makes it clear that she will marry Jeb without his blessing, however, and Adam rides after Jeb, intending to kill him. Instead, Jeb kills Adam in self-defense but, despite the findings of a jury, Ma and Thor believe he is guilty of murder. Jeb then becomes a partner in Jake Dingle's (*Hale*) saloon. At a dance, which Thor attends with the mild-mannered Prentice (*Carey Jr*), Jeb forces her to dance with him. Grant witnesses this and pressures Prentice to avenge the imagined insult to Thor. In the ensuing gunfight, Prentice is killed. Jeb is again acquitted and begins to court Thor. Although she now hates Jeb, Thor agrees to marry him, intending to kill him on their

wedding night.

Pursued was released in the same year as Jacques Tourneur's acclaimed film noir *Out of the Past*, where the main character also recounts a despairing life story in flashback. In both films Robert Mitchum played the leading role, but his Jeb Rand only remembers the ruins of his previous years and spends most of the film in ignorance. The intensity of *Pursued* lies in what is hidden. Ma Callum implores Jeb to believe in family values, and that he is a valuable member of their family, yet Jeb continuously finds evidence to the exact opposite. Almost all the men in town seem set on killing him and his half-brother Adam dislikes him from the onset, a conflict of Old Testament proportions and with incestuous overtones. Jeb is neither a real brother nor a real son, but the typical outsider, hidden in shadows, night-time landscapes, under ominous clouds, in an old ruin, trying to piece together his life. He often has to ride past the massive rock face that towers over him, the most potent metaphor for the mental barricade he has to overcome.



Mitchum was the kind of actor who regularly seemed bored or weary on screen, as if the material and director were not worthy of him. He indeed found himself marooned in too many empty films. Yet at his best he is simply fascinating and untouchable. Here he

carefully watches everybody before making his mind up, and avoids all violence until there is no escape from it. There is no need for 'grand actor' gestures or mannerisms: the stillness of his exterior belies the intellectual strength of his thoughts and profound feelings, and the less is more style of acting is perfectly suited here. His languor and passivity are essential to help maintain the menacing atmosphere, giving Jeb Rand that sense of anxiety that he just might be responsible for the hate and bloodthirstiness after all.



Mitchum always professed his liking for the film because Walsh inspired and allowed him to act in an understated and natural way. If proof is needed that this is one of the great American actors of the second half of the 20th century here it is. It should also lead film buffs to more of his key performances in seminal movies: Otto Preminger's *Angel Face*, Nicholas Ray's *The Lusty Men*, Charles Laughton's *Night of the Hunter* to begin with.

Walsh learned his trade with the legendary D.W. Griffith, a director who turned the face in cinema into a high aesthetics, but Walsh took it one step further by having the face staring into the camera lens and developing the point-of-view shot. He needed remarkable personalities to make it work.

Teresa Wright was one of those intuitive actresses who was cast in motherly roles far too early in her career, because she was deemed as simply not glamorous enough by studio bigwigs and producers. Her husband Niven Bush wrote the role of Thorley Callum for her. She excels as the young woman not quite able to understand her feelings towards Jeb. She constantly has to reshape her estrangement from him and juggles to find out whether her affinities are with her brother or with her lover. The ambiguity of the love-conflict has a physical impact on her: in the main part of the film she moves close to the camera with her back curved as if facing a formidable windstorm. Only gradually she regains her upright posture.

That formidable stage actress Judith Anderson was usually cast in unsympathetic roles, especially since her viperish Mrs Danvers in Hitchcock's *Rebecca*. She invests all her expertise and Shakespearean complexity in her role as Ma Callum, the woman who harbours the tragic secret that sets everything in motion. On stage she was a towering performer, on screen often undervalued and underused. Ma Callum might just be her finest performance, one preserved for the ages.

Neither has Dean Jagger been better on screen. Routinely cast as a father, a doctor, a priest, a military man of great distinction, here as the one-armed patriarch Grant Callum he gives one the most frightening studies of hate in American cinema. Maybe it was too close for comfort, so afterwards he mainly drifted back into those leisurely roles of respected citizens. A special mention should also go to Alan Hale, who plays Jeb Rand's only friend. Hale specialized in playing the hero's bluff, garrulous,

backslapping pal; he was a long time member of Warner Brothers stock company, making his debut as early as 1911, but death by cancer of the liver at the age of 57 prevented him from clocking up more than 200 appearances in the movies.

Pursued was made in 1947, and scenarist Niven Bush wrote Jeb Rand as a wounded hero of the Spanish-American War. So many young men returning from war in the late forties found themselves at a loss and traumatised. Bush had written a novel a few years earlier (*They Dream of Home*) that dealt specifically with the subject. He was also a highly cultivated man who knew his classics. Elements of Greek drama are abundant too. In that wild, wild West you may never know who your real blood relatives are. It is a tough, nocturnal film that doesn't have the typical humour and cheerfulness of many a Walsh picture. Walsh and his outstanding director of photography James Wong Howe subvert the western's iconography, in particular

the *Fordian* one, by scanning those troubled characters and resulting action in swift sliding movements and high contrast lighting. Monument Valley, epic in John Ford's westerns, here in *Pursued* becomes an entrapment, a claustrophobic visualisation of the hero's predicament. The front porch, that conventional place of friendly banter or family gatherings, a place where heroes contemplate their deeds, a place photographed from certain angles so it reveals great vistas, primarily exists in *Pursued* as a place to be 'knocked off' from. It is indeed a nocturnal film, but its dramatic images are constantly of an astonishing beauty, and never suggest pretension or artifice. The camera is the fifth leading character. For a man who lost an eye early on in his career the lens became his second eye. Walsh never made many subjective comments about his films but in an interview he said with uncommon candour: "I love this film!" In a fine print, on the big screen, it once again reveals itself as a truly momentous film.

Our next screening..... **Andrei Rublev**

The first in our..... **Andrei Tarkovsky Season**



Eden Court Cinema

Tuesday 25th October,
2016 at 6.30 pm

Widely regarded as Andrei Tarkovsky's finest film, *Andrei Rublev* charts the life of the great icon painter through a turbulent period of 15th-century Russian history. Our Season ties in with a major retrospective of all seven of his films, the final three screenings hosted by InFifa



www.facebook.com/infifa

Inverness Film Fans (InFiFa) meet fortnightly at Eden Court Cinema for screenings and post film discussions. To join us for free and for more info go to:

www.invernessfilmfans.org