



The Pawnbroker

1964, USA, B&W, Drama, Running time: 116 mins.

**Second film in
our Sidney
Lumet
Season**

Tuesday 17th
October at
8.00pm

Film essay by
Mark
MacLennan
(InFiFa)
Film Notes
compiled by
Mark
MacLennan
(InFiFa)

Directed by Sidney Lumet. Cast: Rod Steiger, Geraldine Fitzgerald, Brock Peters

Rod Steiger is usually seen these days as an actor who specialised in offbeat, volatile and crazed characters resulting in a reputation for hamminess, probably deserved if you look only at his film output from the early 1970's onwards. However, if we look back to the 60's, with the right film role and with the right director it is impossible to deny that he was a 'Method' actor of immense power and skill. And the performance that kicked off this golden period is one of his very best in Sidney Lumet's still powerful **The Pawnbroker**. Steiger was certain that he would be awarded the Best Actor Oscar for his performance (he began to button up his jacket in anticipation of leaving his seat) and was shocked when the name 'Lee Marvin' was announced as the winner for his roles in the film **Cat Ballou**. Steiger's Oscar came soon after for his fine turn as the bigoted sheriff in the celebrated **The Heat of the Night**, in which he starred with Sidney Poitier (who considered Steiger and Spencer Tracy the finest actors he worked with). In 1995 Poitier remarked on Steiger: 'He's so good he made me dig into bags I never knew I had.'

In 2008, **The Pawnbroker** was selected for preservation in the United States National Film Registry by the Library of Congress as being "culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant", and it is indeed an important film for a variety of reasons, some of which are discussed below. First, it was one of the first American films to deal with the Holocaust (though it is not about the Holocaust *per se*) and almost certainly the first American film from the viewpoint of a concentration camp survivor.



Secondly, it was an American film that was undoubtedly influenced by the French New Wave films, through its use of very effective flashbacks (some very brief) to reveal Nazerman's backstory immediately before and during his interment. This allows the viewer to try and 'understand' the man as he is 'now'.



Thirdly the film was controversial for some adult scenes; (that were originally rejected by the Motion Picture Association of America but the scenes were eventually allowed to stay in); to say more is too much, but remember that this film was made in 1964.



Various directors were considered for the film, including then rising Stanley Kubrick, and Franco Zeffirelli, who both turned it down before Sidney Lumet was given the job. Lumet, who over his 50 year career, in many of his films specialised in making New York the most intriguing, domineering 'character' and **The Pawnbroker** was no exception



Lumet is also known for dialogue driven films, with a lot of speeches and dramatic verbal duels, and again this is apparent in **The Pawnbroker**. Also, in many of Lumet's spectacularly good collection of movies, many of his characters are often persecuted men striving for justice; in this case as justice cannot be reached for Nazermann, what, if anything, is Nazermann striving for ? Does it change throughout the film ?

The film generated considerable controversy in several communities. Some Jewish organisations urged a boycott of the film which they felt encouraged anti-Semitism. Black groups also accused the film of encouraging racial stereotypes of the inner city where everyone seemed to be a pimp, prostitute or drug addict. Even the Legion of Decency objected to some of the 'adult' scenes. All of these charges, however, seem unjustified when one views the film and what emerges is a realistic and devastating portrait of urban alienation.

Brief Synopsis

In 1960's Harlem Sol Nazerman manages a pawnshop owned by a local gangster, and it provides him enough money to support his sister-in-law's family and the widow of an old colleague. He is emotionless and direct, which makes him an effective pawnbroker, in negotiating with his largely desperate customers as he has no feeling about their plight. Most of his pawnshop acquaintances are unaware that his demeanor is a result of what he witnessed as a Jewish concentration camp inhabitant. What happens on the streets of Harlem often reminds him of incidents at the concentration camp, with Sol shutting off his feelings from what he now sees to survive emotionally. He has just hired a young man, Jesus, who has led a life of petty crime up until now, who sees this job and his association with Sol as a path to salvation.

One person who suspects what Sol has gone through is a new welfare worker (Miss Birchfield) in the neighborhood who has her own reasons for trying to break through his defenses. His life takes a turn when he discovers the true nature of the pawnshop owner, Rodriguez, which, although unpleasant, at least allows him to feel again for the first time since the war. The question becomes what is he, if anything, going to do about it, especially in relation to Miss Birchfield and Jesus.



Although used sparingly (as was the case with almost all of Lumet's films), the music, provided by the renowned Quincy Jones (one of his best), is used to great effect, with a fine mix of jazz, bossa nova, soul, and plenty of noir-ish moodiness which maintains the sophisticated air throughout.

Lumet, who would chronicle New York better than any other filmmaker (in the author's opinion), makes brilliant, inspired use of location shooting on **The Pawnbroker**. It shows a city that's ugly, mean, corrupt to the core but also gloriously and unmistakably alive in its vulgarity, sadness, and desperation. Only someone who loved New York as deeply as Lumet could capture its grit so compellingly.

Our next screening..... The Offence

The last film in our..... Sidney Lumet Season



Eden
Court
Cinema

31st October
2017
at 7.15 pm

Released only one year before the director's *Serpico* *The Offence* offers an early Lumetian investigation into the psyche of a policeman under duress, and the potential for corruption within. A surely never better Connery plays a policeman who has spent 20 years investigating murders and sexual abuse. He snaps during an interrogation of a suspected paedophile played by the equally outstanding Ian Bannen...Don't miss this!



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