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A Film Grows in Brooklyn

NAKED CITY

(Universal-International.)

NAKED CITY, which was the last film made by the late Mark Hellinger, stars the city of New York, with Barry Fitzgerald as the chief supporting player and Hellinger himself as narrator—and New York walks off with the honours. In case this order of favouritism should lead the more perverid admirers of Mr. Fitzgerald to imagine that *Naked City* is (to use an earnest phrase) Great Cinema, let me say at once that I didn't mean that all. It's not a great picture, but it is in many ways a good one, and better than the usual run-of-the-mill ninety-minute soapific.

It's good in spite of what Mr. Fitzgerald does—or, to be fair, what he is required to do. That, I know, sounds harsh but he comes of a noble company of actors and the sight of a former Abbey Theatre player clowning his way through one of the curmudgeon roles which Hollywood persists in hanging on him is not one which I can regard without misgivings. In a way, it's like seeing Forbes-Robertson in a purple kilt and a curly walking-stick. This time he is Lieutenant Muldoon of the Homicide Squad, a character almost indistinguishable in voice and manner from our old friend Officer Crosby of the carbolic soap operas. Associated with Lieutenant Muldoon is his young assistant, played by Don Taylor who is no worse—and no better—than any one of a dozen reasonably personable young Hollywood males might have been. Among the other players there are a number of unfamiliar faces, but again no one performance which is particularly distinguished—and one or two, which might we'll have been cut out altogether.

It is, in short, not the acting which raises *Naked City* above the average, nor is the plot remarkable for its originality: it is a simple murder story, with a bit of jewel-thieving thrown in to provide a modicum of complication—quite a prosaic affair as these things go.

Such freshness and vitality as the film has—and it has an encouraging share of both—derive from the manner in which the material has been handled. First of all there is the device of the bridging narrative, spoken by Hellinger. The lines are by turns simple and direct, sardonically humorous, and downright sentimental. Some of them are pure East Side in grammar and inflexion, some ponderously whimsical, but Hellinger was himself a New Yorker and it is impossible not to be infected with the enthusiasm and the gusto which he shows in describing the city. For its own sake the commentary is interesting enough, but it serves a useful dramatic purpose as well. It links the various episodes of the story, bridges the dull moments, slows or speeds the tempo of the action, and does succeed in giving one a hasty bird's-eye view of the sprawling city.

Hellinger's voice, however, is not the only interesting element in the soundtrack. *Naked City* opens with some appropriate background music, but this very soon gives way to the raucous indigenous noises of New York itself. Like

BAROMETER

FAIR TO FINE: "Naked City."
OVERCAST: "Secret Beyond the Door."

Call *Northside 777* (Listener, 30.4.48) Hellinger's film was made on the sidewalks of the city it depicts. *Northside* was remarkable mainly for this authenticity of physical setting and though city noises were used in that film to some extent, they were not employed as consistently or as strongly as Hellinger has used them. There is in fact no doubt that much of the local colour in *Naked City* has been slapped on simply out of an innocent love of local colour itself. Whether one accepts this or not is a matter of individual taste. I enjoyed it, for it was briskly done and there was no attempt to make the colours more attractive than natural, no ignoring of the greys, the drab tints, in favour of purple patches or high lights. There are shots of dawn over the Hudson and there are also pictures of squalid, dirty, littered streets; you hear the thin tinkie of a barrel-organ, then it is suddenly drowned in the roar of street traffic or the clatter of the Elevated railroad.

Like the sound, the photography is strongly realistic—a straight report with very little conscious art about it, but with the virtues of clarity and good timing which make American news-photography so vivid and eye-catching.

Naked City is a whole world removed from the Belfast of *Odd Man Out*, and yet occasionally I found myself reminded of Carol Reed's film. Both films are about manhunt, both are pictures which stress the impersonality of the city organism, both show similar glimpses of low life. In *Odd Man Out* the story moves to its climax with the inevitability of Greek tragedy, in *Naked City* the hunt pounds down the labyrinthine ways on the flat feet of precinct policemen. Hellinger has kept his story simple and therefore believable. There are no heroics, there is no love-interest; attention is concentrated, if anywhere on the seamy side of life not (as someone put it) the come-up-and-see-me side.

A good deal of publicity capital has been made out of the fact that *Naked City* was actually made in New York, and that it is an American documentary. That it should be considered in some ways audacious to make a film anywhere but on the sets and under the klieg lamps of Hollywood indicates at least one of the intellectual impediments which keep the average American commercial film at its present low level. So far as the documentary claim is concerned, there is no doubt that Hellinger has learned much from documentary, but I thought *Naked City* (like *Call Northside 777*) came closer to the *March of Time* technique—in story as well as treatment. *Naked City* isn't bothered by flashbacks. It marches on from the beginning, through the middle and reaches the end, then stops. And that is what every good film should do.

SECRET BEYOND THE DOOR

(Universal-International)

"THE mystery-monger's principal difficulty," wrote Dorothy Sayers, "is that of varying his surprises." That was



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