

I Did it - So What?

CRY OF THE CITY

(20th Century-Fox)

AS a change from foreign-language films and westerns there were a couple of straightforward thrillers showing in Wellington last week—straightforward, that is to say, in that neither of them dealt with repressed libidos, oedipus complexes, schizophrenias, or any of the other psychopathological motives that Hollywood has been putting in its thrillers lately. In *Cry of the City*, Martin Rome (played by Richard Conte, an actor who looks rather like Laurence Olivier, and has a good deal of his charm), is a smart, hard-boiled young crook who comes from a poor Italian-American family. He was brought up in a slum environment which, he declares, didn't give him a chance in life; in fact, it encouraged crime. The audience sees him lying wounded in bed after killing a policeman in a gun battle. When a rascally lawyer says he can reduce his sentence if he confesses to taking part in a jewel robbery the police are investigating, he tells him, in the colourful patois of the American gangster, to "go fry." And when his innocent sweetheart appears at his bedside for a moment, and he learns that the police might take her in for complicity in the crime, he escapes from the prison hospital to help her.

These seem to be quite worthy acts. Rome has a certain amount of integrity, and a natural desire to protect the girl who loves him. But with the help of an implacable police lieutenant named Candalla (Victor Mature) the film soon shows up the hollowness of his moral pretensions. In the first place, it is not true that environment was responsible for Rome's criminal life, for Candalla was brought up in the same district.

But Rome is a plausible rogue. He kills again while obtaining money for a getaway; he involves a second girl-friend and a poor doctor with the law; he double-crosses another crook who assists him; and he tries to get his innocent girl to run away with him. Worst of all, in the detective's eyes, he tries to corrupt his younger brother Tony, who regards him as a hero. Candalla determines to destroy his evil influence, and finally reveals him as a contemptible outcast, not worth a scrap of the pity, love, or grief that has been wasted on him.

The hackneyed theme of a desperate chase through the city is in this case skilfully handled. Robert Siodmak, the director of *Cry of the City*, is a man who knows how to play on the nerves of his audience, and there are some well-built-up sequences of suspense and terror which stand out in the film, if merely as successful examples of the screen being used as an artistic medium. In particular the mounting tension of the scene in which Rome escapes from the prison hospital, having to walk down a long corridor amongst numbers of policemen and hospital attendants, passing through several barriers at each of which he is scrutinised but not recognised before he gets into the open, is a fine piece of cinema.

BAROMETER

FAIR: "Cry of the City."
FAIR: "The Woman in White."

Yet it is a weakness that on the whole the artistry of *Cry of the City* is a little obvious, while its sombre, potent realism tends to detract from its entertainment value. Nevertheless, the mysterious atmosphere of the city at night is vividly caught, with its neon lights and swift-moving limousines, its cocktail bars and drunks, and its pianos tinkling out thin streams of jazz from midnight honky-tonks. This is the background cry of the city from which the film gets its title, but against it is posed a sharper cry at the warped mentality of a criminal who can say, when confronted with his crimes, "I did it—so what? You can't bring a dead man back to life."

THE WOMAN IN WHITE

(Warner Brothers)

AS a mystery novel, published in 1860, *The Woman in White* established Wilkie Collins's reputation as practically the first English writer to deal with the detection of crime. It contains some finely conceived characters, plenty of melodrama, a hint or two of the supernatural, and as complicated a plot as the most ardent whodunit fan could desire. The book is a classic of its kind, but this adaptation appears to do it less than justice. From the very first the Hollywood-style "olde English" atmosphere doesn't seem to strike the right note, and the nagging impression remains that these are just actors in a film about a novel written nearly a hundred years ago by an Englishman.

The film's appeal—its success in holding audiences more or less spellbound—seems to be due largely to the story. With its suggestion of obscure Latin cruelties on Fosco's part, the machinations of the villainous Sir Percival Glyde, the flabby selfishness of the valetudinarian Fairlie, the apparition of the mysterious woman in white, and the sinister asylum in which she has been confined, it is a real Gothic chamber of horrors, and for those who enjoy this sort of thing *The Woman in White* has its strong points. Unfortunately, the director seems to pre-suppose a knowledge of the plot, for the hasty, last-minute unravelling of its complicated strands is too casual for the average picturegoer to get a clear idea of what all these queer goings-on at Limmeridge House have really been about.

Sydney Greenstreet was, of course, a natural choice for the plump, smooth Italian villain, Count Fosco ("I couldn't be dangerous: I'm too fat"), but this is not one of his best performances. He glares wickedly about him as occasion warrants, indulges in a little hypnotism, and almost succeeds in combining an air of menace with one of joviality. But the best piece of acting in the film is given by Alexis Smith as the loval, vivacious, warm-hearted Marian Halcombe. For most of the others in the cast, and the direction, there is a feeling that something vital is lacking.

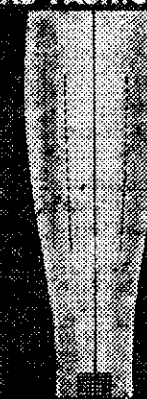
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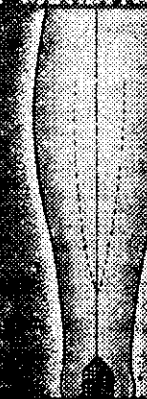
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