

TIGHT SPOT: PHIL KARLSON IN THE FIFTIES

Welcome to Phil Karlson's fifties America, where corruption and cruelty lurk not just in urban back alleys but in sunny resorts and leafy villages, and injustice is not an abstraction but a visceral blow to the body politic. Karlson is known for a particularly stark and punishing brand of noir, but his visual assaults are based in a brutal morality. Although he objected to screen violence for its own sake, Karlson said, "when it belongs, you should show it and you shouldn't pussyfoot around it. You should put it on there the way it happened." This fidelity to the physical was part of a pulp naturalism that combined authentic locations and downscale details with weird set pieces and startling twists, uncovering the uncanny in the real.

Born Philip Karlstein, Karlson (1908–86) came of age in 1920s Chicago and was seasoned in that city's underworld as well as its high culture: he was a bootlegger's lookout and witnessed a mob killing before attending the Art Institute. Later, to pay his way through law school at Loyola, he took a job at Universal, "washing toilets and dishes and whatever the hell they gave me." He eventually landed a barely more glamorous position as a director at Monogram on Poverty Row, where he compared himself to "a mechanic that worked on a line"—but "I was experimenting with everything I was making, trying to get my little pieces of truth here and there." The experiments paid off in the fifties, when Karlson put out the remarkable run of movies we feature here (all but one of which are unavailable on DVD). Join us for four nights of low-budget ingenuity and exhilarating eccentricity, laced with gritty little pieces of truth.

Juliet Clark
EDITOR

SERIES CURATED BY JULIET CLARK,
WITH THANKS TO STEVE SEID.
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PACKARD HUMANITIES INSTITUTE. WE
ARE GRATEFUL TO SONY PICTURES
FOR PROVIDING VAULT PRINTS.

PROGRAM NOTES BY JULIET CLARK.

FRIDAY JUNE 5

6:30 **Kansas City Confidential**

Phil Karlson (U.S., 1952)

John Payne was the perfectly imperfect star for Karlson's kind of noir: a former pretty-boy crooner whose face eroded into a sagging scowl, Payne conveyed a mixture of baffled resignation and simmering resentment in his portrayals of fate-battered characters. *Kansas City Confidential* pits Payne against Preston Foster, a criminal puppetmaster who jerks the strings of Neville Brand, Jack Elam, and Lee Van Cleef, the most grotesque trio of heavies this side of *Dick Tracy*. In a plot laden with paranoid convolutions, Foster's gang pulls off a sensational heist and Payne gets blamed; wronged but not innocent, the patsy turns persecutor, eventually tracing the robbers to a tropical resort where they await the big payoff. (Spying and stalking one another while attempting to pose as casual tourists, the men become caricatures of Americans-at-leisure.) Eerie imagery—jumpsuited men in blank gray masks, sweat-smearing faces in stark close-up—amplifies the atmosphere of suspicion, which is interrupted but not relieved by ironic humor and sudden eruptions of violence.

• Written by George Bruce, Harry Essex, based on a story by Harold R. Greene, Rowland Brown. Photographed by George E. Diskant. With John Payne, Coleen Gray, Preston Foster, Neville Brand. (98 mins, B&W, 35mm, From MGM)

8:30 **99 River Street**

Phil Karlson (U.S., 1953)

Shot largely from below the belt, *99 River Street* delivers a one-two punch of brute force and formal cunning. The film builds on typical noir elements—a down-on-his-luck protagonist, an untrustworthy blonde wife, a grisly gallery of underworld types—but ventures beyond familiar wrong-man themes to explore the overlaps between reality and spectacle. We first meet Ernie (John Payne), a failed prizefighter turned taxi driver, as he watches himself lose on a TV show called "Great Fights of Yesterday." Bruised, embittered but earnest Ernie is ensnared in an unstable universe where shops selling flowers and puppies are backdrops to crime, and murder is played as theater. When gangsters cast Ernie in the role of wife-killer, an aspiring actress (Evelyn Keyes) tries to help him with yet more artifice, but the expug's response to his predicament is more direct: "I gotta hit." The film's working title was "Crosstown," evoking both the characters' mutual betrayals and the cabbie's nocturnal travels across the map of New York, finally leading him down a dead-end street in Jersey City.

• Written by Robert Smith, based on the story "Crosstown" by George Zuckerman. Photographed by Franz Planer. With John Payne, Evelyn Keyes, Brad Dexter, Frank Faylen. (83 mins, B&W, 35mm, From MGM)





LEFT TO RIGHT
Kansas City Confidential, June 5
99 River Street, June 5
Scandal Sheet, June 12

FRIDAY JUNE 12

6:30 **Scandal Sheet**

Phil Karlson (U.S., 1952)

Broderick Crawford throws his grizzly bulk into the role of Mark Chapman, executive editor and chief cynic of the *New York Express*, a rag whose circulation-boosting stunts are the shame of its stockholders. When a figure from Chapman's past washes up among the human flotsam at an *Express*-sponsored lonely-hearts dance, ugly recriminations lead to a Weegee-worthy scene of manslaughter. The editor hopes to erase his error by dropping a wedding ring down the sewer and tearing a paper heart to pieces. But sordid death is the *Express*'s stock in trade, and soon Chapman finds himself selling the story even while evading the investigations of his own star reporter (John Derek). Karlson adapts Samuel Fuller's novel *The Dark Page* with tabloid gusto: the film moves to the clattering pace of city-desk chatter, and Burnett Guffey's starkly lit renderings of Bowery gin joints and tenement backstairs imbue Fuller's pulpy yarn with a pungent air of urban authenticity.

• Written by Ted Sherdeman, Eugene Ling, James Poe, based on the novel *The Dark Page* by Samuel Fuller. Photographed by Burnett Guffey. With Broderick Crawford, Donna Reed, John Derek, Rosemary DeCamp. (82 mins, B&W, 35mm, From Sony Pictures)

8:15 **Tight Spot**

Phil Karlson (U.S., 1955)

"Don't volunteer for nothin'," tough cookie Sherry Conley (Ginger Rogers) advises a newcomer to the big house. But what if fate volunteers you? Sherry is sprung from prison by the D.A. (Edward G. Robinson) in the hope that she'll testify in a mob trial, and finds herself in a new kind of bind. Kept under wraps in a bland hotel (a corball telethon on the room TV satirically underscores the tedium), she passes the time by engaging in a sniping flirtation with the terse cop (Brian Keith) assigned to her case. But she can't escape her role in a morality play about what individuals owe to society—or, put another way, "Who wants a hero with their insides blasted out?" As the crass but conflicted moll in an unflattering haircut and too-tight suit, Rogers departs from the winsome persona of earlier days to give one of the best performances of her career.

• Written by William Bowers, based on the play *Dead Pigeon* by Lenard Kantor. Photographed by Burnett Guffey. With Ginger Rogers, Edward G. Robinson, Brian Keith, Lucy Marlow. (97 mins, B&W, 'Scope, 35mm, From Sony Pictures)

FRIDAY JUNE 19

6:30 **5 Against the House**

Phil Karlson (U.S., 1955)

Proof that "college boys are not swallowing goldfish these days," as a *New York Times* reviewer observed in 1955, *5 Against the House* transplants the characters of a campus comedy into a genre-shuffling hybrid of crime caper, shellshock melodrama, road movie, and Western—with songs. If Midwestern University students Al (Guy Madison) and Brick (Brian Keith) look too old for school, that's because they spent their formative years fighting in Korea. While Al hopes to build a future with a lovely nightclub singer (Kim Novak in an early role), Brick thinks the deck is stacked against him. When one of their glib and callow collegian pals comes up with a scheme to rob a casino simply to prove it can be done, Brick takes the intellectual exercise a little too seriously. The heist at Harold's Club in Reno highlights Karlson's talent for location shooting and his taste for surreal set pieces; a parking-garage car-elevator provides a sort of catharsis *ex machina*.

• Written by Stirling Silliphant, William Bowers, John Barnwell, based on a story by Jack Finney. Photographed by Lester White. With Guy Madison, Kim Novak, Brian Keith, Alvy Moore. (84 mins, B&W, 'Scope, 35mm, From Sony Pictures)

8:15 **The Phenix City Story**

Phil Karlson (U.S., 1955)

Phenix City, Alabama, a.k.a. "Sin City, U.S.A.," became nationally notorious in 1954 when the good-ol'-boy gangsters who ran the town's vice rackets conspired to murder Albert Patterson, a local lawyer who'd just been elected Alabama's attorney general. Filmed on location while the murder trial was still in progress, Karlson's raw report opens with newsreel footage of journalist Clete Roberts interviewing townspeople involved in the events. The drama that follows, cowritten by Daniel Mainwaring (*Invasion of the Body Snatchers*), mixes actors with real-life residents and facts with invented incidents in a shockingly detailed depiction of depravity and corruption. With a text declaring "Phenix City is now a model community," the movie officially celebrates the ultimate arrival of law and order, but its images acknowledge a darker undertow. As critic and Alabama native Jonathan Rosenbaum wrote, "though the movie's politics are liberal, its moral outrage is so intense you may come out of it wanting to join a lynch mob."

• Written by Crane Wilbur, Dan Mainwaring. Photographed by Harry Neumann. With John McIntire, Richard Kiley, Kathryn Grant, Edward Andrews. (100 mins, B&W, 'Scope, 35mm, From Warner Bros.)

FRIDAY JUNE 26

6:30 **The Brothers Rico**

Phil Karlson (U.S., 1957)

"I believe in families," gentle-voiced gangster Sid Kubik (Larry Gates) assures his ex-employee Eddie Rico (Richard Conte) in the living room of his genteel apartment, while down the hall, Eddie's brother Gino is tortured on Sid's orders. "Thanks, Uncle Sid," Gino growls between guttural moans. Based on a novel by Georges Simenon, *The Brothers Rico* rewrites the greeting-card sentiments of fifties family values into a treatise on entrapment and betrayal. Believing he's left his mob ties behind, happily married Eddie now runs a successful laundry business. But nothing is harder to wash out than blood, and when he hears his two brothers are in trouble, Eddie is drawn back under the influence of Uncle Sid. While mothers and wives worry about the future, the younger Rico brothers face an awful fate inadvertently enabled by loyal, responsible Eddie. A final triumph for the nuclear family doesn't negate the damage; instead, it only reinforces a gangster's wisdom, "You can't buck the system."

• Written by Lewis Meltzer, Ben Perry, based on the novel *Les frères Rico* by Georges Simenon. Photographed by Burnett Guffey. With Richard Conte, Dianne Foster, Kathryn Grant, Larry Gates. (92 mins, B&W, 'Scope, 35mm, From Sony Pictures)

8:30 **Gunman's Walk**

Phil Karlson (U.S., 1958)

This tragedy of masculinity ties one family's violent legacy to broader social histories of brutality and mistrust, the legacy of the West. Van Heflin plays a gunslinger turned rancher who arrived in the territory before the law did. While his younger son James Darren cares less for guns than for Kathryn Grant, a half-Indian girl, big brother Tab Hunter is dangerously determined to do his father's mythic past one better. Karlson and scriptwriter Frank Nugent (*The Searchers*) establish an unrelenting atmosphere of tension and one-upmanship among the three protagonists, building to an inevitable but still shocking conclusion; Heflin delivers a moving performance as a man who doesn't quite realize what he's wrought until it's too late. (Karlson later boasted that the film made Harry Cohn cry.) The widescreen cinematography beautifully visualizes the contrast between the confines of civilization and the golden open country, where wild horses and men roam in restless motion, their freedom tinged with desperation.

• Written by Frank S. Nugent, based on a story by Ric Hardman. Photographed by Charles Lawton Jr. With Van Heflin, Tab Hunter, Kathryn Grant, James Darren. (97 mins, Color, 'Scope, 35mm, From Sony Pictures)