

1970s crime film is the best of its kind

By Oliver Spivey
Staff Writer

Robert Mitchum is one of those iconic stars whose signature tough-guy walk, droopy-eyed expression and unmistakable deep voice are forever etched into our collective cinematic consciousness. His screen presence was marked by an experience-informed coolness and authority.

He had, much like John Wayne or Johnny Cash, a face endowed with craggy good looks and a timeless American appeal, a face that could have easily seemed in its proper place carved into the stone of Mount Rushmore.

Mitchum was in some very good movies—*Heaven Knows, Mr. Allison* (1957), *The Sundowners* (1960)—and gave his best performances as terrifying, psychotic villains in the classics *Night of the Hunter* (1955) and *Cape Fear* (1962).

The Friends of Eddie Coyle (1973) is a sharp crime film directed by Peter Yates, the man who gave us the ultra-cool Steve McQueen detective flick *Bullitt* (1968). Mitchum, as the titular protagonist, gives what must be his finest performance. The performance flows from Mitchum so naturally that we forget we are watching a movie.

Coyle (Mitchum) is an aging crook who fears he may be spending time behind bars for transporting illegal goods into other states for the mob. Coyle has been around

long enough to know the almost inevitable end to a life of crime. He also fears that his Irish wife (Helena Carroll) and their kids will be forced to go on welfare.

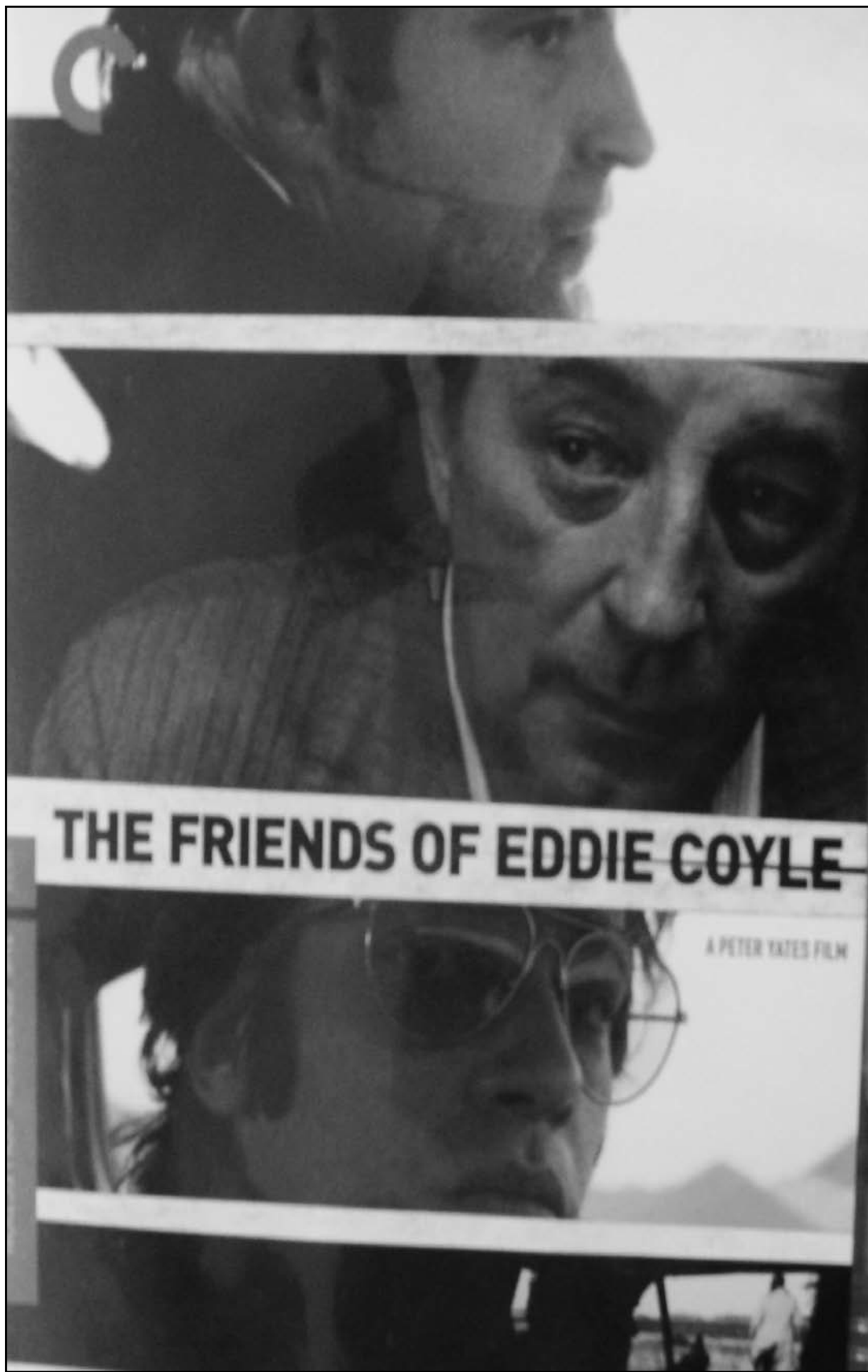
Coyle begs undercover treasury agent Dave Foley (Richard Jordan) to try to talk the judges out of his sentencing. Foley promises but wants Coyle to rat out his friends in crime: gun-runner Jackie Brown (Steven Keats) and bank robber Artie Van (Joe Santos).

Knowing it is his only chance, Coyle decides to take it. But the cops actually have no intention of cutting Coyle slack and now his longtime underworld friend, a seemingly harmless bartender named Dillon (Peter Boyle), is hired by the mob to kill Coyle for talking.

This is a movie in the tradition of film noir that is full of doom-gloom fatalism yet still cares for its seedy characters in a detached sort of way. The shocking finale is among the grimmest and most tragic in any crime film. It was made at a time when gritty cop dramas were the rage.

There were certainly some great ones like *The French Connection* (1971), *Dirty Harry* (1971) and *Serpico* (1973). What sets Eddie Coyle apart is the low-key approach to the narrative. It is really a first-rate character study and is much less concerned with sensational melodrama.

There are no obligatory car chases, no explosive gunfights and no flam-



boyant, sociopathic killers.

When action scenes do arrive, like the elaborately staged bank robberies, they seem oddly out of place; we long for

more conversation between Coyle and his criminal associates. I found myself feeling that not enough screen time was given to Coyle, which is unfortunate because

Mitchum makes him so likeable and interesting a character.

The movie is not constructed with off-the-shelf themes about law and order and crime doesn't

pay; it's too intelligent for that. The cops are just as corrupt as those who they go after. In a society that thrives on greed, Coyle and his pals are doing the best they can to get their bit of milk and honey.

Paul Monash's screenplay of George V. Higgins' novel is loaded with memorable dialogue. Coyle gets some great lines to spout at the young punks who just don't understand what it's all about.

The less-than-glamorous Boston locales add a dimension of realism that is startling and creates the unforgiving milieu of a true neo-noir.

Mitchum provides the film with an actual connection to the heyday of film noir.

It is fitting that a man who started his career starring in hardboiled noirs like *Out of the Past* (1947), *Crossfire* (1947) and *Angel Face* (1953) should, more than 20 years later, find his finest, most nuanced performance in the character of the small-time crook Coyle.

The film's offbeat pacing may not attract viewers who need hyperkinetic spectacles to keep their attention. Consider yourself warned.

Overlooked (and unavailable) for too long, *The Friends of Eddie Coyle*, unlike so many films of its kind, displays a concern for its characters living in the shifty margins of society that is a testament to its insightful filmmakers—and to Mitchum.

Classic film pushes limits of risky content

By Oliver Spivey
Staff Writer

In the early 1960s, most Hollywood films and filmmakers were still dealing with the rigid demands of the production code, which would not change until the latter end of the decade. *Town Without Pity* (1961) was a German-American co-production that was able to push the limits of acceptable material.

Marketed as a film for adult audiences only, *Town Without Pity* takes on unsavory issues that were a sure way to stir up a hornet's nest in the smugly conventional America of the period.

A 16-year-old girl named Karin Steinhoff (Christine Kaufmann) is brutally raped by four drunken U.S. soldiers stationed in a sleepy post-war German town. With the town and the girl's enraged parents demanding justice, the military prepares for a trial.

Karin is given a prosecuting counselor played by E.G. Marshall, who is aiming to make sure the four soldiers are given the death penalty to appease not only the town and the parents, but also the German people who may get the wrong ideas about an American military presence in their country.

Maj. Steve Garrett—Kirk Douglas in a role similar to the one he had played in Stanley Kubrick's superior anti-

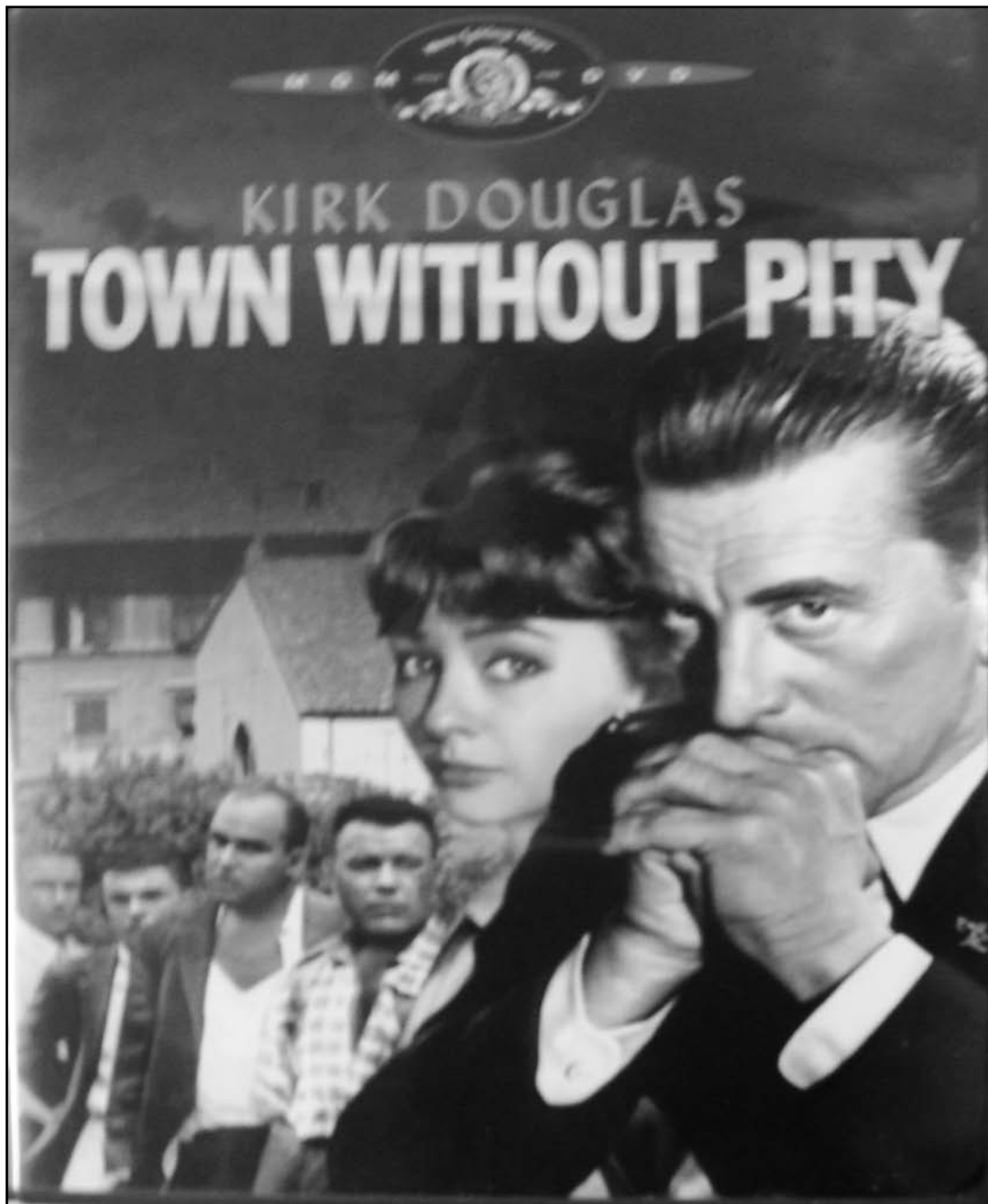
war film *Paths of Glory* (1957)—is the lawyer brought in from the outside, who has the unwanted task of pleading the innocence of the obviously guilty men.

Garrett soon finds that the only way to make a case for the defendants is by smearing Karin's reputation and painting her as a sex-crazed teen who welcomed her own rape. Garrett begs her father to remove her from the trial so he doesn't have to go through with it. Knowing the men are guilty, he can barely stomach the position he is in.

Instead of continuing to demonize the rapists, the town instead begins to ridicule Karin and the sensational trial spreads gossip like wildfire. The finale is ruthlessly ironic, making other Hollywood courtroom dramas of the era seem pretty tame by comparison (check out the silly, though well acted, Glenn Ford film *Trial* (1955)).

For example In Otto Preminger's *Anatomy of a Murder* (1959), lawyer Jimmy Stewart asks permission to exhibit Lee Remick's panties for the court. The use of the word "panties"—among others—was cause enough to have censors crying indecency upon that film's release.

In *Town Without Pity*, a similar instance is replicated when Garrett uses the word "impotence" to describe Cpl. Larkin's



(Robert Blake) "condition." That alone must have put the film's release in jeopardy.

The film is certainly transgressive for its time and has some solid performances. Douglas is the standout in the courtroom scenes where, with signature intensity, he gets to ham it up, giving us all of the growling and grimacing we can handle.

But the things that the movie has in its favor may be a bit outweighed by the things that mar it. For one, most of the characterizations are way too thin, and director Gottfried Reinhardt doesn't weave the dangling threads of potentially fascinating characters and their back stories into the overall fabric of the movie.

I found myself want-

ing to know more about Garrett, Marshall as the prosecuting attorney and particularly the psychologically tormented Larkin played by Blake, who dominates early scenes but then is dropped by a negligent screenplay. Blake would play a much more realized character as the tortured criminal Perry Smith in the film version of *In Cold Blood*

(1967).

Next we have the German speaking scenes which are interrupted by an intrusive voice-over narration from Barbara Rutting, who plays Inge Koerner, a muckraking reporter. The natural flow of the film is made clumsy because of this, and I guess it was a way to save American viewers from the exhausting task of having to read subtitles.

And that brings me to the film's title song sung by pop star Gene Pitney. The song was a smash hit that year and was actually nominated for an Oscar.

The film is determined to make sure the audience leave with it stuck in their heads. If that was the sole intent, then it succeeds whether you want it to or not.

But it becomes tiresome as it is played over and over again. The song even plays in several variations during a scene at a local bar where kids festively dance the night away to it like it's the only song they've ever heard.

If you can look past its imperfections, *Town Without Pity* stands as a noteworthy film from its era that still packs a punch. Although not really groundbreaking on its own, we can at least appreciate it as an entry into that catalog of risky movies that long attempted to awaken Hollywood and the American public from their sugarcoted slumber.