

Depression era film is a tale of escape

By Oliver Spivey
Staff Writer

I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang (1932) is a jailbreak movie that helped set the standard for all that followed. It is one of the earliest movies to put in place many of the conventions of one of our most popular subgenres. Without it, we may never have so thoroughly enjoyed prison escape classics like *Cool Hand Luke* (1967), *Escape from Alcatraz* (1979) and *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994). Director Mervyn LeRoy's film is a stark, uncompromising portrait of a man caught up in a system of overwhelming injustice.

Given its preoccupation with violence and paranoia, the film is actually listed in *Film Noir: An Encyclopedic Reference to the American Style* as one of the earliest forerunners to that dark mode of filmmaking that began in the 1940s. One can certainly see its influence on Jules Dassin's *Brute Force* (1947), a classic prison noir. *Chain Gang* is one of the genuine classics to come out of the gangster/social drama cycle of films made by Warner Brothers in the 1930s.

The movie primarily takes place in the years just following WWI. The story concerns itself with soldier James Allen (Paul Muni) and his return home after the war. His old boss offers to hire him

back to work at the factory where he spent his years before the war. Full of big ideas, Allen abandons his monotonous job and his controlling parents by leaving home and begins to drift throughout the country, occasionally holding odd jobs.

After being wrongfully accused of a holdup he didn't commit, Allen is sentenced to 10 years of hard labor on a chain gang. He soon sees the utter despair of his situation. The movie gives us scenes of sadistic guards handing out lashings and punishing those who would dare wipe the sweat from their foreheads without asking permission. The food the inmates are made to eat is tasteless slop; their feet are linked together with short chains to inhibit running away; their days begin before the sun is up and end well after it goes down.

In one genuinely exciting sequence, Allen makes his first escape from the chain gang. The scene showing us his methods for escape is clearly echoed over 30 years later in *Cool Hand Luke*. The scene involves Allen asking one of the guards if he can go to the bathroom.

While behind a bush, Allen makes a run for it through the woods. He is pursued by guards with dogs and just barely makes his escape by submerging himself underwater in a pond, while breathing through a reed.



It may very well be the first time a movie has depicted that now clichéd technique of hiding.

Since the film was released two years before the Production Code would change the nature of content permitted in Hollywood movies, *Chain Gang* gets away with some stuff that still man-

ages to raise eyebrows. Shortly after Allen makes his getaway, a scene shows him at the apartment of an old prison buddy. His friend offers him some "companionship" for the night with a young lady. She tells him she'll take care of him as she hops up on his lap. As the scene fades to black, it

doesn't take a genius to figure out what's being suggested.

Allen has enough luck to legitimately work his way up the ladder to become the wealthy engineer he always envisioned himself as being. But a conniving girlfriend who wants his hard earned money knows all about

his past and will turn him in unless he marries her—even though he soon meets the girl of his dreams.

Eventually the truth leaks out and after losing everything, Allen is made to return to prison. This time around the sentencing is much shorter, but his day of supposed freedom never comes. This all leads to another desperate escape. If the film ends abruptly, it wisely does so with Allen whispering some final haunting words about how he goes on surviving while on the run.

Muni was one of the finest movie actors of his time. The same year that this film was released, he also starred in the best and most violent of the 1930's gangster films, Howard Hawks' *Scarface*. LeRoy was a director whose most prolific period was in the 30s and 40s. He is best known for directing the gangland classic that shot Edward G. Robinson to fame, *Little Caesar* (1930).

This is a movie approaching 80 years old that, for the most part, plays as powerfully today as when first released. It has a message without ever preaching to its audience and is one of the most thrilling movies you're likely to see (old or new).

Whoever said a movie with concern for social justice can't also be one heck of an action movie, too?

Oscar award winning film rarely mentioned

By Oliver Spivey
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Marty is a title you rarely hear thrown around these days. The Oscar winner for best picture of 1955 seems so uncharacteristic of other Academy Award winners of that decade. Most were big budgeted efforts that included everything from splashy Technicolor musicals like *An American in Paris* (1951) and *Gigi* (1958), to WWII and sword 'n' sandal epics like *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957) and *Ben-Hur* (1959).

The film is a heartfelt, simple story of a lonely Bronx butcher named Marty Piletti, played by Ernest Borgnine, who would go on to win the Oscar for best actor of the year. The script was adapted to the screen by the great screenwriter Paddy Chayefsky from his teleplay.

Marty is a guy who has just never had luck with the ladies. Marty's mother Theresa, a strong Italian matriarch played by Esther Minciotti, urges Marty to take his mind off the butcher shop and get married. At 34-years-old Marty realizes it is time to finally settle down and give meaning to a life that has been rather aimless ever since the end of the Second World War, 10 years earlier.

Marty is one of those guys who are hardworking, nice and sensitive by nature. His friends are a group of womanizing losers, also in their 30s, but

who act like frat boys. One highly humorous scene, depicting the maturity gap between Marty and his friends, has Marty telling them in earnest how he longs to go see Clara (Betsy Blair), the girl he had met at a dance hall the previous night.

His close friend Angie (Joe Mantell) tells him to forget about her, describing the homely Clara as a "dog." Angie insists they all do some girl watching down on 72nd Street, while his two other companions discuss their love for the pulp fiction of Mickey Spillane and are taken with the misogynistic author's fictional methods for disposing of two-faced women. They repeatedly exclaim "That Mickey Spillane. Boy, he sure can write!"

Marty sees himself as an ugly man and a failure with women. He knows the pain of rejection. Watch his face as a girl he met earlier denies him a date over the phone. Borgnine exudes the pent-up pain of a man who has sadly come to accept disappointment.

The night he meets Clara everything changes for Marty. He is noticeably happy and talks for hours with the soft-spoken school teacher. She sees so much goodness in Marty and likes him, too, but holds back and is more reserved.

She is a lot like him though: stood up by cruel dates, seen as ugly and socially awkward. They are two lonely people in the right place at the right



time and complement each other perfectly. I like the way director Delbert Mann (who also won an Oscar here) lets these endearing characters walk and converse and invites us in to a late-night diner to eavesdrop on the elated couple.

Soon Marty finds

himself a man encircled by people who all share the opinion that he should drop the sweet Clara. His mother soon realizes once Marty is off and married, she will be useless.

Having taken care of him her whole life, she fears she will be a forgotten old widow without a

husband or a son. Marty's cousin, Tommy, who is in a turbulent marriage, warns him emphatically to stay single and, of course, his juvenile friends want him free to chase skirts with them.

Marty gets up the courage to finally follow what his intuition is

telling him, leading to a moderately satisfying but somewhat abrupt conclusion.

The movie left me longing for something more, a stronger sense of closure. That lone quibble aside, *Marty* is a terrific production with memorable performances.

Borgnine was never better. He played a brutish bully in '50s classics like *From Here to Eternity* (1953) and *Bad Day at Black Rock* (1955) and was good, but there always seemed to be a sensitivity and vulnerability lurking beneath that baddie persona.

He was almost always a supporting player, rarely a leading man. Here he plays a character that to us seems to be no less than the actual Borgnine. I mean, doesn't he just look like your friendly neighborhood butcher?

Chayefsky, the film's writer, scripted some of the best social satire ever brought to the screen, including *The Americanization of Emily* (1964) and *Network* (1976). The film's location shooting is admirable. Getting to see the real nighttime streets of New York in the 50s sure beats your ordinary time capsule.

Do yourself a favor by taking the latest Matthew McConaughey disaster out of the DVD player and pop in a movie about real relationships. *Marty* will make you smile when you're feeling blue. I promise.