

The Main Feature

Season 32 - Issue 12 (screening 8.3.12)



USA 1938 97 minutes Certificate PG

Director: Michael Curtiz Screenplay: John Wexley, Warren Duff and Rowland Brown
 Music: Max Steiner Cinematography: Sol Polito
 Producers: Samuel Bischoff, Hal B. Wallis and Jack L. Warner

Cast:

James Cagney	Rocky Sullivan	The Dead End Kids:	
Pat O'Brien	Jerry Connolly	Soapy	Billy Halop
Humphrey Bogart	James Frazier	Swing	Bobby Jordan
Ann Sheridan	Laury Ferguson	Bim	Leo Gorcey
George Bancroft	Mac Keefer	Crabface	Huntz Hall
		Hunky	Bernard Punsky

As MGM was to musicals so Warner Brothers were to gangster movies and in the 1930s such films, particularly starring James Cagney, Edward G Robinson and Humphrey Bogart, helped form the image of the studio. Angels with Dirty faces, a gutsy rousing blend of gangster thriller and social commentary, was one of the best of the genre.

Rocky (James Cagney) and Jerry (Pat O'Brien) were best friends who grew up together in the then slum ridden Hell's Kitchen in New York, and dabbled in juvenile crime. But while Rocky, after having been sent to reform school, grew up to become a notorious gangster, Jerry becomes a priest working with kids just like they had been. Rocky returns to their old neighbourhood, where he is the object of hero worship by the

local youths (the Dead End Kids), whom Jerry is seeking to keep from a life of crime and away from the corrupting influence of his former friend.

Meanwhile Rocky gets involved with Frazier (Humphrey Bogart) a crooked lawyer and Keefer (George Bancroft, the first gangster star of the movies although little remembered now) who is a shady business man. Rocky's relationship with this pair, involving bribery, crooked government and killings, builds to the climax of the film. Not to be revealed, other than to remark that gangster melodramas of the period – *Angels with Dirty Faces* was released in 1938 – had to provide a moral outcome that the production code necessitated. And there is a certain ambiguity about the ending on which you the audience must take a view.



Central to the film is, of course, the relationship between Cagney and O'Brien who form an irresistible team. Great friends away from the screen they made nine films together. *Angels with Dirty Faces* received three nominations for Academy Awards for Best Director, Best Actor (James Cagney) and Best Writing, Original Story. None were successful on this occasion, but James Cagney subsequently won an Oscar in 1942 for Best Actor in *Yankee Doodle Dandy*.

James Cagney (1899-1986) is best remembered for playing tough guys, but his first professional acting performance was as a dancer, dressed as a woman, in the chorus line of the 1919 revue "Every Sailor". He

spent several years in vaudeville until he got his first major acting part in 1925. Spotted by Warner Bros they awarded Cagney a seven year contract. *The Public Enemy*, in 1931 thrust him into the spotlight not only because it became one of the most influential gangster movies of the period, but also, and perhaps even more so, for the famous scene when Cagney pushed half a grapefruit into the face of Mae Clarke. Or did he? Some said he did, others said it was faked. But as John Ford remarked if the legend is more interesting than the truth, print the legend. Hum!

Cagney became one of Warner's and Hollywood's biggest stars, but the relationship between him and the studio was not without its problems. He walked out on them several times but always returned. Jack Warner called him "The Professional Againster" in reference to Cagney's refusal to be pushed around. This was mirrored in his cocky walk and punchy personality. And together with his staccato delivery, whether playing the cop, gangster, western hero or Shakespearean clown – he was Bottom in Max Reinhardt's 1935 production of *Midsummer Night's Dream* – his persona and style produced many imitators. I wonder if anyone remembers the 1993 episode of the TV comedy show *Hale and Pace* which featured a sketch parodying *Angels with Dirty Faces*, entitled *Angels with Big Trousers* with Pace playing James Cagney as "Rocky Pantaloon" and Hale playing "Somebody O'Brien as the Irishman".



After 70 years what view will we take of the film? Will we see it as "a rousing, bloody, brutal melodrama" which is how one New York critic saw it, or as the fashionable, moralising film with a social conscience and an emphasis on the public good which the Hays code demanded?

Neville Ledsome

The Dead End Kids terrorised the set during shooting. They threw other actors off with their ad-libbing, and once cornered costar Humphrey Bogart and stole his trousers. But they didn't figure on James Cagney's street-bred toughness. The first time Leo Gorcey pulled an ad-lib on Cagney, the star stiff-armed the young actor right above the nose. From then on, the gang behaved.

To play Rocky, James Cagney drew on his memories of growing up in New York's Yorkville, a tough ethnic neighborhood on the upper east side, just south of Spanish Harlem. His main inspiration was a drug-addicted pimp who stood on a street corner all day hitching his trousers, twitching his neck, and repeating, "Whadda ya hear! Whadda ya say!" Those mannerisms came back to haunt Cagney. He later wrote in his autobiography, "I did those gestures maybe six times in the picture. That was over thirty years ago - and the impressionists have been doing me doing him ever since."

.....

The "Hays code"

First published in March 1930, the Motion Picture Production Code (popularly known as the Hays Code) was the first attempt at introducing film censorship in the US through laying down a series of guidelines to film producers.

Will H. Hays resigned his Postmaster General cabinet position on January 14, 1922, in order to become the President of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) shortly after the organisation's founding. He began his new job, at a \$100,000 annual salary (average annual earnings at the same time was \$1236), on March 6 of that year. The goal of the organisation was to renovate the image of the movie industry in the wake of the Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle rape and murder scandal and amid growing calls by primarily Protestant groups for federal censorship of the movies. Hiring Hays to "clean up the pictures" was, at least in part, a public relations ploy and much was made of his conservative credentials, including his roles as a Presbyterian deacon and past chairman of the Republican Party

The Code was founded according to the concept: "if motion pictures present stories that will affect lives for the better, they can become the most powerful force for the improvement of mankind" - the clear implication being that films were failing to achieve these lofty aims.

The Code was based on three general principles:

- No picture shall be produced that will lower the moral standards of those who see it. Hence the sympathy of the audience should never be thrown to the side of crime, wrongdoing, evil or sin.
- Correct standards of life, subject only to the requirements of drama and entertainment, shall be presented.
- Law, natural or human, shall not be ridiculed, nor shall sympathy be created for its violation.

These were developed in a series of rules grouped under the self-explanatory headings Crimes Against The Law, Sex, Vulgarity, Obscenity, Profanity, Costume, Dances (i.e. suggestive movements), Religion, Locations (i.e. the bedroom), National Feelings, Titles and "Repellent Subjects" (extremely graphic violence).

Although these guidelines were technically voluntary, in practice the major Hollywood studios used the Hays Code guidelines as a convenient means of staving off pressure groups (the British Board of Film Censors' recommendations had been adopted by British film producers and distributors for similar reasons).

As a result, the Hays Code (and similar strictures laid down by the hugely influential Catholic Legion of Decency) directly influenced the content of almost every American film made between 1930 and 1966, when the Motion Picture Association of America introduced a ratings system along the lines of the BBFC's classification certificates.

The printing of the notes for each film is undertaken by Repropoint free of charge



15 Poole Road, Woking Tel: 01483 596280

sponsors photocopying of *the main feature*

Reactions to **La noche de los girasols** 23 February

Score **0** **1** **2** **3** **4** **5** **6** **7** **8** **9** **10**
Votes ~ 1 ~ ~ 1 1 9 13 7 1 ~

Total received – Average Score – 6.67

Your Comments

Well directed, well acted, gripping film – rural background authentic and convincing
 A great film with tension throughout – holiday in rural Spain cancelled! Too violent
 Well constructed – a bit like “El Columbo” Intriguing and entertaining Certainly not boring
 A very good film which maintained one’s interest throughout A surprise ending
 Very slow first half but improved greatly in part 2 Strong stuff but very well made
 Excellent – would watch it again Enthralling – very cleverly done
 Beautifully shot on location “Desperately” good – acting, location and filming
 Much better than some recent films! Different – a lot of suspense: quite enjoyable
 Oh no! The bad guy got away with it! Booooo!

Why does the character watch a documentary on bees in the last scene?

Director I wanted to adopt the perspective of an entomologist. We see the story from above, we see the way people’s paths cross. And in the documentary the commentator says, ‘bees don’t sting if you don’t bother them’, which I thought worked well with the killer’s story. But in the subtitles there is a mention of *Las Hurdes (Land Without Bread)*, the Buñuel documentary, and I hadn’t seen that. So everybody said, ah, so it’s an homage to Buñuel, but it wasn’t that at all, I just hadn’t seen it! (*laughs*)

Position	Film	Average Score
1 st	The Secret in their Eyes	8.69
2 nd	The Kings Speech	8.66
3 rd	Made in Dagenham	7.94
4 th	Etre et Avoir	6.94
5 th	The Illusionist	6.92
6 th	Machan	6.81
7 th	Night of the Sunflowers	6.67
8 th	Harvey	6.3
9 th	Public Enemies	6.16
10 th	Black Swan	5.88
11 th	Heartbeat Detector	3.95

Our next film, in German with English subtitles

8pm on Thursday 22 March 2012

Winner of the 2003 Oscar for Best Foreign Language film

A Jewish family in Germany emigrate to Kenya shortly before the Second World War to start running a farm, but not all members of the family come to an arrangement with their new life.

