



# THE FORGOTTEN MAN

Richard Fleischer's RKO Years | Jason Ney

If you were to ask a group of film noir fans to come up with a single list of the best film noir directors of all time, a spirited debate would no doubt ensue. Those who prefer the big-ticket “A” pictures would put Billy Wilder and John Huston at the top. The low-rent, Poverty Row aficionados would argue passionately in favor of Edgar G. Ulmer and Anthony Mann. A few would loudly clamor for Sam Fuller. Ida Lupino, the lone lady of the bunch, would surely get at least a handful of votes. Orson Welles fans would have intricately detailed arguments for why their guy deserved to be on the list. Others would argue in favor of Edward Dmytryk, Robert Wise, Nicholas Ray, Jacques Tourneur, and Robert Siodmak. Despite his debatable noir pedigree, Alfred Hitchcock would probably get at least a few mentions.

However, there's one name that probably wouldn't come up often, if at all: Richard Fleischer.

While Welles, Wilder, and other noir heavyweights continue to be celebrated and studied decades after their films were originally released, Fleischer remains noir's forgotten man. Despite a successful directorial career that spanned nearly fifty years, he never managed to carry the same level of brand-name recognition that his more famous colleagues enjoyed. A perfect example of how Fleischer remains generally ignored in noir circles comes from the recent book *Film Noir: The Directors*, edited by Alain Silver and James

Ursini. The book provides profiles of no less than twenty-eight noir directors, but Fleischer is nowhere to be found—except as the target of a quick brush-off in Silver's introduction, who explains that Fleischer's lack of inclusion is because he is “not necessarily” one of “the best examples” of a noir director. However, a fresh look at Fleischer's accomplishments in the noir genre while under contract at RKO Radio Pictures in the late 1940s and early 1950s, reveals a consistently solid body of work that establishes him as a noir director worthy of more admiration and recognition than he currently receives.



Bill Williams and Marya Marco in *The Clay Pigeon*, Richard Fleischer's first noir

**WHEN DESCRIBING HOW HE BROKE INTO** the picture business, Fleischer recalled that, during his time directing plays in New England, “An RKO talent scout named Arthur Willi caught one of the shows I’d directed, sought me out after the performance, and said, ‘Young man, how would you like to come to Hollywood and direct movies?’ Just like that. Even Cinderella never had it so good.” When he got to Hollywood in 1945, Sig Rogell, who, according to Fleischer, “was in charge of the B picture unit and ran it with all the humanity of a tyrant,” generously took Fleischer under his wing. By Fleischer’s own admission, Rogell could have crushed him. But instead, Rogell mentored him through his first years in Hollywood and, according to Fleischer, “turned me from a Yale Drama School graduate into a Hollywood survivor.”

Fleischer didn’t immediately start out in noir, but it would quickly prove to be his salvation and his springboard into a long and successful career. His first picture for Rogell and the RKO “B” unit was the child-focused drama *Child of Divorce* (1946), starring the Shirley Temple wannabe Sharyn Moffett. Unlike most “B” pictures which, according to Fleischer, were never previewed but were instead simply “manufactured and dumped into the theatres owned by RKO,” his first film actually received a preview screening in Hollywood and was warmly received, both at its initial

screening and when it was widely released on the second half of a double bill.

But the initial glow didn’t last long. *Banjo* (1947), also starring Moffett, was an unmitigated disaster. It also received a preview screening in Westwood Village but this time, the theatergoers weren’t so kind. The theater was packed with college kids expecting to see a preview of a major studio release, not an RKO “B” picture about the adventures of a girl and her dog. According to Fleischer, when the name SHARYN MOFFETT flashed across the screen during the opening credits, “Pandemonium broke out. The entire audience rose to its feet and started pushing toward the aisles. They were screaming ‘NO! NO! NO!’ at the screen. The ushers, three abreast, rushed into the aisles yelling, ‘You can’t get your money back after you’ve seen the title!’ and started pushing the surging crowd back. It was utter chaos.” When the film was finally released, audiences generally reacted the same way as the college kids. Everyone but Fleischer—

Sharyn Moffett, producer Lillie Hayward, *Banjo* the dog—got fired. Fleischer managed to escape with his job, but his relationship with Rogell was seriously damaged. As he put it, “it was several months before Rogell would even speak to me.”

**NINETEEN FORTY-EIGHT WAS A PIVOTAL YEAR** for both Fleischer and RKO. Fleischer needed to figure out a way to get back







Real-life husband and wife Bill Williams and Barbara Hale in *The Clay Pigeon*

into Rogell's good graces, and the studio was struggling through another tumultuous change in leadership. Richard B. Jewell writes in *RKO Radio Pictures: A Titan is Born* that "executive turnover was in fact the distinguishing feature of [RKO's] twenty-nine year existence.... RKO's management was never stable. New corporate presidents or production heads, or both, arrived every few years, making RKO the most unsettled and erratic of motion picture enterprises." In May of 1948, the new executive was none other than Howard Hughes.

While Hughes' meddling, fickle actions would eventually spell doom for RKO, they actually had a mostly positive effect on Fleischer's career. Within weeks of taking over, Hughes fired 1900 of RKO's 2500 employees, shelved the serious "so-called message pictures" that were either already completed or in production, and mandated that the studio focus its efforts on churning out films filled with sex and violence. For a director like Fleischer working in the "B" picture unit, that meant one thing—noir, noir, and more noir.

Early in 1948, before Hughes bought a majority stake in RKO and while Fleischer and Rogell were still on the outs, Fleischer somehow convinced Rogell to hire Carl Foreman to develop the screenplay for an original noir story called *The Clay Pigeon* (1948), which Fleischer would direct. The film was the first to go into production at RKO under the Hughes regime, and it kicked off a five-year run of under-the-radar success for Fleischer in the noir genre. From 1948 to 1951, Fleischer would complete no less than seven noirs, six of them for RKO and one—*Trapped* (1949)—while on loan to Eagle-Lion.

It wasn't long before Fleischer regained his footing, bouncing back from the *Banjo* debacle by directing both *The Clay Pigeon* and *Bodyguard* in 1948 (although *The Clay Pigeon* wouldn't be released until 1949). In both films, Fleischer shows his developing skill as a director by getting excellent performances from his lead players. *The Clay Pigeon*, an amnesia noir, tells the story of Jim Fletcher (Bill Williams), a World War II veteran who wakes up in a VA hospital with a spotty memory and a lump on the back of his head. He's not sure why everyone is giving him dirty looks, and he definitely doesn't know why another patient was trying to strangle him in his sleep. It's not long before he overhears the

doc and the nurse talking about how the government is charging him with treason. Fletcher isn't going to stand for that. He's sure he didn't do it, even if he can't remember what happened during his tour of duty in the Pacific Theatre. So he busts out of the hospital and heads for his buddy Mark Gregory's house. Mark's not home, but his wife Martha (Barbara Hale) is. What Jim doesn't know, and what Martha doesn't tell him initially, is that Mark is dead and he's the main suspect. However, Jim convinces her of his innocence in short order, and together, they set out to clear his name.

Fleischer makes the most of what turned out to be an inspired bit of casting. Bill Williams and Barbara Hale were married from 1946 until Williams' passing in 1992, and Fleischer tapped into their real-life chemistry and effectively translated it to the big screen, putting the two leads into action as a B-picture equivalent of Bogie and Bacall. Their back-and-forth banter reflects a genuine off-screen attraction, something Fleischer worked to his own advantage. The two leads of the film are thoroughly convincing as they grow increasingly fond of one another throughout the course of the story, and they form a bright spot in what could have otherwise been a perfunctory, straightforward affair.

Who knows what Fleischer thought when he first heard that he'd be directing Lawrence Tierney in *Bodyguard*. One of the most





legendary tough guys in Hollywood, Tierney was best known for his violent persona onscreen and his violent actions offscreen. In addition to several real-life scrapes with the law, he was just coming off a series of bad-guy roles—murderer John Dillinger in *Dillinger* (1945), murderer Steve Morgan in *The Devil Thumbs a Ride* (1947) and murderer Sam Wild in *Born to Kill* (1947)—when the role of ex-cop-turned-private-detective Mike Carter became available. He probably jumped at the chance to play a good guy. Perhaps Fleischer tapped into what Tierney would later reveal in a late-career interview when he said, “I resented those pictures they put me in. I never thought of myself as that kind of guy. I thought of myself as a nice guy who wouldn’t do rotten things. I hated that character so much but I had to do it for the picture.” Fleischer embraced Tierney’s desire to display a better side, and it shows. The two of them worked together to infuse the character of Mike Carter with a rough but complex and sympathetic personality that makes the audience want to root for, instead of against, him. Yes, Carter gets kicked off the police force in the film’s opening scene for being a loose cannon, and yes, he gets into a scrape with his commanding officer before leaving. But through it all, Fleischer gets Tierney to consistently show that there’s a good guy underneath that rough-and-tumble exterior.

Fleischer’s combined efforts on *Bodyguard* and *The Clay Pigeon* showed that he was back on his game. Once both films opened to generally positive receptions, he improved his reputation at RKO enough that, not only was his job safe, he was about to become one of the busiest and most productive directors at the entire studio.

**BY 1949, RICHARD FLEISCHER’S STOCK** was steadily rising. RKO’s was not. Hughes was one year into what film scholar Betty Lasky once described as his “systematic seven-year rape of RKO.” Hughes was notorious for wanting to screen every single pic-



our little movies with no interference from anyone. ... Forty-three pictures had been planned for 1949. Only twelve were made, three of which were mine. Single-handedly I had directed 25 percent of RKO’s entire output.”

Fleischer continued his run at the tables with *Follow Me Quietly* (1949). When looking back on this film, Fleischer said, “This is the film that, above all, increased my knowledge of the trade. I learned how to organize a film.” While both *The Clay Pigeon* and *Bodyguard* were solid films in their own rights, Fleischer’s continuously improving directorial skill is evident in this one-hour police procedural, particularly since he managed to take an incredibly hokey premise and turn it into an entertaining outing. A serial killer who calls himself “The Judge” has been murdering people for months, strangling them only on rainy nights. He leaves notes that are made out of letters cut from magazines that claim he is punishing sinners and meting out justice.

ture before approving it for release, which resulted in several problems. He often wanted to make changes to the endings of pictures that were already complete, causing interminable delays and skyrocketing production costs. In addition, he would frequently equivocate on his own changes, often ordering new changes to a picture that contradicted his previous statements. He also had no concept of time. Films would sit for months in his screening room before he would get around to viewing them. Many sat for over a year. This caused both production and distribution to grind to a halt, which drastically affected the studio’s bottom line. At the end of the year, RKO Radio Pictures reported a loss of \$3,721,415—a precipitous fall from 1947’s \$5,085,847 profit.

However, Fleischer had the incredible good fortune of not having to deal with Hughes, either directly or indirectly. As he put it, in 1949, “While the studio was falling down around us, nothing seemed to affect the B picture unit. We steamed right along churning out



William Lundigan and Jeff Corey on the hunt for the murderous "Judge" in Fleischer's superb *Follow Me Quietly*

The two cops on the case, Lt. Harry Grant (William Lundigan) and his wisecracking sidekick Sgt. Art Collins (Jeff Corey) are sitting on several pieces of evidence that they just can't seem to piece together. In addition, Grant's own lack of progress is driving him crazy. Grant is also trying to fend off a bunch of nagging questions from Ann Gorman (Dorothy Patrick), a doggedly persistent reporter for *Four Star Crime*, a lower-than-low tabloid rag.

Then, one day when Grant is staring at all of the evidence they've compiled, he gets an idea. Instead of just sending out the standard, blasé description of what they think The Judge might look like, why not make a faceless but life-size dummy of him based on what they

know? The idea is a hit within the department. They bring in all the cops and let them see it. They stand potential perps next to it in the lineup room to see how they measure up. They take pictures of it from various angles and canvass the neighborhoods where the crimes were committed to see if anyone recognizes him.

The entire premise is ludicrous. But it's a testament to Fleischer's ability as a director that the film holds together so well and even exhibits some nice stylistic flourishes. The rain-soaked night scenes are beautifully shot, and Fleischer gets effectively flashy with some appropriately deployed Dutch angles during the police's canvassing operation. Because of Fleischer's assured hand, the serial killer-as-dummy approach comes across as genuinely creepy instead of hopelessly ridiculous. And with a 59 minute running time, the film moves along at a nice, brisk pace, never getting bogged down in unnecessary subplots or meandering character moments. With *Follow Me Quietly*, Fleischer had gained the confidence he needed to make a genuine noir classic. The right pieces just needed to come together, and in 1950, they did.



The life-size dummy that aids the cops in nailing a serial killer: *Follow Me Quietly*

**THE COPYRIGHT DATE ON** *The Narrow Margin* reads MC-MLII. It's a simple date. 1952. During the opening credits, it quickly flashes by on the bottom of the screen, and most viewers probably don't even notice it. But there is a story behind why that date is 1952 instead of 1951 or 1950, a story that is as interesting as it is bizarre. It is, if nothing else, a story that epitomizes the Howard Hughes era at RKO.

In 1950, Fleischer was continuing his upward trajectory with his fourth RKO noir, *Armored Car Robbery*. The film stars Charles McGraw, a man whom William Friedkin calls "the quintessential B picture film noir actor." Friedkin sums up McGraw's on-screen persona



when he describes him as “the most hard boiled of the tough guys.” McGraw, who was a contract player for RKO and appeared in many “B” noirs during the late 1940s and early 1950s, had a face cut from granite, the leftover pieces of which were dumped down his throat and left to chafe against his vocal cords. He was the perfect fit for the type of character he played in *Armored Car Robbery*: a hard-nosed cop out for blood after a gang of thugs botches—you guessed it—an armored car robbery, offing his partner in the process. The film boasts great performances, excellent nighttime cinematography, a stripped-down, fast-moving plot, and a fantastic final scene that preceded a similar ending in Stanley Kubrick’s noir classic *The Killing* (1956).

But it wasn’t *Armored Car Robbery* that was destined to put Fleischer on the map. He reteamed with McGraw in 1950, and once he completed directing *The Narrow Margin* in just thirteen days, he knew he had something special. As he put it, “everyone who saw

it at the studio was convinced it was my breakthrough film.” And it would be. But not in 1950, and not in 1951. As Fleischer put it, in 1950, the film “came to the attention of Howard Hughes, who promptly put it in his projection booth, where it sat for more than a year.” His improbable run of autonomy had finally come to an end. He’d run up against the one-man wrecking crew who was unintentionally, but systematically, destroying RKO.

**WHEN HUGHES FINALLY DID GET** around to watching the film, he loved it. He watched it several times, and came away from it claiming it was his favorite film. But in the world of Howard Hughes, this enthusiasm didn’t result in the typical, logical route for such a film—heavy promotion followed by a splashy release. It meant something else entirely.

Because Hughes loved the film so much, he strongly considered scrapping it entirely. His plan, which would have guaranteed that Fleischer’s



Adele Jergens, Don McGuire, and William Talman in a tense moment from *Armored Car Robbery*



Noir icon Charles McGraw commands a police battalion in the climax of *Armored Car Robbery*



CHARLES Mc GRAW ★ MARIE WINDSOR  
JACQUELINE WHITE

**LES TUEURS  
DU PACIFIC-EXPRESS**

"THE  
NARROW  
MARGIN"

Mise en Scène RICHARD FLEISCHER

"DE MOORDENAARS VAN DE PACIFIC EXPRESS"







Charles McGraw and Marie Windsor stare each other down in Fleischer's masterpiece, *The Narrow Margin*

masterpiece would never be released, would ditch the film Fleischer made and turn the story into an "A" vehicle for Robert Mitchum and Jane Russell, both of whom were shooting *His Kind of Woman* (1951) at the time. The budget would jump from \$230,000 to \$1,000,000, and Hughes would have probably assigned one of his "A" picture directors to it.

Fleischer described this time in his life as exasperating. "For years I'd been frustratingly close to making the switch to A pictures," he said. "I'd been promised my big break over and over again, but it always eluded me because of the revolving-door procession of various heads of production. They were the only ones who could bring about such a change, but none of them ever stayed long enough to do so." During the time that *The Narrow Margin* was stuck in limbo, one of the production heads that left was Fleischer's mentor Sid Rogell, whom Hughes fired. Hughes was continuously calling Rogell in the middle of the night to discuss minute production details, and when Rogell finally had enough of it and told Hughes off, he got canned the next day. No one was left to champion Fleischer's cause.

Things quickly went from bad to worse. "I'd finally gotten my foot on the bottom rung of the ladder that would help me climb out of the B picture pit," Fleischer recalled, "and I wasn't about to slip back in." So when his new boss handed him a script that, according to Fleischer, "had nothing going for it except schlock," he handed it back and refused to make it. For a contract director under the studio system, this almost certainly meant career suicide. And Fleischer

came close. He got suspended without pay, putting his job in serious jeopardy.

In a move of sheer desperation, he wrote a letter to Howard Hughes, explaining his situation. And Hughes, who was responsible for Fleischer's predicament in the first place, actually came up with a solution that worked for both of them. Fleischer agreed to work with Hughes to fix what Hughes saw as a problematic ending to *His Kind of Woman*, which had wrapped shooting months before. In return, Hughes would retroactively lift Fleischer's suspension, release *The Narrow Margin* without any changes, and allow Fleischer's contract to expire in 1952.

**WHEN THE NARROW MARGIN WAS** finally released, it opened to nearly universal critical acclaim. *Time* magazine packed their entire Cinema section with a glowingly positive review and a lengthy profile of Fleischer and the film's producer, Stanley Rubin, calling them "Hollywood's bright new hopes for the future." *The New York Times* wrote that the film "should glue anyone to the edge of his seat and prove, once and for all, that a little can be made to count for a lot." And in *The RKO Story*, Richard B. Jewell writes that the film is "one of the best in the studio's history."

The film deserved every accolade it received. Fleischer took the skills he had developed in the "B" picture unit at RKO and expertly applied them to *The Narrow Margin*. The film follows a cop played by McGraw who needs to get a mob wife from Chicago to L.A. so



that she can testify in front of a grand jury about her ex-husband's misdeeds. The majority of the film takes place on a locomotive, the speed of the train matching the speed at which the exciting and unpredictable plot unfolds. The film is memorable for the deep, dark shadows in the opening scenes, the innovative handheld camerawork that highlights and enhances the train's claustrophobic atmosphere, the gritty, hard-as-nails performances from both McGraw and Marie Windsor as the mob wife, and the third-act twist that underscores a fundamental noir theme: nothing is as it seems. All of these elements combine beautifully to create one of the classics of the genre. With the release of *The Narrow Margin*, Fleischer could finally climb out of the "B" noir pit and into the "A" picture arena.

**AFTER THE SUCCESS OF** *The Narrow Margin*, Fleischer moved on to direct bigger films, such as the Disney adventure classic *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* (1954), the courtroom drama *Compulsion* (1959) and the science fiction thrillers *Fantastic Voyage* (1966) and *Soylent Green* (1973). And while some of his later films such as *Violent Saturday* (1955) and *10 Rillington Place* (1971) contain some noir elements, Fleischer never directed another true film noir.

Unfortunately, critics and audiences were just as ready to move on from Fleischer's "B" noirs as he was. While many classic and even lesser-known noirs made their way onto VHS in the 1980s, Laserdisc in the 1990s and DVD in the late 90s/early 2000s, Fleischer's noirs (with the exception of *The Narrow Margin*, which has received several home video releases) were mostly left neglected and unavailable until Warner Bros., which owns a significant portion of the RKO library, started belatedly releasing his films on DVD. *The Narrow Margin* was released in 2005. *His Kind of Woman* was released in 2006. However, even though Fleischer ended up directing the bulk of the final product, his work remains uncredited. *Armored Car Robbery* wasn't released until 2010. *Follow Me Quietly* and *Bodyguard* were never released in any home video format until their made-on-demand DVD-R releases through the Warner Archive Collection in 2011. While *The Clay Pigeon* has received a DVD release in Spain, it is still unavailable in any home video format in the United States.



A fine portrait of Marie Windsor, memorable in *The Narrow Margin*

In essence, all but *The Narrow Margin* were quickly forgotten, written off as nothing more than low-budget movies made for a quick buck to fill space on the bottom half of a double bill. Nothing epitomizes this prevailing attitude toward Fleischer's work than Fleischer himself. The only noir he covers in any detail in *Just Tell Me When to Cry*, his 1993 memoir, is *The Narrow Margin*. The majority of his other noirs don't even get a passing mention. When Eddie Muller hosted a film noir festival in 1999 with Fleischer as a special guest, he reportedly dreaded watching *Armored Car Robbery* for the first time since its initial release in 1950. His response when the film finished screening: "It holds up; I'm amazed."

But looking back on all of Fleischer's RKO noirs, one common denominator is evident. All of his noirs are *entertaining*. His cheap, one-hour programmers (with the exception of the "A" picture *His Kind of Woman*, his longest film is *The Narrow Margin*, which clocks in at 71 minutes) might not have been made for much, but they consistently deliver the goods. In his initial noir outing (*The Clay Pigeon*), Fleischer showed that he had a knack for craft-



Bathed in smoke and light, Charles McGraw prepares to go to work in *The Narrow Margin*



Jacqueline White and Charles McGraw running and hiding in the climax of *The Narrow Margin*

ing an entertaining story that featured some genuinely creative directorial choices. Just take a look at the chase scene early in the film. Fleischer eschews the typical, cheap process shots used in most “B” films in favor of several dramatic viewpoints, using cameras mounted on the backs of production trucks that were speeding along with the chase’s cars. That creativity continued in all of his noirs leading up to *The Narrow Margin*, where it finally blossomed into something iconic.

In addition to the seven noirs he worked on from 1948 to 1951, Fleischer also directed two non-noirs: *So This is New York* (1948) and *Make Mine Laughs* (1949). Such a workload would have burnt out a lesser director. However, Fleischer managed to successfully complete all of his assignments during that time. He also avoided making a bad noir—quite a feat, given some of the source material. The “B” noir subgenre is littered with dozens, if not hundreds, of generic crime pictures that have no drive, no spark, and no true entertainment value. But Fleischer’s work at RKO transcended its humble place of origin by being consistently engaging and enjoyable. Even though he once referred to the “B” picture unit at RKO as “the ooze I’d clawed my way out of,” the films he made tell a different story. He was clearly a director having a good time. The half-dozen noirs he made for RKO, when compared against the work of better-known noir filmmakers, convincingly demonstrate that his name deserves a place on those “best noir directors” lists. Here’s hoping that it happens sooner rather than later. After all, it’s only about sixty years overdue. ■

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