

'Borsalino' sharp, fashionable, witty

by Bruce Mann
Feature Editor

Riding the crest of the New Wave and its parodies of 1930's American gangster films (such as Francois Truffaut's "Shoot the Piano Player"), comes "Borsalino," a sharp, fashionable, witty French film which not only boasts of all the typical gangster-genre cliches but also of rich, intelligent acting and luscious period settings.

Jean-Paul Belmondo, with his Walter-Matthau scowl and off-the-cuff nonchalance, plays Francois Capella, a cocky, small-time pool shark in 1930's Marseilles who, living by the maxim "There's no such thing as luck," contrives a good time by doing small-paying jobs such as kidnapping horses and rigging boxing matches. His mind's horizons appear to be as low as his moll's neckline until Rock Siffredi—played with

Bogartian detachment and verve by slick-haired blue-eyed Alain Delon—becomes Capella's partner in crime after a fight over possession of the moll, Lola (Catherine Rouvel).

Siffredi's ambitious yet florid way of doing things—shown at the beginning of the film when he emerges free from prison in a very ratty suit, gets into an awaiting Citroen, and a splice-second later jumps from the car in an expensive, slender-waisted suit and a slick Borsalino hat—fires the duo into constantly ascending the ladder of the Marseilles underworld hierarchy, removing the competition as they go. In a series of almost 35 fights, they displace, with more finesse, flair and flamboyance than Edward G. Robinson ever did, Poli (Andre Bollet), the gargantuan co-leader of the Marseilles syndicate; Marelo (Arnold Foa), the calculating other co-leader who keeps a boa-constrictor as a

pet; Dancer (Christian de Tilier), a weasel-like choreographer who squeals once too often; and Rinaldi (Michel Bouquet), an opportunistic lawyer with more ambition than conscience.

Throughout the film Siffredi leads the charge to discourage anyone who might "block his sun," and it is his drive, his accumulation of power and riches (a Leleu staircase, priceless art, a tailored white tuxedo with white satin striped pants) and his ultimate dissatisfaction with it all which calls for the dissolution and destruction at the end.

Credit for creating this polished, well-photographed film belongs to director Jacques Deray who wraps the entire production in authenticity—34 old cars, period dresses and suits, cloche hats and allusions to happenings in mobster-run Chicago of the 1930's—an attempt to give our senses entertaining details to keep up with.

Credit also goes to the excellent script, based on a true story of '30's Marseilles bandits, and composed by a quartet of wits: Jean Cau, Claude Sautet, Jacques Deray and Jean-Claude Carriere. Although the dialogue has its share of cliché lines ("Get him out of here" and "There's always some danger with women around"), there are still plenty of campy scenes such as the dance when Capella tangoes with a fishing magnate's wife. In timing with the tango's heavy accents,

Capella asks what perfume she is wearing. "It's called 'God Forbid,'" she replies. "I'm so afraid of smelling like fish."

This whimsical, droll tone does much to offset the admittedly graphic violence so necessary to the gangster-film genre. Capella and Siffredi toy with machine guns, and bloody scenes—the burning of the beef warehouse, Capella's drubbing by Poli, Poli's own death in a revolving door—naturally develop for those who aspire to be "Kings of Marseilles."

Also helping to take away a bit of this violent sting is Claude Bolling's incredibly carefree and impish, ragtime piano theme which is such an integral part of the movie that it changes dynamics, key and mode with every modification of the immediate situation of the "heroes."

All of this craftsmanship and beauty for eye and ear, however, does not hide Deray's one miscalculation, pace. Moving rapidly at the beginning, the film slows by the end to an escargot-pace, which is unfortunate because the ending is so inherently weak, being no more than an exclamation that "crime doesn't pay."

Needless to say, though, such a fragmented finish cannot erase the success of earlier scenes.

The dialogue is so breezy, the parody so knife-edged and clean, the music so fresh, and the acting so stunning that one can only tip his Borsalino to Director Deray and his group for a job well done.

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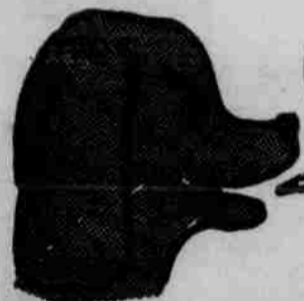
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