

JULES DASSIN'S
Rififi

RIALTO PICTURES PRESSBOOK

Rififi

Rialto Pictures

AWARDS & RECOGNITION

Cannes Film Festival (1955)

Best Director (Jules Dassin)

French Syndicate of Cinema Critics (1956)

Best Film (Prix Méliès)

National Board of Review, USA (1956)

Top Foreign Films

New York Film Critics Circle (2000)

Special Award for the re-release

“The best film noir I have ever seen.”

— Francois Truffaut

Rififi

Rialto Pictures

Directed by
Jules Dassin

Screenplay
Jules Dassin
with the collaboration of
René Wheeler and Auguste Le Breton

Based on the novel by
August Le Breton

Dialogue by
Auguste Le Breton

Executive Producers
Henri Bérard, Pierre Cabaud and René Bézard

Director of Photography
Philippe Agostini

Production Designer
Alexandre Trauner

Art Director
Auguste Capelier

Music
Georges Auric

Song ("Rififi")
Jacques Larue (lyrics) and Philippe-Gérard (music)

Production Manager
René Gaston Vuattoux

Subtitles
Lenny Borger
with the collaboration of **Jules Dassin and Bruce Goldstein**

English song adaptation
Lenny Borger, Richelle Dassin and Bruce Goldstein

Produced by Indusfilms – Primafilm – Pathé Cinéma; A Gaumont Film
Principal Photography: September 22 - December 21, 1954
Exteriors: St-Rémy-les-Chevreuses and Paris
Paris release: April 13, 1955
New York release: June 5, 1956, Fine Arts Theatre (128 E. 58th St.)

France B&W Aspect Ratio: 1.33:1 Running time: 118 min.
A RIALTO PICTURES RELEASE

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CAST

Tony le Stéphanois¹
Jean Servais

Jo le Suédois (Joe the Swede)
Carl Möhner

Mario Farrati
Robert Manuel

César le Milanais
Perlo Vita [Jules Dassin]

Mado
Marie Sabouret

Louise
Janine Darcey

Ida Farrati
Claude Sylvain

Pierre Grutter
Marcel Lupovici

Louis Grutter
Pierre Grasset

Rémi Grutter
Robert Hossein

Viviane
Magali Noël

Tonio
Dominique Maurin

Teddy the Levantine
Teddy Bilitis

Charlie
Emile Genevois

¹ "The Stéphanois" is Tony's gangland nickname. Tony is "from Saint-Etienne," just as César the safecracker is "the Milanese" and Jo "the Swede." Saint Etienne is an 11th century city in central south France, southwest of Lyons. It was long one of France's leading mining centers. Amusingly, in the subtitles of the original U.S. release version, the protagonist is identified simply as "Tony Stephanois!"

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RIFIFI (ri-fí-fi) *n. French argot.* **1.** Quarrel, rumble, free-for-all, open hostilities between individuals or gangs, rough-and-tumble confrontation between two or more individuals. **2.** A tense and chaotic situation involving violent confrontations between parties.

Etym.: probably derived from *rif* "combat," Italian argot *ruffo* "fire," Latin *rufus* "red." Since 1942: Paris underworld slang coined by Auguste Le Breton during a gangland clash in 1942 and popularized in his novel "Du rififi chez les hommes" (Paris: Gallimard, 1953) and the film directed by Jules Dassin (1955). The enormous popularity of that movie led to the use of "rififi" in the titles of several unrelated thrillers.

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SYNOPSIS

After serving a five-year stretch which has destroyed his health, Tony the Stéphanois returns to Paris to find his world changed. The underworld look down on him now and his ex-girlfriend, Mado (Marie Sabouret), has abandoned him to shack up with Pierre Grutter (Marcel Lupovici), a Montmartre nightclub owner and police informer. Only his young protégé, Jo the Swede (Carl Möhner), remains faithful to the weary, penniless gangster. Tony is the godfather of Jo's five-year old son, Tonio, and it was to spare Jo and his family that Tony took the rap for a robbery five years earlier.

Anxious to restore Tony's reputation, fortunes and self-esteem, Jo and Mario Ferrati (Robert Manuel), a voluble Italian pimp, plot a daring daytime robbery of a jewelry shop window on the fashionable Rue de la Paix. At first, Tony turns down the offer ("I don't run so fast anymore") but after a brutal, half-hearted attempt to get revenge for Mado's betrayal, Tony decides he's interested after all – but on condition they go for the jackpot: the store safe, with its millions in precious gems. But to ensure success, they need an ace safecracker. Mario knows just the man: his compatriot, César the Milanese (Jules Dassin), who jumps at the chance to take part in a heist masterminded by Tony the Stéphanois.

For weeks, the foursome plans the robbery in great detail, casing the store and the surrounding streets. The obstacles are daunting: the store has "more alarms than a firehouse" and the establishment's new security system is reputedly foolproof. But at last they're ready: late one night, the band invade the empty apartment of the shop's owner, who lives directly over his establishment. Armed with tools of the trade, including an innocuous-looking umbrella and a fire extinguisher, they break through the shop ceiling and silence the alarm system, as César goes to work on the safe. At dawn, after hours of backbreaking, silent work, their efforts are crowned with success. Jo flies to London to negotiate the sale of the gems with a fence, Teddy the Levantine.

Meanwhile, the Milanese makes a fatal error. Involved in an affair with Viviane (Magali Noël), the lead singer of Grutter's nightclub "L'Age d'Or," he makes her a present of a ring from the heist. Thinking it's a fake, Viviane shows it to Grutter, who's been offered a hefty reward by his police contacts for any leads to the thieves behind the sensational 240 million franc jewelry heist, ("the biggest take since the abduction of the Sabine women"). Putting two and two together, Grutter realizes that the Milanese is one of the jewel thieves. But rather than tell the police, Grutter decides he's going to retrieve the loot for himself.

Grutter and his razor-wielding, junkie brother Rémi (Robert Hossein) waylay the Milanese at gunpoint and intimidate him into putting the finger on Mario. The Grutters break into Mario's apartment, threaten the Italian and his girl, Ida (Claude Silvain). When they refuse to serve as bait to ambush Tony, Rémi cuts their throats.

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Vowing to avenge their deaths, Tony slips into the Grutters' deserted nightclub, finding César still bound to a column. César admits to his cowardice, understanding that he's violated an underworld code and must die. "I liked you, Macaroni, I really liked you," Tony mutters before he squeezes the trigger.

More determined than ever to get the loot, the Grutters kidnap Jo's son Tonio, snatching him from his mother, Louise (Janine Darcey), in the middle of a busy Paris street. Jo, no less devastated than his wife, is ready to meet the kidnappers' demands, but Tony pleads with him to hold on, knowing full well that even if they hand over the loot, the Grutters stand to kill the boy anyway, since he can identify them. While Jo waits for the final phoned instructions from Grutter, Tony picks up the kidnappers' trail thanks to Mado, who, revolted by the kidnapping, comes to offer Tony her aid. She tells him of the country house Grutter is building in a distant Paris suburb and where the child is probably being held. By tricking Rémi's drug supplier into taking an emergency dope delivery out to the house, Mado puts Tony on the trail that leads him to the kidnapped child.

Tony follows the drug supplier out to the Grutter hideaway, but is unable to phone in to Jo with the news. Meanwhile, Grutter calls Jo with the final instructions to deliver the money to the country house. Without news of Tony, Jo's nerves crack; he rushes out of the door to deliver the ransom money. Tony reaches the Grutter's isolated house, shoots Rémi, who is guarding the child, and drives off with Tonio. When Tony finally calls in and learns that Jo has just run out the door with a suitcase, he leaves the child in a cafe and drives back to the hideout. Too late, Grutter has lured Jo into a trap and murdered him. Tony shoots Grutter, who mortally wounds Tony before dying. Summoning up his remaining strength, Tony drives back to Paris with the money and the boy.

When the car finally comes to a stop in the street outside Jo's apartment, Tony is slumped dead over the steering wheel. Louise gathers her child in her arms as police retrieve the suitcase from the backseat...

PRODUCTION NOTES

When Jules Dassin directed *Du Rififi chez les hommes* in Paris in 1954, he knew it was probably his last shot at making a film comeback after being named as a communist before the House Committee on Un-American Activities in 1952.

The long arm of McCarthyist America had successfully crushed several earlier attempts by Dassin to rebuild his shattered film career in Europe. The most notorious example of this transatlantic persecution came in 1953, when the producers of a new vehicle for comedian Fernandel, *Public Enemy No. 1*, fired Dassin as director just days before he was to begin shooting.² The incident became a *cause célèbre* in France, where an industry support group was led by Jacques Becker (shortly to direct his own seminal gangster opus, *Touchez pas au grisbi*).

Months later, Dassin was in Rome, working on an adaptation of Giovanni Verga's Sicilian literary classic, *Mastro don Gesualdo*, but it was sabotaged via interference from the American Embassy. It was there that Dassin received a call from an agent asking him to return to Paris to meet producer Henri Bérard, who had acquired the rights to a best-selling crime novel by newcomer Auguste Le Breton, *Du Rififi chez les hommes*. Dassin's *Naked City* had been a major success in France and Bérard flattered Dassin by saying no one else but Dassin could do *Rififi*.

But there was a major obstacle. "I got along in French, but the book's slang was a new language," Dassin recalls. "So I called an agent friend, Claude Briac, and asked him to come over and translate it for me. It was a weekend, Friday or Saturday, and I had to give the agent my answer on Monday. But Briac had been courting the same dame for years and she'd finally promised to meet him that Sunday. But I said, 'No, come and read to me.' And the poor bastard did!"

Dassin admits he loathed the novel. He was repelled in particular by the story's inherent racism: the rival gangsters pitted against the story's heroes were Arabs and North Africans. "I was appalled. They were doing all kinds of horrible things, not stopping at necrophilia. On Monday I went to the agent intending to tell him, 'I can't do this!', and instead I heard myself saying, 'Oh, yeah, I want to do it!' I needed the work."

Working under pressure, Dassin wrote the screenplay in six days (veteran screenwriter René Wheeler then helped rework the material back into French). Dassin built up the friendship between Tony the Stéphanois and his protégé Jo the Swede and downplayed the turpitude of the rival gangsters who became Europeans with the more Germanic-sounding name of Grutter.

² Pressures were exerted on Fernandel's co-star Zsa-Zsa Gabor and producer Jacques Bar, who was told in no uncertain terms that if Dassin made the film, neither it nor any successive Bar production would ever be released in the U.S. The film was finally directed by Henri Verneuil and exported as *The Most Wanted Man*.

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More importantly, he devoted quasi-documentary attention to the actual jewel heist, which was a mere 10-page throwaway early in Le Breton's 250-page source novel. "That was the only way to work my way out of a book that I couldn't do, wouldn't do." In the final film, the caper would take up a quarter of the film's two-hour running time and become a classic set piece, which would spawn innumerable imitations.

As might be expected, Dassin's screenplay displeased Le Breton, whom the producer had hired to write the dialogue. "Le Breton was really a character. I believe he had done time in jail or reform schools. And he loved to play the gangster as he saw the gangster played in American movies, with the hat and the manner. I found him rather amusing. When he read my script, he came to see me and said: "Where's my book?" I tried to explain that's how it is when you adapt a book, and he took out a gun and plunked it down on the table, and repeated, "Where's my *book*?" I looked at him, I looked at the gun and I began to laugh. And because I laughed he took me in his arms and we became friends."³

As he had done for San Francisco, New York and London, Dassin, with the aid of cinematographer Philippe Agostini, turned *Rififi* into a sort of cinematic city symphony, revealing a broodingly beautiful Paris most French directors had always overlooked. "I remember walking the streets of Paris and dictating to a secretary, 'We'll do this scene here and this one there, just really improvising as we walked. When you make a picture, and you do locations, you gotta walk.'"

Working with what he remembers to be a risible \$200,000 budget, Dassin could not afford stars (as Becker could in *Touchez pas au grisbi*, which owed much of its success to Jean Gabin). He had to make do with second-best but the lack of major names above the title served the film's gritty realism. The tubercular and world-weary Tony the Stéphanois was memorably acted by the Belgian-born **Jean Servais** (1910-1976), who had been in pictures since the early talkies but whose career had gone into a slump due to drinking problems. Servais's ravaged looks and deep melancholic voice gave Tony a tragic grandeur that made one critic call *Rififi* a "Greek tragedy in Pigalle."

The high-spirited Italian gangster Mario Ferrati (a cynical pimp in Le Breton's novel) was played by **Robert Manuel** (1916-1995), a beloved member of the Comédie-Française, where Dassin saw him in one of his specialty comic roles. As Jo the Swede, Dassin, acting on a suggestion by the producer's wife, cast **Carl Möhner** (1921-2005), a young Austrian-born stage and screen actor. (Both Servais and Möhner would work again under Dassin's direction in his next film, *He Who Must Die*, again produced by Bérard).

Using the pseudonym **Perlo Vita**, Dassin himself stepped into the shoes of César the Milanese, the Italian safecracker whose weakness for women unleashes the tragic chain of bloodletting. "We had cast a very good actor in Italy, whose name escapes me, but he never got the contract! When I called him, on a Thursday, I think it was, and we were shooting on Monday, he said he was wrapped up in another film. So I had to put

³ Le Breton died in 1999, virtually forgotten. Dassin said their friendship remained intact to the end.

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on the mustache and do the part myself."

Among the supporting cast were two young players whose careers were launched by *Rififi*. The slangy, parodical "Rififi" theme song was delivered by **Magali Noël** (1931-2015), one of the most popular sex kittens of French and Italian films of the 50s and 60s (she would later become a favorite Fellini icon in the maestro's *La Dolce Vita*, *Satyricon* and *Amarcord*). As for young stage actor-director **Robert Hossein** (born 1927), who played the razor-wielding junkie Rémi Grutter, it was the beginning of a long line of violent sociopaths and brooding anti-hero roles, before he abandoned the cinema for the stage.⁴

If Dassin's cast was not bankable box office, his technical collaborators were the cream of the crop. In addition to cameraman Agostini, he also had "one of the greatest men in the history of cinema": production designer Alexandre Trauner, whose credits had included everything from Buñuel's *L'Âge d'Or* (which has an homage in *Rififi* as the name of the nightclub) to the staggering sets for Marcel Carné's *The Children of Paradise*. Because of his reputation as a perfectionist, says Dassin, Trauner had done little of real import locally since the costly fiasco of Carné's first postwar film, *Les Portes de la nuit*. Eager to demonstrate he was not a ruinous collaborator, and out of friendship for Dassin, Trauner did the sets for *Rififi* for "almost nothing." (Trauner later had an even more successful career in Hollywood, where he designed several films for Billy Wilder, including *The Apartment*.)

Dassin's other great artistic collaborator was composer Georges Auric, who had written one of the first great sound scores for René Clair's *A Nous la liberté*. But at first Dassin and Auric could not agree on the scoring of the famous caper scene. "Auric was a wonderful guy. When I said I didn't want any music during the big caper scene, he and Bérard went nuts. Auric said: "Look, I'll tell you what, I'm going to protect you, I'm going to write the music for the scene anyway, because you need to be protected." And he went and scored the entire sequence! When the film was all done, I called him and said, 'I'm going to run the film for you, once with the music and once without.' And afterwards, Auric came out and said: "Get rid of the music!"

Upon Rialto's re-release of the film in 2000, Dassin admitted that he somewhat regretted the *Rififi* theme song, which parodies the underworld slang Le Breton helped introduce into French gangster movies of the 50s. Although nightclub numbers were a convention of film noir of the 40s and 50s, the song was really there to explain to audiences the meaning of the film's title, "Rififi," which ironically, is never uttered by any

⁴ Hossein's current reputation rests on a series of sprawling theatrical extravaganzas (usually staged in stadiums) drawn from literature, motion pictures and history. In addition to the original Paris production of the hit musical, *Les Misérables*, Hossein theatricalized the revolt of the battleship Potemkin, the French revolution, the life of Jesus and literary classics like *Notre Dame de Paris*.

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of the characters.⁵ It was written in two days by lyricist Jacques Larue and composer Philippe-Gérard after Dassin nixed a proposal by Edith Piaf-collaborator Louiguy (the author of "La Vie en rose"). Dassin had also interviewed a young songwriter-singer who was struggling to overcome the handicaps of a sickly-looking appearance and strange voice. Bérard told Dassin not to bother with him, that he wouldn't come to anything. Dassin complied. The songwriter was Charles Aznavour.

Dassin remembered the film being made in "a marvelous atmosphere of friendship. My problem was that I hadn't made a film in such a long time I was terribly nervous in the beginning and I had to fight for people not to see it. The only serious tensions came from the producer because I didn't want to shoot in sunlight, I waited for gray days, which may have extended shooting time. It drove him mad."

Amusingly, Bérard was also frustrated by the film's lack of... "rififi!" The big man in French commercial pictures at the time was Yank expatriate singer-actor Eddie Constantine, who was then starring in a hugely successful series of comedy thrillers as Lemmy Caution, the quick-fisted, hard-drinking G-man imagined by British crime novelist Peter Chesney. "Bérard insisted that I throw in scenes of fist fights like in the Constantine pictures. He'd keep insisting, 'Where are the fights, where are the fights?' and I'd say, 'Well, next week, next week!'

Against all odds, *Du Rififi chez les hommes* was a smash hit from its Paris first-run in April 1955, a success ratified that same month when the jury at the Cannes Film Festival awarded Dassin the directing prize. Dassin's reputation was restored, along with his financial situation: with Bérard unwilling to give him anywhere near a decent salary, Dassin had agreed to a percentage of the box office take!

Despite the ignominious attempts from Hollywood to stop Dassin from working, *Rififi* enjoyed an enviable art house career in the United States, first in a subtitled version, then in a dubbed re-release (re-titled "*Rififi...Means Trouble!*"). Typically, the film did draw fire from the Roman Catholic Legion of Decency, which slapped a C ("condemned") rating on it, but after three brief cuts and the addition of an opening title card consisting of a quote from the Book of Proverbs⁶, *Rififi* was upgraded to the B category (morally objectionable in part for all). The Rialto Pictures re-release is of the original, uncensored version.

⁵ The term "Rififi" was subsequently used in the titles of several completely unrelated French thrillers, including *Du rififi à Tokyo* (1962), *Du rififi à Paname* (1966), and even *Du Rififi chez les femmes* (1959), all co-written by *Rififi* creator Auguste Le Breton. Other countries used "rififi" to re-title foreign films for instant audience recognition, so the American heist comedy *Who's Minding the Mint?* (1967) became *Rififi à la americana* in Spain; *The Long Good Friday* (1980) became *Rififi am Karfreitag* in West Germany; and the celebrated Italian caper movie *Big Deal on Madonna Street* (1958) became *Rufufu* in Spain!

⁶ "When the wicked are multiplied, crime shall be multiplied: but the just shall see their downfall." Proverbs, 19:16

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The *Rififi* adventure had a curious minor coda years later, when Dassin ran into director Jean-Pierre Melville one day in Paris. "Melville virtually cold-shouldered me. It was only afterwards that I found out why: He had been promised *Rififi chez les hommes* but Bérard had double-crossed him!"⁷

Melville exorcised this early professional disappointment in 1969, when he directed his most successful film, *Le Cercle Rouge*, a highly stylized makeover of the *Rififi* story, which included a long, silent caper centerpiece.

- Lenny Borger (all quotations from Jules Dassin are from a telephone interview conducted by Borger on May 15, 2000)

WHAT THE CRITICS IN 1956 SAID ABOUT *RIFIFI*

"Makes the characters in Mickey Spillane seem like sissies...The keenest crime film that ever came from France...but there is also a poetry about it...Has a flavor of crooks and kept women and Montmartre "boites" that you can just about smell."

— Bosley Crowther, *The New York Times* (June 6, 1956)

"A corker...The half-hour burglary makes the hairs on the back of the neck rise."

— Bosley Crowther, *The New York Times* (June 10, 1956)

"Indubitably the best underworld story yet filmed...If you crave an underworld story that will hold you in an iron grip, *Rififi* shouldn't be missed. In our opinion, it is the best foreign film seen this year." — Justin Gilbert, *Daily Mirror* (1956)

"*Rififi* contains a 30-minute stretch of wordless movie making that is one of the most engrossing sequences since the invention of talking pictures.... [Dassin] gathers enough honors in this memorable silent sequence to satisfy most writers, directors and actors for a lifetime of work." — *Time* (July 16, 1956)

"A vicious and terse French melodrama...Grimly sustained, never relaxing excitement, a classic exercise in keeping nerves stretched taut through ingenuity, imagination and low cunning." — Alton Cook, *New York World Telegram* (1956)

★★★★ "Dassin's direction is tight and tense and sometimes **the suspense is almost unbearable.**" — Wanda Hale, *Daily News* (1956)

"Sets a new high in suspense...a piece of filmmaking that'll have you holding your breath when you aren't chewing your fingernails." — Rose Pelswick, *Journal-American*

⁷ According to Rui Nogueira's *Melville*, a book-length interview with the director published in 1971, Melville's displeasure was with the producer, and not with Dassin. Melville's account: "I was the person who got the producer to buy the rights, he announced that I was to direct the film, and then I didn't see him for six months. Finally the film was made by Dassin, who had the extreme courtesy to say that he would do it only if I wrote to tell him that I was happy about the arrangement. Which I did."

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WHAT THE CRITICS IN 2000 SAID ABOUT *RIFIFI*⁸

“A NOIR MASTERPIECE!” — Andrew Sarris, *New York Observer*

“JUST ABOUT FLAWLESS! For lovers of tough-guy moviemaking, *Rififi* really means perfection.” — Michael Sragow, *New York Times*

“I won’t bore you by rhapsodizing over the **moody-poetic-nightworld artistry** of ‘*Rififi*’...What I will say is that the film’s **amazing central sequence**...has acquired new resonance, since it now looks disarmingly low-tech. This is a film in which master thieves catch plaster ceiling debris in an upside-down *umbrella*. The crime is indeed perfect, **the underworld equivalent of a sublime French meal**, but as *Rififi* goes on, it becomes **as savage as *Reservoir Dogs*, *The Killing*, or any of the other dozens of films over which it still casts a shadow.**” — Owen Gleiberman, *Entertainment Weekly*

“The dark pleasures of *Rififi* are legion, and they linger in the vivid, almost indelible manner shared by all great films...Radiating **white-hot suspense** that’s suffused with sangfroid, Jules Dassin’s jewel-thief thriller **crackles with the same excitement it exuded nearly a half-century ago**...[The 30-minute wordless heist scene] offers a lesson in inspired filmmaking as one gripping image after another keeps the audience hooked. It’s rare to see such a delicious combination of enthralling energy and diamond-hard despair.” — Stephen Garrett, *Time Out New York*

★★★★! “Among the picture’s many surprises is a superb robbery scene filmed in a near-total silence that contrasts exhilaratingly with the noisy flamboyance of more recent films in this venerable genre.” — David Sterritt, *Christian Science Monitor*

★★★★! **“THE FRENCH CRIME THRILLER THAT BROKE THE MOLD!”**
— Jami Bernard, *New York Daily News*

“A GEM! A MUST-SEE!” — Vincent Masetto, *New York Post*

“Now that *Rififi* is again available, after being unseen for many years, **its daring seems all the more stunning.**” — Stewart Klawans, *The Nation*

“THE BEST FILM YOU’VE NEVER SEEN... *Rififi* has no long Tarentino-esque speeches, no Harvey Keitel method-ized overacting, no cozy Elmore Leonard quirks, no Joe Pesci gangsterisms. For better or worse these improvisations are part of its legacies. **Now audiences have the real thing.**” — David D’Arcy, *Film.com*

“One of the great crime thrillers, the benchmark all succeeding heist films have been measured against, it’s no musty museum piece but a driving, compelling piece of work.”
— *L.A. Times*

⁸ In 2000, Rialto re-released *Rififi*, which had been virtually unseen in the U.S. since its original release.

FRANCOIS TRUFFAUT ON *RIFIFI*

Rififi, the first French film by the American filmmaker Jules Dassin, who came to cinema from directing in the theater, is structured like a classical tragedy. Act I: Preparation for a holdup; Act II: “Consummation” of the holdup; Act III: Punishment, vengeance, death.

It isn't necessary to point out the modest production budget of *Rififi* before I say that I liked the film and intend to praise it, but it may serve some purpose, if only to demonstrate that a film's success depends more on its director than on massive production resources or the participation of world-renowned actors.

Out of the worst crime novel I have ever read, Jules Dassin has made the best Film Noir⁹ I have ever seen. In fact, this is not a minor genre. Dassin shot the film on the street during high winds and rain, and he reveals Paris to us [Frenchmen] as he revealed London to the English (*Night in the City*) and New York to the Americans (*Naked City*). It would be unfair not to credit also the chief cameraman, Agostini, who truly worked miracles under very unusual conditions: the interior shots in actual dark bistros, nighttime exteriors without lights, the platform of the Port-Royal subway station, tiny details of décor, etc.

Everything in *Rififi* is intelligent: screenplay, dialogue, sets, music, choice of actors. Jean Servais, Robert Manuel, and Jules Dassin are perfect. The two failures are the female casting and the specially written song, which is execrable.

The direction is a marvel of skill and inventiveness. *Rififi* is composed of three bits of rigorously developed bravura. Every shot answers the viewer's question, “How?” Dassin remains faithful to his style of combining the documentary approach with lyricism. For the past week, the only thing being talked about in Paris was the silent holdup, splendidly soundtracked, in which objects, movements, and glances create an extraordinary ballet around an umbrella placed over a hole pierced through the ceiling of a jewelry store alive with security systems.

Beyond that, the real value of the film lies in its tone. The characters in *Rififi* are not despicable. The relative permissiveness of the French censors allowed Dassin to make a film without compromises, immoral perhaps, but profoundly noble, tragic, warm, human. Behind the smiles of the three actors – Jean Servais' bitter, Robert Manuel's sunny, and Jules Dassin's sad though with bursts of gaiety – we divine the filmmaker, a tender, indulgent man, gentle and trusting, capable of telling us one of these days a more ennobling story of characters who have been better served by their destiny. That is what we must not forget and why we must thank Jules Dassin. It is this consideration that amply justifies the presence at the Cannes Festival of *Le Rififi chez les Hommes*.

⁹ In the English version of this 1954 review in *The Films in My Life*, the collection of Truffaut's criticism translated by Leonard Mayhew (1975, Simon & Schuster), this line reads “Jules Dassin has made the best *crime film* I have ever seen.” Truffaut's actual words are “Jules Dassin a réalisé le meilleur film ‘noir’ qu'il m'ait été donné de voir.” This may be one of the earliest critical uses of the term.

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JULES DASSIN (Writer/Director)

Born Julius Dassin, on December 18, 1911, in Middletown, Connecticut, one of eight children of a Russian Jewish immigrant barber, he moved with his family to the Harlem section of New York City and attended high school in the Bronx. After drama studies in Europe, he made his debut as an actor in 1936 with New York's Yiddish Theater. He later wrote radio scripts and in 1940 went to Hollywood, where, after a brief induction as an apprentice director at RKO (coming under Alfred Hitchcock's wing during the shooting of *Mr. And Mrs. Smith*), he began directing shorts for MGM. One of these, *The Tell-Tale Heart* (1941), resulted in his promotion to feature director. Although his films boasted big stars like Joan Crawford, Conrad Veidt, John Wayne, and Charles Laughton, his MGM pictures were inconsequential, mildly entertaining suspense and comedy fare, although the Laughton film, *The Canterville Ghost*, was a significant hit. In the late 40s he seemed to have at last found his stride with three dynamic on-location slice-of-life dramas, *Brute Force*, *The Naked City*, and *Thieves' Highway* (the latter two shot on location in their respective cities, New York and San Francisco) that earned him renown in Europe as the first American "neo-realist." But just as he was gaining recognition as a director with something to say and an interesting way of saying it, he was forced into exile in Europe as a result of the House Un-American Activities Committee hearings, in which he was identified as a Communist by Edgar Dmytryk.

Dassin's first stop was England, where he directed another intelligent film in his newfound semi-documentary style, *Night and the City*. But, because of the blacklist, it was five years before he would direct another movie. Luckily, it turned out to be the suspense gem *Rififi*. Accepting the Best Director prize at Cannes for that movie, he met the woman who would become his muse and second wife, the Greek actress Melina Mercouri. He began his Greek period in the 1960s with several entertaining films starring Mercouri, the best known of which, *Never on Sunday*, discovered the Mediterranean for Americans, won an Oscar for its memorable theme song, and a Best Actress award at Cannes for Mercouri. *Topkapi*, another commercially successful venture, was a colorful and highly entertaining jewel-robbery caper that inspired the TV series *Mission: Impossible*.

Dassin produced and co-scripted most of his own films since 1950. He also appeared in several as an actor, sometimes using the pseudonym Perlo Vita. From 1980, he was active as a theater director in Athens, where he lived on Melina Mercouri Street and ran the Melina Mercouri Foundation. Dassin died in Athens on March 31, 2008 at age 96.

AUGUSTE LE BRETON (Novel)

Born Auguste Montfort in Brittany (hence his eventual name change), Le Breton was a war orphan, the son of a Barnum circus clown killed in the Somme in 1914. After a childhood in various homes, he spent much of his delinquent teen years in reform schools. Dubbed "Le Breton" by the delinquents and petty hoods he fell in with when he reached Paris in the 1930s, his peripatetic experiences brought him in contact with the numerous figures of the French *milieu* who would serve as models for his later literary creations notably Tony "the Stéphanois." He claimed to have coined the term *rififi* during a gangland clash in 1942.

With his contemporary Albert Simonin, author of the equally seminal gangster novel *Touchez pas au grisbi* (which appeared only months before *Du Rififi chez les hommes* in 1953 and was unforgettably filmed by Jacques Becker), Le Breton is considered the father of the *argot* crime thriller. Like *Grisbi*, *Rififi* was enriched by the author's first-hand knowledge of the Paris underworld and its rich, often impenetrable jargon. Indeed, *Grisbi* and *Rififi* were both published by Editions Gallimard as part of its famous "Série Noire" thriller collection with an appended glossary of underworld *argot*.

The huge double-barreled success of *Rififi*, book and film, kicked off Le Breton's career as novelist and sometime-screenwriter. He initiated a whole series of thrillers whose titles began with "Rififi..." and followed the globe-trotting adventures of FBI agent Mike Coppolano. Among these, the 1967 *Rififi in New York* was published in translation in the U.S.

Of the nine Le Breton novels adapted for the screen, the finest, after *Rififi*, remain Henri Decoin's *Razzia sur le chnouf* (1955), starring Jean Gabin, and Pierre Chenal's *Rafles sur la ville* (1956), with Michel Piccoli and Charles Vanel. Henri Verneuil's 1969 caper thriller, *The Sicilian Clan*, boasting the powerhouse trio of Jean Gabin, Alain Delon and Lino Ventura, enjoyed international success. Other screen adaptations were *La Loi des rues* (Ralph Habib, 1956), *Le Rouge est mis* (Gilles Grangier, 1957), *Du rififi chez les femmes* (Alex Joffé, 1959), *Du rififi à Paname* (Denys de la Patellière, 1965) and *Brigade anti-gangs* (Bernard Borderie, 1965).

As scenarist and dialogue writer, Le Breton is most famously associated with Jean-Pierre Melville's gangster classic, *Bob le flambeur* (1956). Le Breton's considerable literary output also included a series of autobiographical novels, poetry, memoirs, a portrait of Edith Piaf and three slang dictionaries.

Le Breton died in 1999, just weeks before the French theatrical reissue of *Rififi* which he hoped would bring his work back to a new generation of thriller aficionados and filmgoers. He is survived by an expression that remains part of the living language.

ALEXANDRE TRAUNER (Production Designer)

Born in Budapest in 1906, Trauner studied at the city's Ecole des Beaux Arts before moving to Paris in 1929. Apprenticing under the great Lazare Meerson, he made his name as a production designer during the 1930s, working with director Marcel Carné on such classics as *Drôle de Drame*, *Port of Shadows*, and *Le Jour Se Lève*. During World War II, Trauner, who was Jewish, went into hiding in occupied France, but still managed to design Carné's *Les Visiteurs du soir* and the epic-scaled 19th century street sets for *Children of Paradise*. After the war, he began working on an international level, compiling such credits as Orson Welles' *Othello* and Howard Hawks' *Land of the Pharaohs*, for which he constructed a pyramid. A collaboration with director Billy Wilder began in 1957 with *Love in the Afternoon* and continued through *Witness for the Prosecution*; *The Apartment* (for which he won an Oscar); *One, Two, Three*; *Irma la Douce*; *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes*; and *Fedora*. Later, Trauner collaborated with Joseph Losey on *Mr. Klein*, *Don Giovanni*, and *La Truite*. Trauner's other international credits include Jules Dassin's *Rififi*, *The Nun's Story*, *How to Steal a Million*, and John Huston's *The Man Who Would Be King*. In the 1980s, he worked primarily on French productions, such as Bertrand Tavernier's *'Round Midnight* and Luc Besson's *Subway*, for which he received one of his three César awards. Trauner was also the recipient of France's Grand Prix National du Cinéma; he was further honored with several exhibitions of the paintings he made in preparation for his film projects. Trauner died in 1993 at age 87.

GEORGES AURIC (Music)

Born in 1899 in the Languedoc area of France, Auric was a musical child prodigy whose work was first published at age 15; he scored ballets and stage productions before he was 20. One of a group mentored by the older Erik Satie (later dubbed Les Six by others, it included Darius Milhaud, Francis Poulenc, and Artur Honegger), he also worked with Jean Cocteau, for whom he did his first score *Le Sang d'un poète* in 1930, eventually scoring all of Cocteau's films, up to *Le Testament d'Orphée* in 1958. In 1945 he crossed the Channel to score *Dead of Night* for Ealing Studios, eventually becoming identified with Ealing Comedy via *Passport to Pimlico*, *The Lavender Hill Mob*, and *The Titfield Thunderbolt*, as well as *Hue and Cry* and *It Always Rains on Sunday*. Other notable scores include those for René Clair's *A nous la liberté*, Wyler's *Roman Holiday*, Dassin's *Rififi*, Ophüls' *Lola Montès*, Preminger's *Bonjour Tristesse*, Clouzot's *The Wages of Fear*, and John Huston's *Moulin Rouge* (with its Auric-penned theme song "Where is Your Heart?" cracking the Hit Parade).

For a film composer with this incredible range, his reputation is remarkably low profile, perhaps because of his subtlety and general lightness of tone. But he could also unleash the thunderousness of *The Mystery of Picasso*, and the low key creepiness of *The Innocents*. In 1962 Auric semi-retired from film scoring to become director of the Paris Opera and later the chairman of SACEM, the French ASCAP. He died in 1983.

Rififi

Rialto Pictures

RIALTO PICTURES

“The gold standard of reissue distributors” (Kenneth Turan, *Los Angeles Times*), Rialto was founded in 1997 by Bruce Goldstein, who was joined a year later by partner Adrienne Halpern. In 2002, Eric Di Bernardo became the company’s National Sales Director.

Rialto’s past releases have included Renoir’s *Grand Illusion*, both in 1999 and in a new 4K restoration for its 75th anniversary in 2012; Carol Reed’s *The Third Man* – now back in theaters around the country in a new 4K restoration -- and *The Fallen Idol*; Pontecorvo’s *The Battle of Algiers*; Fellini’s *Nights of Cabiria* (for the first time in its “director’s cut”); Jules Dassin’s *Rififi*; Godard’s *Breathless*, *Contempt*, *Band of Outsiders*, *Masculine Feminine*, *Le Petit Soldat*, as well as the U.S. premiere of his *Made in U.S.A.*; Kurosawa’s *Ran*; Buñuel’s *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*; Clouzot’s *Quai des Orfèvres*; the Boulting Brothers’ *Brighton Rock*; Jacques Becker’s *Touchez pas au Grisbi*; Bresson’s *Au Hasard Balthazar* and *Diary of a Country Priest*; Resnais’ *Last Year at Marienbad*; the U.S. premiere of the original, uncut Japanese version of *Godzilla*; the U.S. premiere of the complete, uncut version of Jean-Pierre Melville’s *Le Cercle Rouge*; the U.S. premiere of Melville’s *Army of Shadows*, which became the most critically-acclaimed film of 2006; and the U.S. premiere of Claude Sautet’s *Max et les Ferrailleurs*.

In 2013, in collaboration with the British Film Institute and Park Circus Films, Rialto began touring “The Hitchcock 9” – Alfred Hitchcock’s nine surviving silent films, all newly restored by the BFI. Additional 2013/2014 releases included a digital restoration of *Godzilla* for its 60th anniversary; restorations of Joseph Losey’s two collaborations with Harold Pinter and Dirk Bogarde, *The Servant* and *Accident*; Godard’s *Alphaville*; Robin Hardy’s definitive cut of *The Wicker Man*; and Rob Reiner’s *This Is Spinal Tap*.

Recent releases include a stunning new 4K restoration of Alain Resnais’ debut feature *Hiroshima Mon Amour* and the first U.S. release of Paul Grimault’s French animated classic *The King and the Mockingbird*, both of which were presented at the 52nd New York Film Festival; a new 4K restoration of the complete uncut version of Marcel Carné’s *Le Jour Se Lève*, which puts back scenes censored by the Vichy government, and Mario Monicelli’s *The Passionate Thief*.

Rialto began 2015 with a reissue of The Film Foundation’s spectacular new 4K restoration of Powell & Pressburger’s *The Tales of Hoffmann* and René Clément’s *Forbidden Games*. In addition to a new 4K restoration of *The Third Man* currently playing across the U.S., this year has seen the release of five films by Claude Sautet – *Les Choses De La Vie*, *César and Rosalie*, *Max et les Ferrailleurs*, *Vincent, François, Paul and the Others*, and *Nelly and Monsieur Arnaud* – all newly transferred to DCP, and the 25th anniversary release of Whit Stillman’s *Metropolitan*.

Rififi

Rialto Pictures

In 1999, Rialto received a special Heritage Award from the National Society of Film Critics, and in 2000 a special award from the New York Film Critics Circle, presented to Goldstein and Halpern by Jeanne Moreau. The two co-presidents have each received the French Order of Chevalier of Arts and Letters.

In 2013, Goldstein became the first person ever to receive a Lifetime Achievement Award for Film from George Eastman House. He has also received career awards from Anthology Film Archive and the San Francisco Film Festival (Mel Novikoff Award).

For its 10th anniversary in 2007, Rialto was honored with a retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and similar tributes were held at George Eastman House in Rochester, the AFI Silver Theater in Washington, and the SIFF Theater in Seattle. The Criterion Collection also issued a special gift box set, 10 Years of Rialto Pictures. Rialto's 15th anniversary was observed in 2012 with a Film Society of Lincoln Center series entitled "15 For 15: Celebrating Rialto Pictures."

In 2012, Rialto became the U.S. theatrical and non-theatrical representative of the Studiocanal library of over 2,000 international classics.

rialtopictures.com/rififi

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