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Old Hollywood: Tough Guys and Mad Dames

Rich Johnson

Week 8

GLENN FORD: SECRETS AND LIES

Canadian born Glenn Ford (May 1, 1916 – August 30, 2006) made his reputation playing impassive, laconic military types and Western heroes, which were often his bread-and-butter. Such roles were criminally underrated, often providing an effortlessly authoritative performance and working hard in his output of movies, of which were sometimes three to four a year. When he *wasn't* working, he put all of his energy into his home life; designing his own house (with a 900-pound artificial sun suspended over a glassed-in atrium) where, hung on the wall was the Nazi death sentence he earned during WWII for training French Resistance fighters. However, despite his homebred façade and 'Jonathan Kent' exterior, Ford's private life was, later, revealed to be somewhat of a sham when he confessed (to his son, nonetheless) of all his extramarital affairs during his time as a Hollywood actor.

Please refer to the reading list for a full reference of films.

Main:

Gilda (1946)

Director(s): Charles Vidor

Studio(s): Columbia Pictures

The Big Heat (1953)

Director(s): Fritz Lang

Studio(s): Columbia Pictures

Blackboard Jungle (1955)

Director(s): Richard Brooks

Studio(s): Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer

References to:

Heaven with a Barbed Wire Fence (1939)

Director(s): Ricardo Cortez

Studio(s): Twentieth Century Fox



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So Ends Our Night (1941)

Director(s): John Cromwell

Studio(s): David L. Loew-Albert Lewin Productions (distributed by United Artists)

A Stolen Life (1946)

Director(s): Curtis Bernhardt

Studio(s): Warner Bros.

Lust for Gold (1949)

Director(s): S. Sylvan Simon

Studio(s): Columbia Pictures

3:10 to Yuma (1957)

Director(s): Delmer Daves

Studio(s): Columbia Pictures

Superman (1978)

Director(s): Richard Donner

Studio(s): Dovemead Films / Film Export A.G. / International Film Production (distributed by Warner Bros.)

Framed (1947)

Director(s): Richard Wallace

Studio(s): Columbia Pictures

Lust for Gold (1949)

Director(s): S. Sylvan Simon

Studio(s): Columbia Pictures

Class of '84 (1982)

Director(s): Mark L. Lester

Studio(s): Guerrilla High Productions

Raw Nerve (1991)

Director(s): David A. Prior

Studio(s): Sovereign Investments / Winters Group

Final Verdict (1991)

Director(s): Jack Fisk

Studio(s): Foxboro Company Productions / Turner Pictures

Dangerous Minds (1995)

Director(s): John N. Smith

Studio(s): Hollywood Pictures / Don Simpson/Jerry Bruckheimer Films



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Notes:

“If they try to rush me, I always say, ‘I’ve only got one other speed — and it’s slower.’” — Glenn Ford

Young Gwyllyn

Born Gwyllyn Samuel Newton Ford on May 1, 1916 in Quebec, Canada, Glenn Ford was one of the biggest box office draws of the Golden Age of Hollywood, despite, in hindsight, somewhat overshadowed by his contemporaries and their work. He was an only child and developed a love for theatre and acting from a very early age.

Here are some photographs courtesy of the Glenn Ford Library beginning with Gwyllyn in 1922 newly arrived in Venice, California from Canada as he poses with his new toy shepherd puppy. Even though he knew he wanted to be an actor his dad supported him but wanted him to learn a trade first – having him dismantle a car and put it back together before he could have one. He even taught him to build a house – qualities that stuck with him his entire life, as we’ll get to at the end of the notes.

At 21, Gwyllyn prepares to board a train for San Francisco where he will appear on stage in a tiny role in *Golden Boy*.

Ford looked and often acted as the quintessential mid-century American man; again, as with the likes of Gregory Peck, capturing something uniquely ‘American’. By 1940, Gwyllyn had become Glenn, his full stage name coming from his father's hometown of Glenford, Alberta.

Ford’s characters were a variety of homegrown western heroes, hardboiled detectives, tough teachers and men with integrity, despite his vices off screen. Ford could be the ordinary hero; the guy next door. He was quoted as saying “I have never been bored for one day in my life.”

He learnt to fly with his friends jumping out of aircraft for \$15 a jump. He had guts and “a flair” surrounded by a lot of friends and a teacher who knew he was going to be a star after learning the ropes in the Santa Monica Players.

After he made one of his early film *So Ends Our Night* it affected him so much that in the summer of 1941, while the United States was still neutral in the Second World War, he enlisted in the United States Coast Guard Auxiliary, though he had a ‘Class 3’ deferment (for being his mother's sole support) after the death of his father. He began his training in September 1941, driving three nights a week to his waterfront unit in San Pedro and spending most weekends there.

In 1942, he enlisted in the United States Marine Corps and, according to his episode of *This Is Your Life*, he claimed to have served in the Pacific for two years and also going onto help build safe houses in occupied France for those hiding from the Nazis. He was, however, discharged in 1944 and, in looking into his career in the military, it has been often questioned how much is true during this period with some claiming he never left the US. Some believe there is another Glenn Ford was



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involved in D-Day and went onto be one of the first Americans to enter the infamous Dachau concentration camp at the end of the war. This record sometimes attached to the Hollywood Star's history. After his WWII service, Ford enlisted for a third time in 1958 and entered the U.S. Naval Reserve, in which he was commissioned as a lieutenant commander and was made a public affairs officer. He switched to the Navy on advice based on how much he worked with them as a Marine. As Captain in the Naval Reserve he was asked to serve for three months with the amphibious forces in the Vietnam War. His son in interviews even confirms "he never left Camp Pendleton", despite wanting to fight spending a lot of time in hospital with ulcers.

On October 23, 1943, he married dancer and actress Eleanor Powell. They made a striking couple – Eleanor one of Hollywood's most brilliant dancers and, at the time, a bigger star than he was credited by Fred Astaire as the greatest female dance in Hollywood.

They had one son, Peter Ford. Peter had an interesting relationship with his father and, as with most brought into such a life, a distancing. He went onto write his father's biography *Glenn Ford: A Life*, published in 2011. He has his diaries from when he was 16 to when he could no longer write counting 143 relationships. His own relationship with his dad wasn't always easy claiming there was a jealousy towards him as a child with his mother fully focused on her son and motherhood. He felt excluded and [quote] "Felt driven from the nest". She even toured herself to bring money in before his fame took off. His mother was also living with them which also caused due stress. He felt his father's ability as an actor was even more profound as he wasn't the 'everyman' everyone thought he was.

He had no other children, despite being married another three times to Kathryn Hays (m. 1966; div. 1969), Cynthia Hayward (m. 1977; div. 1984) and Jeanne Baus (m. 1993; div. 1994).

First appearances

His first screen role (as Gwyllyn Ford) was in the short "Night in Manhattan" in 1937 before joining Columbia Pictures in 1939. During this time, at the age of 23, Ford gave up his status as a subject of the King (Canadian citizenship) and became a naturalized citizen of the United States on November 10, 1939. That year he scored his first major role was in *Heaven with a Barbed Wire Fence* (1939).

An underrated star

Glenn's career received a significant boost when he was chosen by Bette Davis to play her love interest in the 1946 drama, *A Stolen Life*. Bette hoped sparks would fly off screen as well.

Notable films during the forties include *Framed* from 1947, *Lust for Gold* from 1948 and one of his most well-known from 1957: *3:10 to Yuma*.

My generation perhaps know him most of all as Jonathan Kent in *Superman* (1978) – his death onscreen a (depressingly) iconic moment.

The serial adulterer



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According to accounts and the confessions to his own son later in life he had numerous affairs which meant he did not remain on good terms with his ex-wives. As a notorious womanizer his affairs were often with many of his leading ladies, including Joan Crawford in 1942, Rita Hayworth (who he continued to see up to the 1980s, moving next to her), Maria Schell, Geraldine Brooks, Stella Stevens, Gloria Grahame, Gene Tierney, Eva Gabor and Barbara Stanwyck. He also, apparently, had a one-night stand with Marilyn Monroe in 1962.

“Statistics show that there are more women in the world than anything else. Except insects.” — Johnny Farrell

In Charles Vidor’s 1946 movie *Gilda*, small-time American gambler Johnny Farrell (Ford) arrives in Buenos Aires, Argentina and is subsequently caught cheating at a game of blackjack. In an effort to evade punishment Farrell manages to talk his way into a job with the casino’s owner, the powerful Ballin Mundson (George Macready). The two form an uneasy partnership based off their mutual lack of scruples until Mundson introduces Farrell to his beautiful new wife, Gilda (Rita Hayworth), who just happens to be Farrell’s ex-lover.

The film was only mildly successful in the US but lapped up by the French and has garnered a reputation over the years as a top tier 1940s movie. It is! Rita Hayworth often remarked on her varied relationships: “They fell in love with Gilda and woke up with me.”

Even if you *haven’t* seen the film it is instantly recognisable through one of the most iconic moments in cinema as Rita Hayworth literally bobs onto screen. A lot of people would recognise the film from *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994). Based on Stephen King’s novella “Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption”, the story uses a poster of Rita Hayworth as a ‘Chekhov’s Gun’, which is that (seemingly) unimportant element that becomes significant later on in the story.

The film is a slice of perfection. A noir but one that focuses very much on the dynamics at play between the leads, full of romance and intrigue. Stills alone show the intensity of Ford and Hayworth’s connection.

The chemistry is real. As mentioned, Ford and Hayworth becoming ‘neighbours’ and continuing their relationship for over 30 years.

What plays well is the constant tug of war and the toying of *Gilda*.

Ford’s charm is on full swing, his character Johnny developing a natural arc from scally to serious right hand heavy.

According to IMDb: whilst the film was in release, an atomic bomb tested at Bikini Atoll in the Pacific Ocean’s Marshall Islands bore an image of Rita Hayworth, a reference to her bombshell status. The fourth atomic bomb ever to be detonated was decorated with a photograph of Hayworth cut from the June 1946 issue of Esquire magazine. Above it was stenciled the device’s nickname, “Gilda,” in two-inch black letters. Although the gesture was meant as a compliment, Hayworth was deeply offended.



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Hard boiled

“You know, you couldn't plant enough flowers around here to kill the smell.” — Dave Bannion

Film noir *The Big Heat* from 1953 a crime unfolds centred around the apparent suicide of a police officer... but Detective Dave Bannion (Ford) thinks there's more to the story. After talking to the man's mob-connected mistress, Bannion discovers far-reaching corruption that leads all the way from the police station to kingpin Mike Lagana (Alexander Scourby). But when the policeman's lover is killed, it becomes clear that crossing Lagana is a dangerous thing to do. Soon Bannion finds himself marked for death and his family in mortal danger.

Directed by the great Fritz Lang, the film shows off an incredible quality, as would be expected from the German Expressionist filmmaker. Listen carefully and you will hear that Lang slyly inserts “Put the Blame on Mame”, which was famously sung by a stunning Rita Hayworth in *Gilda*.

“Bannion was big, strong and angry enough to kill, but he was only one honest man in a city full of mobsters and crooked cops.” — William P. McGivern, *The Big Heat*(1953)

Based on the novel by William P. McGivern which originally ran as a the *Saturday Evening Post*.

Ford's acting is fierce, cool and collected, helping to define those hard boiled enforcers and detectives that cemented the subgenre.

Columbia wanted to borrow Marilyn Monroe from 20th Century-Fox to play the role of Debby Marsh, but Fox's asking price was too high. Gloria Grahame was cast instead.

This is a noir that manages to balance style and intention reminiscent of Hitchcock's work and delivers a satisfying crime story with impeccable direction and performances.

There is no mistaking Ford's hardboiled and tough guy persona in this one – the scenes with Lee Marvin, in particular, are excellent.

“Say now, that wasn't true, what you said about teachers. Some of us do care, you know?” — Richard Dadier

Richard Brooks' *Blackboard Jungle* from 1955 is a rather overlooked classic. World War II veteran Richard Dadier (Ford) arrives in a rough side of New York to take on a teaching position. The staff warns him that the students are nearly impossible to control, but the optimistic Mr. Dadier remains determined to remain resilient and make some change. Soon, though, he realizes that his class are more than just misbehaved but dangerous. The students, led by the thuggish Artie West (Vic Morrow), threaten their teacher and his family with violence, yet Mr. Donier still refuses to give up on the troubled teens.

As a crucial slice of American social-commentary, released in 1955 during the birth of the teenage, it highlighted the shocking violence in urban schools while also becoming instrumental in sparking



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the rock-and-roll revolution by featuring the hit song “Rock Around the Clock” (1954) by Bill Haley and His Comets. It was the first major film to feature rock music on its sound track.

“Would you rather teach in another type of school?” — Evan Hunter, *Blackboard Jungle* (1954)

Based on the 1957 novel *The Executioners* by John D. MacDonald

The film is an unfiltered and surprisingly brutal piece of cinema even to this day – another overlooked Hollywood movie that has become somewhat overshadowed over the years by James Dean’s rise to fame and Nicholas Ray’s classic *Rebel Without a Cause* released seven months later. It was, however, very popular at the time.

Ford’s steadfast and sensitive performance is superb and, quite possibly his best performance. He is believable and, even as he begins to crumble and dig his own grave, he still remains a character we root for.

If you have ever taught and experienced even an ounce of pushback, the film is even more relatable. It is also relatable on a bureaucratic level in that it highlights the passive nature of some institutions turning a blind eye to make the job easier.

The film obviously hit a nerve with its unusually brutal depiction of the social conditions of urban schools. Therefore, the music and the theme made the movie hugely popular with teenage audiences. In the UK at the time, fights and riots broke out in many towns where the movie was shown. Both Vic Morrow and Sidney Poitier are incredible in the film, both of the actors receiving special praise for their roles as the chief delinquents. There is some irony in the fact that Poitier later played a teacher in a similar British film, *To Sir, with Love* released in 1967.

The end sequence is excellent – everything coming to a head as we *hope* that justice is served.

It is hugely influential, 1982’s *Class of ’84* acting as a loose remake along with the likes of 1995’s *Dangerous Minds*, amongst other movies of that era.

Some overlooked classics include: *The Return of October* (1948), *The White Tower* (1950), *Convicted* (1950), *Affair in Trinidad* (1952), *Cowboy* (1958) but, one of his best is *3:10 to Yuma* (1957).

Final years...

Ford was a keen painter, an example of which can be seen (modestly) on his *This Is Your Life* episode in 1973. Like another Ford he was a skilled carpenter and electrician and even made his own wine, grew his own vegetables and made his own cigars while also an excellent cook and second degree mason.. Plenty to keep him occupied in his later years. He had developed a drinking problem after his first divorce.

His final appearances on screen were in *Raw Nerve* and the TV movie *Final Verdict* both released in 1991.



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"I've never played anyone but myself on screen." — Glenn Ford

After retiring in 1991 at 75 with heart and circulatory problems we went onto suffer a series of minor strokes that left him in frail health, passing away at the age of 90 on August 30th, 2006.