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# Old Hollywood: Tough Guys and Mad Dames

Rich Johnson

## Week 10

### **BURT LANCASTER: THE HARLEM KID**

Known for his tall, broad and powerful physique and a smile that lit up Tinseltown, Burt Lancaster (November 2, 1913 – October 20, 1994) was an astonishing Hollywood specimen. Growing up in Harlem, he spent the majority of his twenties as a circus acrobat that only enhanced his awe-inspiring frame and adding to those large signature movements. Lancaster was of a particular ilk; not the actor who would disappear into a role but dazzle an audience as 'Burt'. Within the shackles of a star persona he found a multitude of standout roles, and never lost his prime. He would often team up with his life-long friend from his circus days, Nick Cravat, showing off his athleticism – *Trapeze* (1956) a fine example – utilising Lancaster's skills as a high flier. He soared and conquered, yet his progressive liberal reviews developed a philosophy and perspective that was often at odds with Hollywood. As a strong advocate for equal rights, this often placed him in the firing line (often a target of FBI investigations) over the years; speaking out in support of racial issues and other minorities, the Vietnam War, the AIDS crisis and the death penalty. Despite three marriages and apparent affairs (with both men and women), Lancaster's reputation as a human outshone his stardom. Tough guy? *Great guy.*

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

#### **Main:**

*The Killers* (1946)

**Director(s):** Robert Siodmak

**Studio(s):** Mark Hellinger Productions (distributed by Universal Pictures)

*Brute Force* (1947)

**Director(s):** Jules Dassin

**Studio(s):** Mark Hellinger Productions (distributed by Universal Pictures)

*Trapeze* (1956)

**Director(s):** Carol Reed

**Studio(s):** Hecht-Hill-Lancaster



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**Reference to:**

*From Here to Eternity* (1953)

**Director(s):** Fred Zinnemann

**Studio(s):** Columbia Pictures

*Vera Cruz* (1954)

**Director(s):** Robert Aldrich

**Studio(s):** Hecht-Lancaster Productions (distributed by United Artists)

*The Sweet Smell of Success* (1957)

**Director(s):** Alexander Mackendrick

**Studio(s):** Hecht-Hill-Lancaster Productions / Norma Productions / Curtleigh Productions  
(distributed by United Artists)

*The Birdman of Alcatraz* (1962)

**Director(s):** John Frankenheimer **Studio(s):** Norma Productions (distributed by United Artists)

*The Leopard* (1963)

**Director(s):** Luchino Visconti

**Studio(s):** Titanus / Société Nouvelle Pathé Cinéma / Société Générale de Cinématographie  
(S.G.C.)

*The Train* (1964)

**Director(s):** John Frankenheimer **Studio(s):** Les Films Ariane / Les Productions Artistes Associés /  
Dear Film Produzione (distributed by United Artists)

*The Swimmer* (1968)

**Director(s):** Frank Perry

**Studio(s):** Horizon Pictures (distributed by Columbia Pictures)

*Ulzana's Raid* (1972)

**Director(s):** Robert Aldrich

**Studio(s):** De Haven Productions / The Associates & Aldrich Company  
(distributed by Universal Pictures)

*Local Hero* (1983)

**Director(s):** Bill Forsyth

**Studio(s):** Goldcrest Films (distributed by Twentieth Century Fox)

*Tough Guys* (1986)

**Director(s):** Jeff Kanew

**Studio(s):** Touchstone Pictures / Silver Screen Partners II / The Bryna Company



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#### Notes:

*“We’re all forgotten sooner or later. But not films. That’s all the memorial we should need or hope for.” — Burt Lancaster*

Young Burton

So, it is worth some focus on Harlem, the neighbourhood that shaped him and his liberal beliefs raised amongst minorities.

Obviously, Harlem is associated with its black community who have been present in the area continually since the 1630s. As the neighborhood modernized in the late 19th century, they could be found especially in the area around 125th Street and in the "Negro tenements" on West 130th Street. By 1900, tens of thousands lived in Harlem. The mass migration of African Americans into the area began in 1904, due to another real estate crash, the worsening of conditions for black people elsewhere in the city. As a community it is iconic and has led to specific cultural influences such as the burgeoning music scene.

In terms of snapshots of Manhattan during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the artist George Bellows is worth looking at, having been a major part of the art movement that became known as ‘American Realism’. Take a close look at *Cliff Dwellers* (1913) and *Stag at Sharkey’s* (1909) as prime examples of his observational eye at street-level. The boxing paintings are very cinematic, his phrase “Man as meat” illustrating his approach and technique to how he painted the figures as they almost merge with the punches... resembling something closer to a butcher’s slab.

There is at least a legacy (certainly hints) of the ‘tough guy’ persona inherent in his generation of actors.

Born Burton Stephen Lancaster on November 2, 1913 in New York City. Athletic by nature, Lancaster went on to perform as a circus acrobat during the 1930s, which became a major part of his prowess as a movie star.

Photographs of a young Burt and his family are rare due to a poor upbringing.

Lancaster had a lifelong friendship with actor and stunt man Nick Cravat. They met as youngsters at a summer camp in New York and became lifelong friends creating an acrobatic act called Lang and Cravat in the early 1930s and going on to join the Kay Brothers circus in Florida. The pair worked at various circuses and in vaudeville. Transitioning to the movies they appeared in nine productions together.

Married three times: First to June Ernst in 1935 who was a trapeze acrobat. Ernst was the daughter of a renowned female aerialist and an accomplished acrobat herself. After they were married, he performed with her family and her until their separation in the late 1930s. When they divorced is unclear. Contemporary reports listed 1940, but subsequent biographers have suggested dates as late as 1946, delaying his marriage to his second wife.



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He married Norma Anderson in 1946 and divorced in 1969. Anderson was the mother of all five of his children.

His last wife was Susan Martin who he married in 1990.

In 1947, Lancaster reportedly signed a statement release by the National Council of Arts, Sciences and Professions (NCASP) asking Congress to abolish the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). He was also a member of the short-lived Committee for the First Amendment, formed in support of the Hollywood Ten. He was one of 26 movie stars who flew to Washington in October 1947 to protest against the HUAC hearings.

Later, during the 1960s, he and his second wife Norma hosted a fundraiser for Martin Luther King Jr. and the Student Diversity Leadership Conference (SDLC) ahead of the historic March on Washington in 1963. He attended the march, where he was one of the speakers. He flew in from France for the event, where he was shooting *The Train*, and flew back again the next day, despite a reported fear of flying.

His own man

Lancaster managed to develop the distinct tough guy image that became a definition of a certain ilk of movie star during the post-war period, often associated with the likes of Robert Mitchum and Kirk Douglas.

The no-nonsense attitude and physical presence could not be ignored from his hardboiled persona and anti-hero characters synonymous with this period to the underlining sensitivity detected in his roles.

He also looked the king of cool and really did set a template for the likes of Steve McQueen and Clint Eastwood who would follow him as the next generation of movie stars exploring the abrasive anti-hero characters.

First appearances

At least as a legacy... there are certainly hints – the ‘tough guy’ persona inherent in his generation of actors.

Although released after his breakthrough film *The Killers* in 1946, his first filmed role was *Desert Fury* from 1947.

Iconic roles

At least as a legacy... there are certainly hints – the ‘tough guy’ persona inherent in his generation of actors.

He starred in many iconic Hollywood movies including pushing the barriers of the ‘love’ scene in *From Here to Eternity* in 1953, making journalism cinematic in *The Sweet Smell of Success* (1957),



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returning to prison – we'll lock ourselves up once again with Brute Force in a moment – in John Frankenheimer's *The Birdman of Alcatraz* (1962) and even exploring European cinema with Visconti's *The Leopard*, released in 1963.

Action hero?

As mentioned, there is at least as a legacy the 'tough guy' persona inherent in his generation of actors.

Lancaster and Frankenheimer made five films together including *The Young Savages* (1961), *Birdman of Alcatraz* (1962), *Seven Days in May* (1964), *The Train* (1964), and *The Gypsy Moths* (1969). *The Train* is an incredible film that feels like the perfect movie that rests between Old Hollywood and New Hollywood and showcases some genuinely groundbreaking direction. The fact it was shot in Europe also lends it a high level of authenticity.

Inherent danger

*"What am I going to do if I quit fightin'?"* — Pete Lund/Ole "Swede" Anderson

In one of the three films from Robert Siodmak (already highlighted via de Havilland's talk), *The Killers* presents a cool little noir tale shows all the classic tropes. It's a simple setup as two professional killers invade a small town and kill a gas station attendant, "the Swede," (Lancaster) who's expecting them. Insurance investigator Reardon pursues the case against the orders of his boss, who considers it trivial. Weaving together threads of the Swede's life, Reardon uncovers a complex tale of treachery and crime, all linked with gorgeous, mysterious Kitty Collins.

The movie was so big when it was released in New York that the cinemas were open 24 hours to meet demand, helping them to break previous box office records.

Based on the 1927 short story of the same name by Ernest Hemingway. He liked the film so much that when asked to take a sip of gin for every moment he didn't enjoy. After the screening, Hemingway held up the full bottles, grinned, and said, "Didn't need 'em."

Remarkable to think that the first film release he was top billing.

The boxing match in the third flashback was filmed in a boxing arena for an audience of 2000 spectators. Lancaster trained for two months with a boxing champion and played the part of the Swede with realism, against a real boxer, until his second KO and TKO.

Smouldering chemistry between Lancaster and his female co-star Ava Gardner. The film is impeccably directed by Siodmak – the staging and framing, in particular. As highlighted last week this was one of three films of his released in 1946, the other two including *The Spiral Staircase* and *The Dark Mirror*.

The entire Prentiss Hat Co. robbery was filmed with one camera and no cuts. It required quick coordination among dozens of people and several vehicles.



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There is a 1964 remake by director Don Siegel starring Lee Marvin and Ronald Reagan.

Commanding performance

*“You've been looking at a lot of air lately... and you think you ought to have a rest. In short, you're sorry for yourselves. I don't have a lot of patience with this, "What are we fighting for?" stuff. We're in a war, a shooting war. We've got to fight. And some of us have got to die.”* — General Savage

In *Brute Force* from 1947 Lancaster stars as prisoner Joe Collins who is released from solitary confinement and learns that his supportive wife, Ruth (Ann Blyth), is refusing surgery to treat her potentially deadly cancer, unless Joe can be by her side after the operation. But while Joe is plotting his escape with fellow prisoner Gallagher (Charles Bickford), a violent incident in the prison machine shop causes the entire prison to go into lockdown mode, overseen by the mean-spirited guard Captain Munsey (Hume Cronyn).

The climactic scene in which Lancaster throws sadistic prison guard Hume Cronyn from the guard tower became an iconic talking point of the film. This, coupled with his breakthrough in *The Killers* helped make the actor into a superstar.

No doubt about Lancaster's presence in this film. He puts the 'P' in powerhouse and burns the screen throughout.

The calendar girl was painted as a composite (by artist John Decker) of all the female characters in the film: it features one or two facial characteristics from each one of them. Therefore when each man looks at it, it does actually resemble his loved one. The original prop was sold at an auction for 2500 dollars.

Director Jules Dassin was blacklisted and as someone well aware of class and the 'system' he made a first prison film years ahead of its time that wasn't really about criminal justice at all but social issues and the vice and power that holds as a cinematic device. The imposing angles and shots alone are evidence of this, let alone the brutality shown throughout.

Michael Atkinson's Criterion essay [“Brute Force: Screws and Proles”](#) is worth checking out and brings up some fascinating observations and parallels:

By “Jules Dassin's *Brute Force* (1947) has a particular edge—not only is it arguably the meatiest and most resonant prison film ever made in this country, but it also exudes a startling degree of metaphoric frisson. For one thing, it draws explicit parallels to the Nazi encampment experience, making it one of the first Hollywood films to explore, even by proxy, those fresh wounds (preceded, as far as I know, only by Gregory Ratoff's 1945 Constance Bennett vehicle *Paris Underground*). From the storm-battered credits overture (surely one of the most atmospheric openings of the forties) to the vision of the prison's gun towers and giant front gates, the long black raincoats of the guards, and the concept of Hume Cronyn's nebbishy, fake-cultured, torture-happy Nietzschean captain, Dassin's nasty, intimate film fairly shivers with fascist portents.”



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*“When circus was real, flying was a religion. Now what have you got? Pink lights, ballet girls, blue sawdust. A lot of hoopla!” — Mike Ribble*

Mike Ribble (Lancaster) is a hard-drinking tent pitcher. His career as a famous trapeze artist ended years ago after attempting a triple somersault that gave him a permanent limp. Young acrobat Tino (Tony Curtis) tracks Mike down and asks him to teach him the dangerous stunt. At first, Mike refuses but is convinced by his ex-lover, Rosa (Katy Jurado). Mike and Tino have a shot at the big time, but the two men are driven apart by the scheming of Lola (Gina Lollobrigida), an Italian trampolinist.

It’s a classic adventure tale and, amongst a decade of noir and drama, makes for a refreshing change in the cinematic landscape of the era and Bogart’s roles. This isn’t the suave anti hero, but a shambling destitute character.

It was the third highest grossing film of 1956.

*“He was very tranquil and at times gave one the impression that his pale blues eyes dwelt in a different world.”*

Based on *The Killing Frost* (1950) by Max Catto

The film makes an interesting pairing with 1952’s *The Greatest Show on Earth*, but Circus and carnival-themed films in general were very popular during this time. Besides these two examples, there were *Lili* (1953) with Leslie Caron, *La Strada* and *Carnival Story* (both 1954), *The Bic Circus* (1959), *The Big Show* (1961) and *The Main Attraction* (1962) starring heart throb Pat Boone. Also worth mentioning are *Billy Rose’s Jumbo* and *Circus World* (1964).

It is no surprise that his background as a trapeze artist came into play here. Lancaster was 42 at the time of production and performed all but one of the trapeze stunts himself and even insisted on doing the climactic triple somersault. The one stunt the studio pushed back on was during the climax with technical adviser Eddie Ward hesitant on Lancaster performing the stunt. Ward doubled for him during the first weeks of shooting and then director Sir Carol Reed eventually hired Lancaster’s longtime friend, stuntman Nick Cravat to perform the stunt.

Even in black and white the film works. A mark of the incredible cinematography and promo stills you will find.

Some overlooked classics include: *Sorry, Wrong Number* (1948), *Kiss the Blood Off My Hands* (1948), *Criss Cross* (1949), *Gunfight at the O.K. Corral* (1957) and Robert Aldrich’s overlooked Western *Vera Cruz* from 1954.

One of his finest performances and most personal roles in *The Swimmer* (1968). I say personal as the film reflects the mindset of a man going through a failing marriage and a relationship he was deeply unhappy with. There are some rumours that Lancaster was homosexual but was never proven despite his second wife saying it was true. Most people put it down to his liberal views and



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how supportive he was of the gay community; Rock Hudson being a close friend and whose ‘parties’ he would attend.

Other films in the later stages of his career include the Western *Ulzana’s Raid* (1972), *Local Hero* (1983), and *Tough Guys* (1986), which reunited him with Kirk Douglas – two aging Golden Age stars bringing an incredible amount of weight to this little gem of a film.

Final years...

Photographs during his later years are scarce which only emphasizes how important his privacy was.

His final movie was *Field of Dreams*, released in 1989, but his final performance came in 1991 with the TV mini-series *Separate But Equal*.

Watching interviews, Lancaster comes across as an honest individual who was didn’t beat around the bush when it came to expressing his political beliefs or that opinions on the state of the film industry.

*“I hate looking backward, but every once in a while it sneaks up on you.”* — Burt Lancaster  
Burt Lancaster died at his apartment in Century City, Los Angeles after having a third heart attack on October 20, 1994. His body was cremated, and his ashes were scattered under a large oak tree in Westwood Memorial Park, which is located in Westwood Village, California.