7:30 pm

ALEX FILM SOCIETY presents

JULY 26

Chrome-Plated Crime:

A Car-Crazy Film Noir Double Feature!

Films introduced by Alan K. Rode of the Film Noir Foundation

"She believes in two things - love and violence!"

So proclaimed posters for "Deadly is the Female", the spot-on original title for the acclaimed film noir better known as "Gun Crazy".

Influenced in part by the exploits of Depression-era outlaws Bonnie and Clyde, "Gun Crazy" was based on a short story by MacKinlay Kantor which appeared in *The Saturday Evening Post* in 1940. The screenplay, a more "violent expansion" of the short story, credits Kantor and Millard Kaufman, though the latter was actually a front for blacklisted writer Dalton Trumbo, a member of the famed "Hollywood 10."

"Gun Crazy" took femme fatale Annie Laurie Starr, played to fierce, smoldering perfection by Peggy Cummins, into action territory. This frightened Production Code chief Joe Breen, who had extensive say in the film's development to ensure that, among other things, the movie avoided the "glamorization" of violence. But did Breen succeed? Laurie seduces future husband Bart Tare (John Dall) during their first meeting by challenging him to a shoot-off. Before the harmless gun-obsessed Bart knows it, he's caught up in Laurie's world, donning disguises, stealing cars, robbing banks and running from the law in what the Los Angeles Times called "hell on wheels."

Cars play a particularly vital role in "Gun Crazy". In 86 minutes, Laurie and Bart snatch no fewer than three vehicles, and one has gone down in film history for the groundbreaking way it was utilized. The couple drives into a mid-American town (actually what is now the Montrose Shopping Park), looking for a spot to pull over in front of a bank. The three and a half minute sequence was filmed in one take from the back of a 1949 Kaiser. How? Well, the crew removed the back seat, replaced it with boards and a jockey saddle, and squeezed in five people. The boards were greased, which allowed the camera to focus on the couple and also pan for a view outside when trouble comes along, a technique which places the audience in the car and perfectly captures the anxiety and adrenaline of the situation. To further the feeling of realism, the scene was almost entirely improvised, and only the principal actors and those inside the bank knew what was going on – when a woman screams there's been a robbery afterwards, that was actually a real bystander!

Though produced within B-movie territory – "Gun Crazy" was shot in 30 days for $500,000 – the movie still packs a punch and has stood the test of time: In 1998, "Gun Crazy" was selected for preservation in the Library of Congress' National Film Registry, having been determined "culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant."

Kim Luperi http://www.isecadarktheater.com/ Twitter: @kimbo3200

SOURCES: TCM.com articles on the movie: http://www.tcm.com/tcmdb/title/77083/Gun-Crazy/articles.html
The Best American Noir of the Century, edited by James Ellroy and Otto Penzler. *Gun Crazy* by Jim Kitses

Alan K. Rode

Alan K. Rode is well-known to those who frequent the annual Noir City film festival at the American Cinematheque. Mr. Rode is the author of *Charles McGraw: Biography of a Film Noir Tough Guy* and a soon-to-be-published bio of Michael Curtiz. He is a director of the Film Noir Foundation and producer of the Arthur Lyons Film Noir Festival, which is held each May in Palm Springs. His commentary may be heard on numerous DVD releases of classic films.

"There's never been a guy like Dancer. He's a wonderful, pure pathological study... a psychopath with no inhibitions."

-- Robert Keith to Richard Jaeckel in "The Lineup"

Seldom have the words "wonderful" and "pure" been used to describe a movie psychopath, but Julian's (Robert Keith) description of his assassin/bag man partner Dancer (Eli Wallach) is spot on. Wallach, in the performance following his theatrical film debut in Elia Kazan's "Baby Doll" (1956), displays a cool, sophisticated veneer as he begins a routine assignment to collect illicit drugs hidden in the luggage of unsuspecting tourists returning from overseas. Subtle hints of menace and anger gradually become more blatant as the mission unravels over the course of an afternoon.

Julian and Dancer pursue their innocent prey with the unapologetic intensity of sharks – their hunt becomes embodied in their means of transportation – a 1957 Plymouth Belvedere. Loaded with chrome and displaying fins suggesting both sharks and rocket ships, the gangsters' car becomes a menacing character as it cruises the streets of San Francisco en route to its next victim, navigating the city as easily as Jack Bauer crisscrosses Los Angeles in "24".

The streets of the San Francisco circa 1958 are used to great advantage. Nob Hill, the Embarcadero, Steinhart Aquarium – typically thought of as benign tourist attractions by visitors, take on sinister qualities as they become crime scenes. Both the Golden Gate and Bay bridges figure prominently as backdrops for illicit activities along the waterfront.

The most striking visual treat of the film is the sequence filmed within the Sutro Baths, which was adjacent to the Cliff House at the western extremity of the city. Originally opening in 1896, it was a phantasmagorical water park comprising seven indoor salt water swimming pools encased by massive glass roofs. By the mid-fifties one pool had been converted to a skating rink. Dancer enters a building filled with happy ice skaters and schoolchildren on field trips and leaves it transformed into yet another scene of mayhem and violence.

If you're ever curious about the make, model or year of a car appearing in a classic film, consult the Internet Movie Car Database – www.imcdb.org