

TREASURES FROM THE YALE FILM ARCHIVE

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THE HUSTLER

SUNDAY
APRIL 7, 2019
2 PM • WHITNEY
HUMANITIES CENTER

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PAUL L. JOSKOW '70 M.PHIL., '72 PH.D.



THE HUSTLER is often categorized as a “sports movie,” which is accurate to an extent: much of it takes place at pool tables, and director Robert Rossen conveys the excitement and, despite the grim settings, the *elegance* of the sport. The early marathon battle between “Fast” Eddie Felson (Paul Newman) and Minnesota Fats (Jackie Gleason) features many complicated pool shots that are fascinating to experience. Newman, who had never held a cue, learned enough to do most of his shots, with technical advisor Willie Mosconi standing in for some close-ups. Gleason, amazingly, performed all of his shots, as can be seen by the camera positioning. Rossen and the actors were aided admirably by editor Dede Allen, who, as Roger Ebert observed, “finds a rhythm in the pool games—the players circling, the cue sticks, the balls, the watching faces—that implies the trance-like rhythm of the players.”



But there is much more. In Rossen’s words: “Fast Eddie wants to become a great pool player, but the film is really about the obstacles he encounters in attempting to fulfill himself as a human being.” (The same could be said of John Garfield’s boxer in Rossen’s debut as a director, *BODY AND SOUL*, 1947.) Eddie begins as a cocky, superficial hustler (“I’m the best you ever seen, Fats... Even if you beat me I’m still the best.”) with no evident morality. Will he develop a conscience and a soul? For Rossen, the issue of conscience (and guilt) may have been personal: in 1951 he had refused to cooperate with HUAC, leading to his being blacklisted; in 1953, he “named names” and his blacklisting ended.

Rossen and co-scriptwriter Sidney Carroll convey Eddie’s potential evolution partly through their greatest departure from Walter Tevis’s 1959 novel: the significance of Eddie’s relationship with Sarah Packard (Piper Laurie). One of the film’s essential scenes, a picnic in the park, has no equivalent in the novel. Occurring a little more than halfway through, it serves as a respite, removing Eddie, Sarah, and the audience, from the claustrophobic dark pool halls, shabby bars, and squalid apartments. It is here that Eddie, via a monologue written for the film, expresses how he becomes transformed when playing pool, convincing Sarah that he is a winner.

Rossen filmed over six weeks, mostly in and around Manhattan, including Ames Billiard Academy (off of Times Square), the old Greyhound Bus terminal, and “Hell’s Kitchen” (West 50s). THE HUSTLER is in black-and-white, common in 1961 for gritty subjects. And although the choice of CinemaScope—the widescreen (2.35:1 ratio, width to height) process that had been used mainly for color spectacles—may seem contradictory, Rossen employs it effectively: isolating characters on the edges of frames, creating distances between people, and taking advantage of CinemaScope’s de-emphasis on verticality to enhance the constriction of the interiors.

THE HUSTLER was a commercial success, and was nominated for nine Oscars, winning two: Cinematography and Art Direction. Piper Laurie, who had been in largely mediocre films since her 1950 debut and had not made a film in four years, received her only Best Actress Oscar nomination. Supporting Actor nominations went to both Jackie Gleason—whose remarkably restrained performance is almost a 180-turn from his rambunctious loudmouth on TV’s *THE HONEYMOONERS*—and George C. Scott, who follows up on the snakelike persona he had displayed two years earlier in *ANATOMY OF A MURDER*.

Above all, the film was a big boost to Paul Newman. He had been a movie star since 1954, and already been Oscar-nominated for *CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF*. But it was Fast Eddie Felson that set him on the road to becoming *the* immoral-yet-charming anti-hero of the 1960s, a status cemented by *HUD*, *HARPER*, *COOL HAND LUKE*, and *BUTCH CASSIDY AND THE SUNDANCE KID*. In 1961, Maximilian Schell (*JUDGMENT AT NUREMBERG*) prevailed over Newman for Best Actor, but 25 years later Newman finally won his only competitive Academy Award: playing Fast Eddie in Martin Scorsese’s sequel, *THE COLOR OF MONEY*.

DIRECTED BY **ROBERT ROSSEN**
SCREENPLAY BY **SIDNEY CARROLL AND ROBERT ROSSEN**
CINEMATOGRAPHY BY **EUGENE SHUFTAN**
PRODUCED BY **20TH CENTURY FOX**
(1961) 134 MINS.
STARRING **PAUL NEWMAN, JACKIE GLEASON, PIPER LAURIE, GEORGE C. SCOTT, MYRON McCORMICK, AND MURRAY HAMILTON**

DID YOU KNOW: LOOK FOR VINCENT GARDENIA (LATER OSCAR-NOMINATED FOR *BANG THE DRUM SLOWLY AND MOONSTRUCK*) AS THE BARTENDER IN THE OPENING SCENE; AND FORMER BOXING CHAMPION JAKE LAMOTTA (LATER THE SUBJECT OF *RAGING BULL*) AS ANOTHER BARTENDER, WHO HAS ONLY THREE LINES, EACH CONSISTING OF THE WORD “CHECK!”

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