

Fury

By Raquel Stecher

Joe Wilson is an everyman. He works hard, keeps out of trouble, plans to marry his girl and his only vice is his penchant for eating peanuts. Joe's life is on the right track until he finds himself in the wrong place at the wrong time. He's been accused of kidnapping; a crime that's been making headlines and instilling fear into the hearts of locals. A crime he didn't commit. With increasing pressure to find the culprit, law enforcement is quick to throw Joe into the county jail. When the sheriff starts to change his mind it's already too late. Gossip has spread, accusations have been made and the townspeople demand justice. The town has gathered as a mob outside the jailhouse and they come armed with their brute force and explosive anger. They infiltrate the jail and set it ablaze trapping Joe inside while his girlfriend Kate watches in horror. They write him off as dead but he escapes. He is very much alive and now he wants revenge.

"Fury" (1936) was director Fritz Lang's first foray into American cinema. Having fled from Nazi Germany in the early 1930s, Lang had a brief stint in France where he made the film "Liliom" (1932). One would think that celebrated director, best known for acclaimed films such as "Metropolis" (1927), "M" (1931) and the Dr. Mabuse films, would be received by Hollywood with open arms but that wasn't the case. He was idle for a couple of years, waiting for a project. Lang decided to take a roadtrip through the American west. He wanted to get a sense of the culture and to better learn the language. He returned Hollywood with a goal of finding a film to direct. And that film would be "Fury."

On November 27th, 1933 in San Jose, California, two people, accused of kidnapping and murdering a department store heir, were lynched by an angry mob. Hundreds were involved but only one person was indicted and those charges were cleared the following year. MGM writer Norman Krasna, fascinated by the story, pitched the idea to screenwriter Joseph L. Mankiewicz. Tentatively titled "Mob Rule" the film sparked Lang's interest. Mankiewicz had his sights on directing but when Louis B. Mayer appointed Mankiewicz as producer instead, Lang was appointed as director.



Sylvia Sidney and Spencer Tracy. Library of Congress Collection

Before the film became "Fury," the story went through several hands. Krasna came up with the original idea, Mankiewicz started off the project with a 10-page treatment, Leonard Praskins worked with Lang on story development and Bartlett Cormack gave the film its dialogue. While everyone had a hand in the project, it was Mankiewicz who saw the screenplay's development from start to finish and who came to the conclusion that the principal character must be an ordinary man. Krasna would later be nominated for an Academy Award for best original screenplay for "Fury" even though he did very little of the actual writing.

Joe (Spencer Tracy) and Kate (Sylvia Sidney) are everyday people in an extraordinary situation. The film is a mirror reflecting an image of people like ourselves. We empathize with these characters and this makes what happens to them even more horrifying in our eyes. What happens to Joe and Kate could happen to anyone and this is what makes the film so powerful.

"Fury" shines a spotlight on social justice by exploring social injustice. It's a time capsule; a look into a period of time when public lynchings were still common. It was a time when people wanted to see criminals punished publicly in front of their own eyes. "Fury" explores the public's urgent need for swift punishment and the media's exploitation of crime to tantalize readers.

Mob mentality has been examined in numerous movies throughout film history but few depict mobs being punished for their collective crime. "Fury" is an MGM but it's more characteristic of the political and social films Warner Bros. made during the same era. It takes a critical look at corporal punishment and highlights the flaws in the American justice system. With the Hays Code in strict enforcement in 1936, it was necessary for the film to end a certain way. Joe was only pretending to be dead so the mob he took to court, with the help of his brothers, have to be acquitted. The film's happy ending, a meeting and reconciliation between fiancées Joe and Kate, was typical of studio era films.

"Fury" is one of a trio of socially minded films directed by Fritz Lang and starring Sylvia Sydney, including "You Only Live Once" (1937) and "You and Me" (1938). Sydney was very influential in helping Lang get his start in Hollywood and was willing to take a pay cut in order to work with him. It was a different story for Spencer Tracy who never worked with Lang again after "Fury." However, the film did wonders for Tracy's career. His performance demonstrated his range as an actor. We see his portrayal of Joe morph from an innocent and loveable guy into an embittered man thirsty for revenge. Other notable cast members of "Fury" include Bruce Cabot, Walter Brennan, Walter Abel, Frank Albertson and Terry, who plays Rainbow the dog and went on to capture hearts around the world as Toto in "The Wizard of Oz" (1939).

"Fury" was Lang's favorite of his American film and it reminded him of his German film "M," also famous for a mob scene. While "Fury" received great reviews it did poorly at the box office. Lang would go

on to have a very mixed career; hopping from studio to studio and genre to genre. He never quite got the hang of Hollywood and eventually went back to Europe towards end of his career.

It's a film timeless in its general themes and historical in its more specific ones. It launched the second leg of the great Fritz Lang's career and serves as a fine example of the effectiveness of good storytelling and of a bygone era in film.

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Raquel Stecher writes for Out of the Past: A Classic Film Blog (www.outofthepastblog.com). She's covered events including the TCM Classic Film Festival and Fathom Events screenings as a member of the press. She enjoys watching classic films on the big screen and at home and loves reading about the golden age of Hollywood. Raquel has a Bachelor of Arts in English from Northeastern University and Master of Arts in Writing, Literature and Publishing from Emerson College and currently works in the book industry.