

The Hitch-Hiker

By Wheeler Winston Dixon

This essay includes brief excerpts from Dixon's article on the career of Ida Lupino in the journal [Senses of Cinema 50](#) (April, 2009)

When Ida Lupino directed the low-budget suspense film "The Hitch-Hiker," she was the only woman working as a director in Hollywood. Cinematic pioneer Dorothy Arzner had been directing since the 1920s, but in 1943, when she fell ill during the production of "First Comes Courage," Arzner's strikingly feminist tale of the Norwegian resistance during World War II, she was summarily replaced and never made another feature film. Thus, when Arzner was forced into retirement, there were no women directing in Hollywood.

As far as the major studios were concerned, women were supposedly not "reliable" enough to helm a feature film. Never mind that the film industry had been started largely by women, such as Alice Guy, Cleo Madison, Ida May Park, Ruth Stonehouse, Dorothy Davenport Reid, Lois Weber, and many others; by 1920, women had been exiled from the director's chair. But that wasn't going to stop someone as determined as Ida Lupino, who later told an interviewer that "believe me, I've fought to produce and direct my own pictures [... I] always nursed a desire to direct pictures."

Born in England, Lupino began her career as an actor, appearing in a series of trifling British "B" films in the early 1930s before coming to the United States under contract to Paramount Pictures. Recognizing her innate skill and maturity, Paramount abandoned plans to cast her as a juvenile and loaned her out for a long series of tough, unsentimental films. Lupino did not see her first real prestige project, "The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes" opposite Basil Rathbone as Holmes, until 1939. Her big break as an actor came in "The Light That Failed" (1940), in which she played a Cockney guttersnipe opposite Ronald Colman, earning her rave reviews. This was followed by a string of rough and tumble films including "They Drive By Night" (1940), "High Sierra" (1941), and "The Hard Way" (1943), for which the New York Film Critics Association honored her as best actress. By then, Lupino was becoming more



Crazed hitch-hiker William Talman holds a gun to Frank Lovejoy's head and forces Edmond O'Brien to drive the getaway car. Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.

interested in what was happening on the other side of the camera.

During her career as an actress at Warner Bros., she began absorbing the technical details of her craft from such masters as Raoul Walsh and Michael Curtiz, as well as cameraman George Barnes. Lupino was feeling more and more limited working solely as an actor. Since no studio would bankroll her as a director, she left Warner Bros. and formed The Filmmakers, a small production company, and began tackling issues that no one else would touch. In 1949, she produced and ghost-directed "Not Wanted," a small, independent film about a young girl having a child out of wedlock; the film's nominal director, Elmer Clifton, suffered a minor heart attack shortly after filming began, and Lupino immediately stepped into the breach, though she received no directorial credit for the film.

With "Not Wanted" under her belt, Lupino plowed ahead and directed the nearly autobiographical "Never Fear" (1949), in which a young woman (Sally Forrest) is stricken with polio. Lupino had suffered and recovered from polio in 1934. This was followed by "Outrage" (1950), the first Hollywood film dealing with rape; "Hard, Fast and Beautiful" (1951) about domineering mother who pushes her daughter to become a tennis star; and then in 1953, "The Hitch-Hiker," easily her most brutal and most successful film as a director.

Based on the true crime story of William Cook who murdered six people during a hitchhiking "thrill kill" spree, "The Hitch-Hiker" is a mere 71 minutes long,

shot in stark black and white for the most part on location in the California desert. Lupino took on the project as yet another film that was too “hot” for the major studios to touch, and the filming of “The Hitch-Hiker,” torn from the headlines as it was, got a great deal of press attention. Then, too, as a woman directing in Hollywood, Lupino was something of a curiosity. For her director of cinematography, Lupino chose the gifted noir stylist Nicholas Musuraca, whose brilliant, chiaroscuro camerawork is perfectly suited to the project. The film was shot under extremely difficult circumstances. The budget was little more than \$100,000.

“The Hitch-Hiker” opens with a series of anonymous, off-screen murders as psycho killer Emmett Myers (William Talman) hitches rides from unsuspecting tourists and then brutally slaughters them at gunpoint, even as the credits continue to roll. Myers continues to thumb more rides, and is soon picked up by the unsuspecting Roy Collins (Edmond O’Brien) and Gilbert Bowen (Frank Lovejoy), two men out on a vacation fishing trip. For the rest of the film, as Myers forces the two men to drive him to the Mexican border, Lupino creates an atmosphere of nonstop suspense; will they live, or will Myers kill them both once his objective has been achieved?

Lupino stages “The Hitch-Hiker” in a series of claustrophobic close-ups, wide-shots that emphasize the inhospitality of the desert terrain, and lighting strategies that favor shafts of light in the darkness of the desert night, or else slightly overexposed shots to convey the heart of the desert during the daytime. There is an atmosphere of real violence in the film – not only in the subject matter, but also in Lupino’s relentless pacing, hyperkinetic camera set-ups, and her intense use of oppressive close-ups to heighten the film’s suspense. This is the American nightmare of senseless violence on the rampage, and if anything, the film is more relevant today than when first released. The end result is a film of almost unbearable intensity, made all the more effective by Talman’s superb performance as the deranged gunman.

Lupino was given the opportunity to direct only two more feature films: “The Bigamist” (1953), a rather

maudlin and simplistic tale of adultery in which she also starred; and the surprisingly effective coming-of-age comedy/drama “The Trouble with Angels” (1966). She remained much in demand as a television director, working on some of the most violent series then in production, including “Have Gun, Will Travel,” “The Untouchables,” and “The Rifleman.” Her last directorial credit was an episode of “The Ghost and Mrs. Muir” in 1968. As an actor, she continued on until 1978, working in both television and theatrical motion pictures.

Tough but effective on set – telling one difficult actor “darling, we have a three day schedule. There’s no time to do anything but to do it” – Lupino was the consummate professional. To win over the mostly male crews with which she worked, Lupino admitted, “Often I pretended to a cameraman to know less than I did. That way I got more cooperation.” She despaired that more women weren’t working as directors and producers, and encouraged those who attempted it.

Today, that fight is still going on, and while women now routinely direct television shows, women directors in theatrical motion pictures are still a rare breed. Lupino was the first woman filmmaker in the modern era to break through this barrier while creating work that bore the stamp of her own personal vision, and “The Hitch-Hiker,” long overdue for recognition as one of the great suspense thrillers of all time, is one of her finest works.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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