

ShortCutToHellJamesCagneyWilliamBishop1957TextTVS

by Tim Van Schmidt

Short Cut to Hell ***

At some point while watching "Short Cut to Hell," I thought that if this movie had been made and released in the 21st Century, it would be considered a kind of masterpiece. Its highly stylized form alone- a crisp black and white with carefully planned settings and lighting effects- would raise eyebrows because, well, they just don't make them that way anymore. The gritty story, hard-edged characters and engaging details then would be hailed as a distillation of the crime genre movie, featuring terse, matter-of-fact action with an active, even thrilling soundtrack being busy in the background. It would be called an artful homage to film noir.

The quality inherent in "Short Cut to Hell" must be the work of director James Cagney. Cagney would know all about crime movie-making from the inside out as an actor. This is his only directorial effort and he keeps a brisk pace throughout. Film noir had been established a long time before this, so Cagney must have known all the tricks and made sure he used them in this tight little package.

Added to this are the distinctive performances by the lead actors- Georgann Johnson and Robert Ivers. Johnson plays an outgoing singer who gets kidnapped by Ivers' character, a killer seeking revenge on a former associate for a double-crossing deal. Johnson is the liveliest thing in the production- much more so than her big, stiff detective boyfriend- and comes on like a gust of fresh air. Ivers creates the opposite kind of character- a brooding, snarling loner- and the two mix like oil and water. However, their interaction affects both of them as the action winds up on the wrong side of a bullet.

The movie is full of flavorful details- from the shadows on the walls during some scenes to the cool factory setting in others to an old newspaper dating an air raid shelter. Distinctive details are also built into the story, like the "Fat Man" nickname and his peppermint patties. There are also some really great lines. Johnson delivers one right in the kisser when she tells her boyfriend "Well, here's one for your mother!" Ivers spits out the most arresting line, however, when he admits "I'm not a person, I'm a gun."

The inevitable ending falls kind of flat- once the chase is over, there isn't much else to do- but for the most part, "Short Cut to Hell" delivers an entertaining ride.

Directed by James Cagney...1957...89 min...featuring William Bishop, Robert Ivers, Georgann Johnson.