

CZECH NOIR FEST HITS ITS STRIDE

Křivoklát—CZECH REPUBLIC. The sun was shining brightly, but the movies were as dark as ever. The 5th edition of the Czech Noir Film Festival was again brought to life by its enthusiastic host, Vitek Grigartzik—and it was another success story for what has become Europe’s most thoughtful annual presentation of international noir, catering to an audience of experienced movie lovers and those who are watching noir for the first time. Programmers Jana Bébarová and Milan Hain exert much research and organizational talent to craft a program that works for both groups. With tributes to Humphrey Bogart, Robert Mitchum, Lizabeth Scott, and Alfred Hitchcock, a variety of classics were shown which are known in Europe to more than cinema aficionados. Jacques Tourneur’s *Out of the Past* (1947), Alfred Hitchcock’s *Notorious* (1946), and Nicholas Ray’s *In a Lonely Place* (1950) received evening screenings in either the ancient Crown Hall or in the atmospheric courtyard of Křivoklát castle.

Ah, yes—the location. The festival is held in a huge medieval castle amidst the Bohemian woods south of Prague, and this is what makes the Czech Noir Film Festival one of a kind. Taking a seat in that courtyard after dark—with bats flying low and summer’s late blossom in the air—provides a dose of magic. Czech audiences are enthusiastic about the festival. Although I arrived the evening before the event started, some screenings had already sold out in advance. The festival’s staff admitted they did not expect *Too Late for Tears* (1949), *Conflict* (1945), and *Lady on a Train* (1945) to draw so much attention. The latter belonged to a section entitled “Trains in Film Noir,” further comprised of *The Narrow Margin* (1952), *Human Desire* (1954), and *The Tall Target* (1951).

Another special segment dedicated to “Mexican Noir” included *The Other One* [*La otra*] (1946), *The Kneeling Goddess* [*La diosa arrodillada*] (1947), and *The Adventuress* [*Aventurera*] (1950). “I wonder how the audience will react to this different type of film noir,” Milan Hain said as we entered the screening of *Aventurera*. No fear: Alberto Gout’s emotional rollercoaster ride, with Cuban dancer and actress Ninón Sevilla in a trademark role, was given extensive applause by the sold-out crowd. Several Hollywood noirs were also screened to highlight America’s relationship with its slightly exotic neighbor “South of El Paso.” John Farrow’s



The atmospheric medieval Křivoklát castle — noir screenings amidst the Bohemian woods south of Prague

Where Danger Lives (1950), Robert Montgomery’s *Ride the Pink Horse* (1947), and Anthony Mann’s *Border Incident* (1949) made a fascinating counterpoint in the collection.

I did not expect much from “Czech Noir,” but I was wrong. Veronika Zýková, digging into her country’s archives, presented films that truly surprised me. Protagonists haunted by their past, shady characters who are not what they seem to be, a guilt-ridden husband and father, plus the always alluring *femme fatale* and detective with strange habits ... all these were present in Czechoslovakian films such as *Game without Rules* (1967), in which a police officer, fallen from grace after he caused a fatal incident, four years later digs into that old case, now as a taxi driver. *Conscience* (1948), *Hope* (1963), and *Ninety Degrees in the Shade* (1965) rounded out this impressive string of Czech crime and noir films, barely known in the Western

world up until now.

Filling out the program were screenings of HBO’s amazing Czech series *Wasteland* (2016), created by Alice Nellis and Ivan Zachariáš, and a special screening of Steven Zaillian’s *The Night Of* (2016). This year’s Czech Noir Film Festival proved to be an exceptionally sinister edition. Between movies, I filled up on black coffee, vegetarian tortillas or pancakes, and chats with Czech and international noir lovers, talking over camera angles, screenwriters, and the future of what is not merely a tradition for many, but a way of looking at the world. As for next year—Nordic Noir? Heist classics? Whatever the theme of the Czech Noir Film Festival, I’m sure Vitek Grigartzik’s wonderful team will prove once again that film noir is an essential part of contemporary culture.

—Matthias Merkelbach