

Brattle Theatre Film Notes: *Out of the Past*

(
USA, 1947. Not Rated. 97 min.
Cast: Robert Mitchum, Jane Greer,
Kirk Douglas, Rhonda Fleming; Music:
Roy Webb; Cinematographer:
Nicholas Musuraca; Novel: Daniel
Mainwaring; Producer: Warren
Duff; Director: Jacques Tourneur
)

"I don't want to die," a desperate Kathie Moffat (Greer) tells Jeff Bailey (Mitchum) in *Out of the Past*.

"Neither do I," he responds, "but if I have to I'm gonna die last."

Aside from being a clever exchange, this is one of those moments that is so quintessentially noir it needs to be written down in a reference book somewhere (if it hasn't already been). It gives us both the tough, world-weary resignation of the doomed hard-boiled hero, and the wariness with which he has learned to approach the duplicitous heroine. And nearly every component of *Out of the Past* has this quality: the expressionistic shot composition of director Tourneur; the constantly twisting plot; the violent but honorable hero; the smoldering femme fatale; the smooth, ruthless villain. It is so much the definition of noir, in fact, that it seems fair to say if you don't like *Out of the Past*, you probably don't like the genre at all.

Jeff seems to be a likeable enough hero when we first meet him, and a somewhat atypical one, too. He isn't lurking on some dark city street in a fedora and trench coat. Instead, he's lounging in the woods with the wholesome Ann (Huston), clad in a hunter's wool coat, smoking cigarettes and talking about clouds – not where you find most movie tough guys. But Jeff has a past that has little in common with this bucolic setting. And because this is a film noir, his past is more than just a collection of events that happened once, somewhere else. Because this is a film noir, the things he once did, the people he once knew, and the secrets he keeps are like his shadow, never far behind and impossible to shake. When a big

city stranger named Joe (Valentine) rolls into town asking for Bailey, that past catches up.

The movie really tells two stories. The first is the past to which the title refers, and we experience it in an extended flashback as Jeff confesses to Ann during a drive to a reunion with gangster Whit Sterling (Douglas). Jeff, who was once known as Jeff Markham, explains that Joe works for Whit. It happens that Jeff himself also once worked for Whit, not on his regular payroll but for one job: tracking down and bringing home Kathie, the moll who, Whit claimed, had made off with \$40,000 of his money and shot him in the stomach for kicks. Jeff tracked her to Mexico easily enough, but as soon as he got a look at her he knew he was in that usual film noir spot: over his head.



Kathie, it goes without saying, is a beauty, all doe eyes, pouting lips and supple come-ons. It doesn't take long for flirtation to blossom on love, complete with walks on the beach, mad dashes through rainstorms to the shelter of Acapulcan love nests, and desperate plans to escape Whit's clutches. Whit, Kathie insisted, was a monster who'd surely kill her if he ever found her. Oh, and she never took any \$40,000, either; that was a lie. "How big a chump can you be?" Jeff asks in the weary voiceover. "I was finding out." Suffice it to say things become complicated and Kathie's innocence proves as negotiable as her love. She and Jeff part ways suddenly, leaving only hurt feelings and a grisly secret between them. But does Jeff still love Kathie? That's what Ann wants to know when

he finishes with his story, and Jeff says he does not. Certainly he has no reason to love her, having peered into the dark corners of her treacherous little heart and seen the lengths to which she'd go to protect herself. So no, he insists, that love died long ago. The poor sap probably believes it, too.

The second part of the story, of course, follows Jeff's efforts to extricate himself from old debts, forgotten loves and unhealed wounds, and the twists do pile up. But no matter how many murders, crosses and double-crosses we're led through, we get the sinking feeling that Jeff can only be headed back to Kathie's arms. She's no good, we know that, and certainly Jeff knows it better than anyone. The crucial scene comes in a cabin in the woods when she stands against a wall, dramatically uplit and cornered, watching Jeff in a fistfight. She's beautiful in the scene, irresistible, but she has an undeniable animal quality, her eyes wide and hungry and her mouth on the edge of a sadistic smile. She watches the fight rooting not for Jeff, but for herself, and when the time comes she ends it decisively. She does what animals do when they're cornered.

Ultimately, *Out of the Past* is a movie so perfectly executed it deserves to be enjoyed more than studied. Look for Mitchum's stylish performance when he pays an unannounced visit to a nightclub to retrieve a crucial briefcase. Savor the dialogue – mean ("Just get out, will you?" Jeff spits at Kathie when she comes into his bedroom. "I have to sleep in here."), funny ("My feelings?" Whit asks Jeff. "About 10 years ago I hid them somewhere and I haven't been able to find them."), and biting ("You're like a leaf that the wind blows from one gutter to another," Jeff sneers at Kathie.). Enjoy Greer's definitive performance as the calculating, desperate but not quite evil Kathie. Because, as Jeff would tell you, in this cold, hard world, these fleeting pleasures are all we have before the black hand of fate comes to punish us for our sins.

- Lawrence Fahey