



***This Gun for Hire* is a forthcoming LVCA dvd donation to the Ligonier Valley Library of Ligonier, Pennsylvania. Below is Kino Ken's review of that dvd film.**

12 of a possible 20 points = * above-average film**

**United States 1942 black-and-white 81 minutes live action feature film noir
Paramount Pictures Inc. Producer: Richard Blumenthal
a Universal Studios dvd release**

**Key: *indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance
(j) designates a juvenile performer**

Points:

- 1 Direction: Frank Tuttle**
- 1 Editing: Archie Marshek**
- 2 Cinematography: John Seitz***
Still Photography: Mal Bulloch
- 2 Lighting**
Special Visual Effects: Farciot Edouart, Gordon Jennings, William Pereira
- 0 Screenplay: Frank Tuttle, Albert Maltz and W. R. Burnett from the novel
by Graham Greene**
- 1 Music: David Buttolph**
Orchestrations: George Parrish, Walter Scharf and Leo Shuken
Songs: "I've Got You" and "Now You See It"

Music: Jacques Press Lyrics: Frank Loesser*

1 Production Design: Lynd Ward

Art Direction: Hans Dreier and Robert Usher

Gowns: Edith Head*

Makeup: Wally Westmore

2 Sound Recording: John Cope* and Philip Wisdom*

1 Acting

1 Creativity

12 total points

Cast: Alan Ladd* (Philip Raven, a murderer), Veronica Lake* (Ellen Graham), Robert Preston (Lieutenant Michael Crane), Laird Cregar (William Gates), Tully Marshall (Alvin Brewster), Mikhail Rasumny (Sluky, slingshot booth) Marc Lawrence (Tommy, Gates's bodyguard), Pamela Blake (Annie), Harry Shannon (Steve Finnerty), Frank Ferguson (Albert Baker), Bernadene Hayes (Baker's secretary), Olin Howland (Blair Fletcher), Roger Imhof* (Senator Burnett), Patricia Farr (Ruby), James Farley (night watchman), Virita Campbell (j)* (crippled girl), Victor Kilian (Brewster's secretary), Charles Wilson (police captain), Mary Davenport (salesgirl), Earle Dewey (Mr. Collins), Lynda Grey (Gates's secretary), Emmett Vogan (Charlie, a cop), Charles Arnt (Will Gates, dressmaker) Chester Clute (Mr. Stewart, rooming house manager), Dick Rush (Lieutenant Clark), Clem Bevans (scissor grinder), Harry Hayden (restaurant manager), Tim Ryan (Weems guard), Edwin Stanley (police captain), Elliott Sullivan (Officer Glennon), Sarah Padden (Mrs. Mason), Don Barclay (piano player), Richard Webb (young man), John Sheehan (Keever), Alan Speer (Frog), Cyril Ring (waiter), Fred Walburn (Walt), Robert Winkler (Jimmie), Yvonne De Carlo (special dancer at Neptune Club), others

***This Gun for Hire* is an early film noir drama from 1942, following soon after John Huston's *The Maltese Falcon*. Unlike the latter film, it didn't boast an A-list cast. Instead of Humphrey Bogart and Mary Astor, Frank Tuttle's lower-budget drama made do with first-time lead actor Alan Ladd and rising siren Veronica Lake, both of whom delivered highly impactful performances. Ladd's steely professional gunman and Lake's rivetingly seductive professional singer**

and magician intent to land a mate of settled habits are both flawlessly acted, much to the credit of director Frank Tuttle. This film was the first in which that popular teaming appeared. Two more Paramount productions with the duo succeeded it: *The Glass Key* in 1942 and *The Blue Dahlia* in 1946. The gap between them was occasioned by Ladd's on-again, off-again stints in the army. All three of those movies were noirs. Each proved a critical success, solidifying the genre as a newly minted Hollywood staple.

Based on a novel by Graham Greene with original British settings and characters relocated to the United States and Americanized, *This Gun for Hire* presented less of a maze for audiences to track through than *The Maltese Falcon* or Howard Hawks' 1946 *The Big Sleep*. With simpler plot and fewer double-crossing villains, Tuttle's film permitted watchers to concentrate on a subversive romance operating underneath the more socially palatable one involving Lake's Ellen Graham and her rather smug beau, Police Lieutenant Michael Crane.

Playing Crane as alternately business-like detective and infatuated swain, Robert Preston falls victim to a ludicrously ambivalent script which never decisively identifies its protagonist. Even though Ladd's vengeance-bent killer doesn't verbally get the girl in this crime saga's final reel, he does seem to obtain spiritual union with her at that point.

Philip Raven would be a disaster as father or homeowner. But he makes a far more dashing action hero than the dully earthbound lawman pursuing him.

As demanded by its genre, *This Gun for Hire* has plenty of night scenes, obscuring mist, a mysterious Mr. Big – Victor Kilian's Alvin Brewster – lacking any redeeming social qualities whatsoever, and enough gunshots to appease lovers of understated violence. Gore is kept invisible by prudent editing.

Yet one prime noir ingredient is missing: there's no *femme fatale*. For Raven has no innocence to lose unless it's his total ignorance of politics. Ellen gives him a crash course in treason and patriotism. Largely ignoring it, he proceeds to handle matters in his usual trigger-happy way afterwards.

Raven is initially established as a loner living in a sleazy boarding house. His treatment of personnel there is ruthless. A preferred cat, though, is handled more sensitively because cats bring him luck. Or so the sadistically-inclined renter later declares to Ellen.

He's being paid to wipe out a blackmailer. However, not before getting his hands on a coded chemical formula. Arriving at the Albert Baker's apartment, Raven finds a second person inside. So she is silenced forever as well as her employer. The unrepentant hired gun leaves that crime scene devoid of remorse.

His departure is interrupted by a lame girl, who asks him to retrieve a ball she dropped on the stairs. That simple request has to be pondered by the criminal at length before he condescends to do as she asked. Helping others isn't normal activity for Raven. He's someone more comfortable abusing folks.

After passing along his lawlessly obtained document to Laird Cregar's peppermint-sucking middleman at a prearranged restaurant appointment, Raven receives an envelope full of ten dollar bills. All have been already designated as stolen from the murdered paymaster of Alvin Brewster's Nitro Chemical Company and reported to the police as missing. As the secretive pair discuss procedural details of a hitman's successful undertaking, another man enters the establishment. He asks the portlier individual sitting at Raven's table if he is not William Gates of Los Angeles. The mint enthusiast vehemently denies that identification.

He's lying, however. The man listening to their conversation knows it. What he isn't yet alert to is that he's walked into a trap.

Gates excuses himself and leaves shortly after his interlocutor. He's already nauseated by exposure to Raven's pitiless candor about his operations and quite eager to leave such uncomfortable company.

Paid off in full and not yet suspecting trickery, the lover of cats travels to a San Francisco shop. There he makes a purchase from his supply of ten dollar bills. Within seconds of his exit, an excited salesgirl who rang his sale learns to her consternation the money handed over to her is, in fact, stolen goods.

She informs police, who arrive post haste on the scene. Their lead investigator is Lieutenant Michael Crane, who happens to be romantically entangled with magician-singer Ellen Graham.

The men in blue then get a second hot tip from two newsboys who spotted Raven nearby and hastened to share their discovery with tracking officers.

Belatedly, the casual bill-passer realizes he's being played for a sucker when he overhears conversation about the miscarried paymaster money and a man whose wrist is scarred. Rats! Gates and a fellow strategist must have plotted

publicizing such a connection to eliminate a no longer useful pistol packer and recover their financial outlay. Driven by desire for revenge, Raven resolves to hunt down both of them.

Meanwhile, Ellen Graham auditions for The Neptune nightclub's owner, William Gates, and what might be a booking agent in San Francisco. Her combination of sultry singing and kinetic prestidigitation wows both of them. She lands a gig at The Neptune in Los Angeles.

Gates, presumably merely in San Francisco to pay off Philip Raven, apparently can't resist mixing business with pleasure. Having taken personal interest in Miss Graham, he makes arrangements to ride a night train back to L.A. where he will take his new hire to a private dinner at his residence.

Ellen must first take leave of boyfriend Lieutenant Michael Crane, a detective who's come up to San Francisco either because (pick one) A. he's been recruited by that city's police to take charge of their investigation into a local payroll robbery cum murder or else B. he's a Los Angeles off-duty detective visiting his girlfriend in the Bay City and gets called into the case cited above because the crime involved cash from a company base in L.A. Plotting here is wildly irrational, a problem that will persist throughout the story.

Before she can bid a fond farewell to Michael, Ellen is tracked down by Senator Burnett. He heads a committee probing possible connections between defense company contractors and wartime foe Japan. The senator has some evidence Nitro is acting as a treasonous conveyor of military secrets. Gates is somehow involved. Precise evidence as to how is lacking. Could Ellen fulfill her patriotic obligation to Uncle Sam and extract proof of such treachery by her new employer? Of course.

Keep in mind Mr. Raven is also dogging the Nitro manager at this point.

So all three: Ellen, Gates and Raven board the same southbound passenger train for the City of Angels. Yet another plot-driven unnatural coincidence. As if credibility is still not strained sufficiently, songstress and triggerman wind up in adjacent seats of an economy-class coach. Making even cozier contact, Raven picks the pocketbook of his chance companion, adding another crime to a lengthy list of potential booking charges.

She catches on fast, though, compelling him to return a fiver swiped while at the same time beginning to fathom his likely underworld character.

Their relationship shifts into a more troubled one early the next morning when Gates, on the way to breakfast in a dining car, passes through their coach and sees the odd couple asleep next to each other. He incorrectly infers they are working together to somehow frame him. To foil any such plot, the traveler cables L.A.'s police department about Raven's looming arrival in their territory.

Before an arrest can be made, the intended hare escapes from the hounds by another stroke of luck, spotting bluecoats out the window before they see him. He grabs Ellen and proceeds towards the station platform, his gun pointing at her back, treating the woman as a kind of substitute minesweeper.

That device proves unnecessary. For a perfectly innocent traveler with a bandaged arm gets fastened upon first by overeager men of the law. Another lucky break for San Francisco's one-man crime spree.

Moments later, patrollers realize their mistake and resume chasing the proper suspect with his reluctant human shield. The two incoming visitors to town make their devious way to shelter in a ruined warehouse scheduled for demolition. There Raven plans to eliminate someone he regards as a Gates plant and informer.

However, his stratagem is interrupted by railway workmen who wonder what the strangers are doing on company property. They become alarmed when Ellen and Raven separate, the latter crashing through a window to reach safety.

Ellen, thoroughly shaken, reports to the site of her new job. She still has no inkling Gates set off a police search at the depot. Anyway, her assignment is to pump the Nitro executive for incriminating evidence. So she chooses to journey that evening to his house, which seems to be in foothills somewhere above the city. There he drugs her, then binds the unconscious woman and turns her over to bodyguard Tommy for fatal disposal.

Before that can be achieved however, Crane pays a visit. Tommy tosses Ellen's incriminating monogrammed pocketbook out one of the windows where, after frustrating visit to the wrong Willard Gates listed in an L.A. phone directory, it's retrieved by Raven. He's hit pay dirt on a second trial.

After unexpected encounter with Gates's hapless salaried defender, the interloper sends his adversary tumbling down a flight of stairs. He soon thereafter locates Tommy's slowly reviving victim. After untying her, Raven communicates what happened after a not particularly romantic conversation over cocktails.

The two erstwhile traveling companions next head back to The Neptune, where Crane is trying to grill Gates about Ellen's whereabouts.

Approaching their destination, the pair of fugitives are detected by a seemingly jilted lover, who's diverted into racing after them while Gates, updated about events by a recovered Tommy, absents himself from the premises.

Ellen and Raven flee back to the railroad yards.

Because the endangered woman leaves a path of clues with bread crumbs and smeared lipstick, police shadow them and establish a dragnet, closing down all paths of escape. As her captor earlier saved Ellen's life, she creates a diversion, donning some of his clothes and making a daybreak run across railroad tracks. Tear gas stops her advance.

Not so Raven's. He dashes away in another direction towards possible freedom. Officer Glennon obstructs the man's getaway over a plank bridge and gets fatally shot as his killer completes a break to freedom.

In preceding hours together, he and Ellen shared confessions, during which he first learned about the Nitro Chemical Corporation.

Now that factory complex becomes his new target.

Ellen apprises her boyfriend of where he and his officers would be likely to find their evasive suspect.

What will occur when all these parties converge upon Nitro company grounds? Hint: there's plenty of retributive justice meted out.

As is obvious from the above summary of action, coincidences abound in this drama.

So do a number of absurdly wretched characterizations. Notably Laird Cregar's comic-book bad guy, an equally buffoonish turn by Marc Lawrence as a Raven wannabe that fails to make the grade, and Mary Davenport's naive salesgirl, who could have stepped straight out of a hyper-emotive Victorian melodrama along with her partner in both shop and overexpression. Two juveniles were utterly unbelievable and clueless in enacting street corner news vendors. Just as risible was Chester Klute's cowardly, feckless boarding house manager, who seems to have drifted into the picture from an amateur hour talent rehearsal sponsored by unlicensed charlatans. It's also all too clear the Gates character was merely a convenient plot tool in the imaginations of screenwriters.

On a more positive note, young Virita Campbell registers very effectively as a crippled girl who essentially outstares Raven in a contest of wills. Roger Imhof's folksy Senator Burnett mirrors brilliantly Will Rogers crossed with Harry Carey's *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* character.

Sadly, Lynd Ward's production design lacks distinction. It's quite adequate without being extraordinarily eye-catching.

Quite the contrary is a clinging, glittery gown optimally setting off Veronica Lake's curves in a nightclub scene. Edith Head scored a winner there.

Purring kittens, gunshots, screeching sirens, and alluring alto tones of Martha Mears singing on behalf of Veronica Lake indicate superb aural craftsmanship by John Cope and Philip Wisdom.

Illumination of scenes throughout the film is exemplary, with striking contrasts between light and dark areas producing optimal impact. A-list special visual effects veterans Farciot Edouart, Gordon Jennings, and William Pereira coordinated their efforts splendidly. The resulting suspense in shootout and chase sequences is truly stunning.

The less said about a screenplay brimming over with unlikely serendipities, the better. Albert Maltz began his film writing career in surprisingly unpromising style with work on this thoroughly ungrounded tale. One possible saving grace for him might be the line "I'm my own police." That's a classic, irrespective of author.

Better are two songs inserted to buttress Ellen's claims to singing talent. That's owing to Frank Loesser's clever lyrics, not unmemorable tunes Jacques Press hitched to them. David Buttolph's musical contribution remains a mystery to this reviewer. There doesn't seem to be much of a score present.

Archie Marshek's editing, independent of plotting holes traceable to script origins, keeps momentum rolling nimbly along. It's a decided asset.

So is John Seitz's remarkable cinematography, which drills faces and settings firmly into memories. Close-ups and significant depth photography convey a high degree of realism lamentably lacking in the shooting script's provisions for character development and motivation. Railroad yard shots, a scene where Veronica Lake sidles past Alan Ladd to get a cup of water, the entire sequence of shots depicting Raven's rundown apartment – these are products to relish from an underappreciated master director of photography.

Plenty of brutality and a host of unsavory, amoral personalities cause

***This Gun for Hire*, like other classic era noirs, to be completely unsuitable for any but adult viewers. It's reasonably enjoyable for them *if* they're able to overlook glaring impossibilities of events displayed, for the relaxed camaraderie of Ladd and Lake is itself a sufficient reward. Why not treat yourselves to at least one look at what is, despite the annoyingly feeble stab at creating Hollywood's at a noble conclusion, one of the best available examples of two leading players making magical moments together.**

Regrettably, there are no bonus features on this Universal Studios dvd release.