

# The Museum of Modern Art

*Hugo Fregonese: Man on the Run*

September 1–14, 2022

The Roy and Niuta Titus Theaters

Perhaps history's most restless filmmaker, Hugo Fregonese directed his first films in his native Argentina in the 1940s and then embarked on a globe-trotting career that took him to Hollywood, London, Paris, Rome, Munich, and eventually back to South America, continually exploring themes of claustrophobia, entrapment, and imprisonment. This program, originally organized with Bologna's Il Cinema Ritrovato festival of archival film, includes a new restoration of Fregonese's boldly stylized Western *Apache Drums* (1951), a vintage Technicolor print of Fregonese's first European film, *Decameron Nights* (1953), and a new 35mm print of Fregonese's masterpiece *Black Tuesday* (1954), a strikingly harsh and violent gangster film featuring Edward G. Robinson in his last thoroughly villainous role and spectacular noir cinematography by Stanley Cortez (*Night of the Hunter*).

## SCREENING SCHEDULE:

**Hardly a Criminal (Apenas un delincuente).** 1949. Argentina. Directed by Hugo Fregonese. Screenplay by Raimundo Calcagno, Israel Chas de Cruz, Tulio Deminchei, Fregonese, Jose Ramon Luna. With Jorge Salcedo, Sebastian Chiola, Tito Alonso. In Spanish; English subtitles. 88 min.

Argentina's official entry in the 1949 Venice Film Festival, *Hardly a Criminal* was one of four features made by Fregonese in his native country that reportedly attracted the attention of Louis B. Mayer, who invited the young filmmaker to Hollywood. This highly evolved film noir, his last film in Argentina, features the Argentine star Jorge Salcedo as a classic noir figure, a low-level clerk who succumbs to temptation when the opportunity arises to steal a cash deposit. Knowing he'll be caught, he hides the money, betting that he'll be well compensated for his time in prison when he's released and recovers the cash (a concept that recurs throughout Fregonese's work). But this is reckoning without the ironies of fate, this time embodied by a cruel prison mate who wants the stash for himself. Fregonese's distinctive compositional sense is already fully present in this early effort, and every frame seems to bear his signature.

**Sep 1, 4:00 T2; Sep 12, 7:30 T1**

**One Way Street.** 1950. USA. Directed by Hugo Fregonese. Screenplay by Lawrence Kimble. With James Mason, Marta Toren, Dan Duryea, Basil Ruysdael, William Conrad, Rodolfo Acosta. 79 min.

After a fruitless period at MGM, Fregonese moved to the more genre-friendly Universal, where he found a sympathetic producer in Leonard Goldstein. British newcomer James Mason plays a cynical physician who seizes the moment by betraying his boss, sadistic gang leader Dan Duryea, by running off with both his mistress (Marta Toren) and the loot from a recent robbery. Chance points the fleeing couple to a small village in Mexico, where the doctor's long-dormant idealism is reawakened by the villagers' desperate need for medical care. But even this flowering—a burst of sunshine between dark nights—provides only temporary respite from the leveling hand of fate, here represented by slashing diagonal compositions that lead the characters down the darkest of paths.

**Sep 1, 6:30 T2; Sep 12, 4:00 T1**

**Black Tuesday.** 1954. USA. Directed by Hugo Fregonese. Screenplay by Sydney Boehm. Cinematography by Stanley Cortez. With Edward G. Robinson, Jean Parker, Peter Graves, Milburn Stone. 80 min.

This ferocious film noir, independently produced by Leonard and Robert Goldstein, proved to be Fregonese's last Hollywood film, as well as the last time Edward G. Robinson played a toweringly malevolent figure. As Vincent "King" Canelli, Robinson draws on the audience's memories of *Little Caesar* and countless other gangster films, yet the evil he embodies is something new, born of the industrial-scale violence of WW2. In a brilliant opening shot, Fregonese presents Canelli as a caged animal clinging to the bars of his death row cell; he is to be executed that evening, along with his neighbor Peter Manning (Peter Graves), a bank robber and cop killer who has \$200,000 in loot hidden away. With the help of his faithful gun moll ('30s ingenue Jean Parker) and an emotionless lieutenant (Warren Stevens), Canelli stages a mad, bloody breakout from the execution chamber itself, taking a group of hostages with him as well as Manning, whom Canelli hopes will lead him to the stolen cash. But the escape turns out to be largely illusory, as Fregonese channels his characters through a succession of closed-off, windowless spaces, leading to an upper floor in a warehouse where Canelli and his gang will stage their last stand.

Cinematographer Stanley Cortez, shooting the first feature film on Kodak's revolutionary high-speed, black-and-white Tri-X stock, contributes images that rival the spatial complexity and prickly detail of his work on *The Magnificent Ambersons*, while looking forward to the strong, nearly abstract use of negative space that characterizes his contributions to *The Night of the Hunter* (a film with which *Black Tuesday* shares a mysterious family resemblance).

**Sep 2, 6:30 T2; Sep 10, 4:00 T1**

**Apache Drums.** 1951. USA. Directed by Hugo Fregonese. Screenplay by David Chandler, Harry Brown. Produced by Val Lewton. With Stephen McNally, Colleen Gray, Willard Parker, Arthur Shields. 76 min.

One of Fregonese's most completely realized projects, *Apache Drums* was also the last film of the creative producer Val Lewton (*Cat People*), who died a few weeks before its release in 1951. One wonders how different Fregonese's career might have been had he found other producers as sympathetic as Lewton and settled down in Hollywood rather than becoming a vagabond of international co-productions. Sam Leeds (Stephen McNally) is perhaps Fregonese's most rootless protagonist, a fast-talking gambler and gunman who we first meet while he's being kicked out of a New Mexico mining town on the verge of becoming respectable. The embodiment of the emerging middle class social order is Joe Madden (Willard Parker), the town's mayor and blacksmith, whose motives for running Sam of town are both civil (he's made to leave with the ladies of the local dance hall) and personal, in that both men are drawn to Sally (Colleen Gray), the owner of the town's cantina.

When Sam discovers the bodies of other former townspeople who have been massacred by a band of Mescalero warriors, he reluctantly returns to town to warn the residents of the impending threat. Though at this point convention requires Sam to become a hero and lead the townspeople to safety, he's far more interested in looking like a hero than in actually becoming one, and his flamboyance and impulsiveness lead to disaster. Soon, the townspeople are forced to take refuge in a monumental clay structure that seems to be part church, part city hall, and all prison, and the resulting siege is one of the most remarkable passages in American cinema. As often in Fregonese's work, the happy ending seems rushed and abrupt, with a somewhat arbitrary last-minute cavalry rescue and a tentatively

affirmative image of Sam and Sally emerging from the fire and into an embrace. Will Sam stay in place, marry Sally, and become a real part of the developing township, or will he persuade her to ride off with him, to a life of crime and freedom? The final image is both reassuring and lightly satiric: a donkey foal returns to its mother in the darkened, burned-out building, perhaps not the most expansive metaphor available to express domestic bliss.

**Sep 3, 4:00 T2; Sep 9, 4:30 T2**

**The Raid.** 1954. USA. Directed by Hugo Fregonese. Screenplay by Sydney Boehm, Francis M. Cockrel, from a novel by Herbert Ravenel Sass. With Van Heflin, Anne Bancroft, Richard Boone, Lee Marvin, Peter Graves. 83 min.

The central question of Fregonese's cinema—to stay or to go?—gets vivid treatment in this unusual approach to the American Civil War, set in a small town in Vermont near the Canadian border, where members of a Confederate raiding party, led by Van Heflin's pensive Major Neal Benton, have infiltrated the local citizenry in preparation for a daring guerilla attack on the local bank. Arriving early to scout out the territory, Benton finds himself being drawn into the community through an attractive widow (Anne Bancroft). The embittered major, who had seen his own plantation estate go up in flames in a Union raid, slowly softens as he enters the life of the village, all the while guarding his terrible secret.

Heflin, whose surly interiority often seemed an early manifestation of Method-style acting in Hollywood, delivers a performance of studied ambiguity, his character's lust for vengeance battling with his affection for the widow, her son, and the quiet life they represent. The temptation of domesticity has perhaps never been so strong in a Fregonese film, yet his hero, true to his restlessness, ultimately opts for frantic escape, leaving the film to end on an abrupt note of chaos and moral destitution.

**Sep 3, 6:30 T3; Sep 10, 6:30 T1**

**Decameron Nights.** 1953. United Kingdom/Spain. Directed by Hugo Fregonese. Written by George Oppenheimer, Geza Herczeg, from stories by Giovanni Boccaccio. With Joan Fontaine, Louis Jourdan, Godfrey Tearle, Joan Collins, Binnie Barnes. 129 min.

*Decameron Nights* is a handsome, confident omnibus film, cleverly structured to show off both its Spanish locations (mostly doubling for the Florentine hills) and the considerable gifts of its cast. Once again, we find Fregonese's familiar themes of imprisonment and escape, here transposed to the erotic realm. In his pursuit of the beautiful widow Fiametta (Joan Fontaine, in the most sensual performance of her career), the poet Giovanni Boccaccio (the unshakably urbane Louis Jourdan) pursues her to her country estate, where she is hiding with five ladies in waiting while Florence is under siege. Boccaccio talks his way into this improvised convent (where Fontaine is dressed in nunnish black and white) by offering to entertain the ladies with stories. The tales are presented as a witty, ironic dialogue of seduction, as Fiametta and Boccaccio imagine themselves in three different erotic scenarios.

Working with the cinematographer Guy Green (an Oscar winner for David Lean's *Great Expectations*), Fregonese subtly manipulates the color palette, contrasting the natural lighting and earth tones of the framing story to the expressionistic shadows and bold, primary colors of the imaginary tales. It's a shame the original Technicolor negatives to longer seem to exist; this is a lush and generous film that stands as a delightful contrast to Fregonese's darker works.

**Sep 4, 3:00 T2**

**Blowing Wild.** 1953. USA. Directed by Hugo Fregonese. Screenplay by Philip Yordan. With Gary Cooper, Barbara Stanwyck, Ruth Roman, Anthony Quinn. 90 min.

Fregonese again put his Latin American background to use in filming this independent production (for Milton Sperling's United States Pictures) at Mexico's Churubusco Studios, with location work in Vera Cruz. Gary Cooper is an itinerant wildcatter who finds himself working the oil fields of an ex-partner (Anthony Quinn) who has settled down with Cooper's former lover, a ferociously headstrong Barbara Stanwyck. Fregonese neglects none of the visual metaphors inherent in this tale of mounting erotic pressure, which comes complete with a title ballad sung by Frankie Laine—just as he had done for Cooper's 1952 hit *High Noon*.

**Sep 4, 5:30 T2; Sep 7, 6:30 T2**

**Saddle Tramp.** 1950. USA. Directed by Hugo Fregonese. Screenplay by Harold Shumate. With Joel McCrea, Wanda Hendrix, John Russell, John McIntire. 90 min.

Like Alfred Hitchcock with *The Trouble with Harry*, Fregonese here offers a benign, comic inversion of his regular themes. Joel McCrea, at the height of his casual amiability, plays an itinerant cowhand merrily eluding responsibility as he drifts through the western landscape, only to find himself gradually sacrificing his freedom to care for some orphaned kids, an abused young woman (Wanda Hendrix), and a neglected ranch, weaving himself into exactly the kind of community Fregonese's usual protagonists would literally kill to escape.

**Sep 5, 6:00 T1; Sep 10, 2:00 T2**

**Man in the Attic.** 1953. USA. Directed by Hugo Fregonese. Screenplay by Robert Presnell Jr., Barre Lyndon, from the novel by Marie Belloc Lowndes. With Jack Palance, Constance Smith, Byron Palmer, Frances Bavier. 82 min.

This was at least the fourth cinematic go-round for Marie Belloc Lowndes's 1913 novel—following adaptations by Alfred Hitchcock (1927), Maurice Elvey (1932), and John Brahm (1944)—and it's perhaps the darkest, dominated by an intense, early Method performance by Jack Palance as the mysterious lodger who may or may not be Jack the Ripper. For the first time, the screenplay (by Barre Lyndon and Robert Presnell Jr.) explicitly ties the Ripper's activities to early sexual trauma at the hands of an unloving mother. One wonders whether Hitchcock, a voracious filmgoer who certainly would have seen this variation on his first international success, was influenced by the Fregonese film in creating *Psycho* (1960).

**Sep 6, 6:30 T2; Sep 11, 4:30 T2**

**My Six Convicts.** 1952. USA. Directed by Hugo Fregonese. Screenplay by Michael Blankfort, from a book by Donald Powell Wilson. With Millard Mitchell, Gilbert Roland, John Beal, Marshall Thompson, Alf Kjellin. 104 min.

Perhaps Fregonese's most conventional film, and the only one for which he received any professional recognition (he was nominated for the Directors Guild of America Award for Outstanding Direction, and lost to John Ford). The director's usual fascination with prison and imprisonment, literal and figurative, here gets a do-gooder makeover from producer Stanley Kramer, emerging as something rather cheerful and cozy. Idealistic young prison psychologist John Beal at first gets a hostile reception from guards and inmates alike; but once he makes friends with a scene-stealing Millard Mitchell (*The Naked Spur*), the prison's slyest fixer, it's all uphill. The film was shot mostly on location at San Quentin State Prison, to which Fregonese would return for *Black Tuesday*.

**Sep 11, 6:30 T2; Sep 14, 6:30 T1**

**Seven Thunders.** 1957. United Kingdom. Directed by Hugo Fregonese. Screenplay by John Baines, from a novel by Rupert Croft-Cooke. With Stephen Boyd, James Robertson Justice, Kathleen Harrison, Tony Wright. 100 min.

Despite its grim subject matter—in Nazi-occupied Marseilles, two escaped British POWs (Stephen Boyd and Tony Wright) hide out in the Old Port district at the same time a homicidal maniac (James Robertson Justice) preys on refugees by promising passage out of the country but killing them and keeping their assets—*Seven Thunders* is one of Fregonese's most optimistic and exuberant films. As typically footloose Fregonese protagonists, Boyd and Wright at first feel imprisoned in the cramped quarters of the old city, but they soon learn to negotiate its web of hidden passages and underground connections. Boyd finds a new sense of freedom with the help of a perky gamine (Anna Gaylor), while Wright is protected by a cockney dowager (beloved British character actor Kathleen Harrison) improbably transplanted to France.

After *Apache Drums* and *The Raid*, *Seven Thunders* is yet another Fregonese film that ends with an explosion of apocalyptic violence, though this time the destruction is based on an actual incident: the dynamiting of the Old Port in January 1943 by the Nazis. Fregonese's treatment of this sequence is exemplary, seamlessly blending location, studio, and newsreel footage. For all the horror of destruction, the dynamiting also forces the killer from his dark lair and propels the protagonists into an appealingly vague, open-air future.

**Sep 11, 1:30 T1; Sep 14, 4:00 T1**

*Hugo Fregonese: Man on the Run* is organized by Dave Kehr, Curator, Department of Film, The Museum of Modern Art, and Ehsan Khoshbakht, Director, Il Cinema Ritrovato.

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