

## Chapter 8

### Hate is Like a Loaded Gun: Shaping the Public Response to *Crossfire*

If the audience don't like a picture, they have a good reason. The public is never wrong. I don't go in for this thing that when I have a failure, it is because the audience doesn't have the taste or education, or isn't sensitive enough. The public pays the money.

—Samuel Goldwyn

Samuel Goldwyn, like most of the studio moguls, fervently believed that Hollywood's defining mission was not merely to make money but to provide the American public with the kind of entertainment it desired. Indeed, the moguls took great pride in their intuitive knowledge of the tastes and desires of American film audiences, trusting their hunches, gut feelings, and even, in the case of Harry Cohn, the tingle in his buttocks to predict which films would produce box-office gold.<sup>1</sup> By the 1940s, however, Hollywood increasingly relied on scientific polling techniques to take the pulse of the moviegoing public. By 1946 eleven studios pre-screened rough-cut films with Audience Research, Inc., an independent audience-testing firm run by George Gallup. Audience testing helped independent studios secure bank financing and helped major studios determine what rental fee to charge exhibitors, after a film-by-film rental strategy replaced block booking. In addition, with the postwar decline in audience attendance, market research helped the studios determine what audiences were interested in, and indeed, who those audiences were.<sup>2</sup>

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Thus, following World War Two, the film industry pioneered a new relationship between scientific testing—what we now call market research—and cultural production. Though Hollywood films had always been deeply implicated in the manufacture of taste and desire, the postwar use of expert testing linked the film industry even more closely with the advertising industry in the construction of an "average American," a profoundly normative category that encouraged the "adjustment" model of the therapeutic culture and demonized difference and dissent. At the same time, however, the polls taken by Gallup and others also allowed the American public to take its *own* pulse, and in the case of the movie industry, to express their desires directly, rather than relying on the instincts of the moguls. This could be profoundly democratizing, giving a voice to ordinary Americans; however, it also reified "normalcy" by encouraging people to judge themselves (whether positively or negatively is almost irrelevant) against the "average." As Olivier Zunz argues:

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If social scientists "manipulated" people, it was by conceptualizing an

imaginary person who then exerted a powerful influence on the American psyche during the 1940s and 1950s and who still reverberates today as the counterpoint to our emphasis on diversity. Managing mass society amounted to turning the computing of a statistical device, the average, into an influential way of thinking about the self.<sup>3</sup>

In an era when difference and identity politics seemed a dangerous challenge to the unity of the American polity, the introduction of expert testing reinforced the fundamental conservatism of the film industry, as Adrian Scott clearly recognized: 3

I have had contact with the Gallup bunch and I must say that I loathe them. It's pseudo-scientific nonsense, geared for the palates of the guys who own motion pictures. It can accomplish any number of things which the owners want accomplished. But it chiefly is a weapon against innovation, against new ideas, any ideas. It is a device subscribing to the status quo of pictures—what they want is more of the same; whatever has been done, must be done again.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, expert testing gave a new, "scientific" legitimacy to the moguls' obsession with public opinion and mass taste, profoundly shaping not only the kinds of films produced in Hollywood, but the ways that those films were marketed and advertised to the American public. Not surprisingly, public opinion was critically important in RKO's handling of *Crossfire*. Concerned with its "sensitive" theme and the objections raised by the AJC, RKO subjected *Crossfire* to intensive in-house audience testing, spent large sums on advertising and publicity to shape the public response to the movie, and closely monitored the reactions of film critics. Though radical filmmakers like Scott often interpreted scientific testing and the moguls' slavish concern with public opinion as a challenge to their own progressive creative agenda, the public response to *Crossfire* suggested that there was, indeed, a substantial desire for "message" movies among "average" Americans.

### **Will It Play in Peoria?**

In the spring of 1947, at about the same time that the Jewish debate penetrated the RKO front office, drawing Peter Rathvon into the controversy over *Crossfire*, RKO commissioned Gallup's polling service, Audience Research Inc. (ARI), to conduct a survey measuring audience response to an anti-anti-Semitism film. The pollsters presented the test audience with two movies' synopses, asking them to compare the sample storylines to "most movies they see" and rate them in terms of "much better, a little better, the same, a little worse or much worse." The first synopsis read: "A friendly G.I. party ends in the murder of a civilian whom none of the G.I.s had ever met before. A clever detective is kept from solving the murder by the G.I.'s who loyally band together and deny everything, until the detective uses his knowledge of human nature and an old trick to lure the 4

murderer into giving himself away." The second synopsis read: "An army sergeant's secret hatred of Jews results in murdering a stranger, killing a buddy in cold blood, and placing the blame on a G.I. friend. The soldiers stick together out of loyalty, denying everything to protect each other. A clever police captain shrewdly detects the motive behind the crime and is able to penetrate the group, trap the killer, and obtain his confession."<sup>5</sup> While these two synopses are roughly parallel, there are clearly more variables than the issue of anti-Semitism at play in the design of the poll, and the differences between the two synopses leave vast room for different readings by the audience participants and for alternative interpretations by the pollsters themselves. No doubt the experts at the AJC's Department of Scientific Research would have had a field day picking apart the myriad methodological flaws in Gallup's audience test. While it is impossible to consider Gallup's analysis reliable in any meaningful or "scientific" way, it is nonetheless fascinating to see what meanings the pollsters and the studio executives made of the "results."

Breaking down the results into the categories of "intense want-to-see" and "intense don't-want-to-see," the pollsters found that Jewish moviegoers were the only group that significantly favored the "racial prejudice" storyline over the first synopsis. In contrast, the second synopsis was rated particularly unappealing in comparison to the first by women, younger moviegoers, urbanites, and Catholics. Noting that "the largest dislike category for synopsis #2 is that the picture is about anti-Semitism or that it is just about Jews," the ARI report, submitted to the top RKO executives on April 30, 1947, strongly implied that *Crossfire* would fare poorly with most American movie audiences<sup>6</sup>

Had this survey been undertaken a year or two earlier, *Crossfire* probably would never have been made. However, by the end of April, *Crossfire* was already in post-production, and RKO production chief Dore Schary was determined to back the film against opposition from both inside and outside the studio. Thus, in mid-May, RKO ran two sneak previews of *Crossfire*, one at the Hill Street Theater in downtown Los Angeles and the other at the 86th Street Theater in the Yorkville neighborhood of New York City. Preview cards were filled out by the audience members following the screenings and either collected at the theater or mailed to the studio afterward. The studio then compiled the cards in large batches and retyped the responses, grouping the answers to the various questions separately. The studio also collated and posted the data on age and gender from the cards separately, suggesting that in processing the response data, the studio was more concerned with the *overall* response of its audience than in gauging the responses of specific audience segments.<sup>7</sup>

Significantly, audiences in Los Angeles came to the theater expecting to see *The*

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*Farmer's Daughter*, the last film produced by Dore Schary before he assumed the helm at RKO. Schary often cited both *The Farmer's Daughter* and *Crossfire* as examples of his commitment to "message movies," and it is likely that the Hill Street Theater was chosen for *Crossfire's* Los Angeles preview, perhaps by Schary himself, in hopes of finding an audience amenable to dramatic films with political themes. Indeed, "[s]uch a quiet attentive audience speaks for itself," said one member of the Los Angeles audience. *Crossfire* faced a tougher crowd in the New York City neighborhood of Yorkville. A predominantly German and Irish working-class community, Yorkville in the 1930s had been the stomping ground of German American Bund leader Fritz Kuhn. One Jewish moviegoer at the Yorkville theater listened carefully for anti-Semitic comments, but found that the "surrounding audience was very quiet." Another, however, reported, "I saw quite a few spectators wince every time reference to the Jews was made." Nevertheless, others at the Yorkville screening noted that the film was followed by "thundering" and "spontaneous" applause, which one moviegoer suggested "showed that even if some of the audience couldn't directly accept the message they were held by the picture."

Certainly, there were anti-Semites, both vulgar and genteel, in the preview audiences, and they made their views known in their survey responses. Nevertheless, the overall response to *Crossfire* was overwhelmingly positive. Over 80 percent of the respondents rated the film either "outstanding," "excellent," or "very good," and said they would recommend *Crossfire* to their friends. Asked if they believed the film could be educational as well as entertaining, nearly 70 percent answered yes, while 11 percent thought it was "questionable," and only 8 percent replied no. Though these results are no more "scientifically" valid than the Trager-Raths study, the audience responses to these sneak previews are far more interesting historically. The lobby cards used in the Trager-Raths study of adult audiences in Boston and Denver asked specific questions designed to gauge audience identification with either Monty the anti-Semite or the spokesmen for liberalism and tolerance.<sup>8</sup> In contrast, the RKO lobby cards were open-ended, asking the audience members to list specific scenes that they liked and disliked and to answer two questions: "What will you primarily remember in terms of this picture?" and "Do you believe this picture can perform an educational function?" The audience response to these questions is fascinating and particularly revealing. Some in the audience continued to refer to Jews as a race, suggesting that the biological theories that underlay scientific racism still held a degree of explanatory power. For the most part, however, the audience-response data reveals a fundamental shift in American attitudes toward race and ethnicity. Reaffirming the popular nationalism elaborated by Hollywood and others in the war years, the vast majority of *Crossfire's* preview audience embraced cultural pluralism and tolerance as fundamental principles in the imagined community of postwar

Americans.

Thus, many of the audience members at the preview screenings supported the ADL's position on *Crossfire*, agreeing that anti-Semitism (or any form of racism) was inherently undemocratic, and indeed, un-American. One moviegoer felt the film showed "the necessity of democratic feelings toward different races and religions," while another commented, "The basic idea is that all Americans and the world must live together without hate of races and religion." A viewer from Yorkville emphasized, "We are all Americans," citing the line, "There are many funny names on casualty lists," as one of the most memorable in the film. This sentiment was widely shared by other audience members, and many believed the film "will make better Americans." 9

For most of these viewers, a recognition of the essential humanity or individuality of all people, regardless of race, creed, or color, was the bedrock of Americanism. Several respondents described it as "brotherly love," but others expanded the idea, arguing that *Crossfire* showed that there is "no sound reason for race hatred. Jews, Negroes, and what have you, are human too. They deserve to be treated as human beings." Another argued powerfully that merely tolerating difference was not enough: "There should not be tolerance but recognition of the indivisibility of man without prejudices." One particularly moving comment came from a moviegoer in Los Angeles: "I am a strong supporter of racial, religious and political tolerance. I found a deep sense of satisfaction to find out that I am not alone in an uncertain world." 10

Many viewers also shared the ADL's faith in the power of muckraking and the importance of bringing social problems "into the light." Most believed that *Crossfire* accurately described the "truth of today here in the U.S.A." and hoped that raising the issue would help to make a difference. One moviegoer, praising the film as a powerful "lesson in bigotry and mindful of today's existing problems," argued that "understanding them is the first step toward eliminating them." Most respondents agreed with the ADL that *Crossfire* was thought-provoking and were hopeful that it would promote healthy debate among American audiences. As one Los Angeles viewer noted, "Although a great many people are beyond reach when it comes to prejudice against Jews, I think this picture is great food for thought and will start some people at least thinking about it." One outspoken Yorkville viewer quipped, "We need more like this to put more light on our psychopathic bigots and chowderheads." Another viewer, arguing that people must be "pounded on all sides," recommended that *Crossfire* be screened by schools, churches, clubs and other social organizations: "Keep showing it to the youth of America for that is where the germ is set." A Los Angeles moviegoer suggested with eerie prescience, "I think this picture should be shown to the 11

combined Congress of the United States."

Others echoed the ADL's enthusiasm for liberal propaganda set within the framework of a traditional Hollywood thriller. One audience member, for example, commended "the courage of the producer in taking a very 'difficult' topic, particularly in these times, and dramatizing it so effectively in almost typical Hollywood 'murder picture' style." James McLain wrote, "At first I thought I was in for seeing just another 'who done it'—then all at once I realized that something different was happening but again, I thought they must just be hinting—but again you spoke this time a little plainer. I still continued to think they'll just nibble around the edges and then 'Wham' and I knew you were not pulling your punches." Others, however, felt the film had "too much message, not enough entertainment." As one viewer wrote, "I go to pictures often for entertainment not to be filled up with guff." Another argued that feature films were an inappropriate vehicle for social issues, noting, "I'm sure it will have poor box office appeal as such." "This is a free country," another moviegoer commented tartly. "Let people do and think as they like without influence from movies—to prejudice them—one way or other."

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Nonetheless, for the most part, the preview audience agreed with the ADL that Hollywood movies could be a powerful political tool, capable of cementing American—even New Deal—values of tolerance, diversity, and democracy. Thus, one respondent praised the film industry for "acting as a positive force in advocating our principles." "I think the moving picture industry can do outstanding work in creating lasting democracy," wrote one viewer from Los Angeles, while a Yorkville audience member averred, "It is quite certain now that Hollywood has the power to keep our peoples united." For these broad-minded moviegoers, Finlay's "propaganda" speech marked the high point of the film, reinforcing for them the positive uses of propaganda to articulate and reinforce American ideals. One argued without apology, "It's a propaganda picture for Jews and it helps. It teaches one to respect any race, color or creed," while another cheered, "[I]t is propaganda for the democratic way of life. This picture will undoubtedly meet local opposition for its brutal bluntness, but it must be shown if we ever hope to attain true democracy." Another wrote, "Finlay's speech was simple and down-to-earth and would certainly appeal to the common sense of any American," while another applauded "the excellent lesson it preached, without seeming to preach, against intolerance. We need more pictures like this." Though one moviegoer believed that "the more intellectually sophisticated audience may object to the over-simplified lecture to Leroy," another appreciated the narrative of conversion in the scene, arguing, "It will preach directly to the type of people like Leroy who need to have exposed to them the Monty's [*sic*] of the world—the Hitlers—Ku Kluxers—who spread their hatred with Leroy's as Converts."

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Interestingly, in contrast to the AJC's desire to downplay the Holocaust, many of these audience members argued that it was precisely because of the Nazis' anti-Semitic atrocities that *Crossfire* was such a powerful and *necessary* film. Drawing the obvious parallel between the murder of Samuels and the fate of Europe's Jews, several moviegoers echoed Scott's assertion that violence was the logical culmination of anti-Semitism. As one Yorkville viewer wrote, "I believe that this picture can be of great value in showing how any hatred can lead to violence and disunity." A moviegoer from Los Angeles noted, "An intense resentment or hatred nursed over a period of time will result in a physical combustion of retaliation," while a respondent from Yorkville stated bluntly, "Intolerance can lead to violence and should be curbed as early as possible." Others felt that the film performed an important public service by reminding Americans that "'Jew haters' are not imported product," and that, even in the postwar world, "we still have to be on the alert for bigots, fascists and their various types and breeds." As one Los Angeles moviegoer tersely summarized, "We all need a reminder from time to time on the question of minorities—a reminder that Hitler's methods are not wanted here."

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Nonetheless, some members of the audience, echoing the concerns of the AJC, fearfully predicted that *Crossfire* might create an anti-Jewish backlash. One viewer argued, "I believe there is too much racial controversy as it is. Such propaganda is apt to create more rather than less racial feeling." Another commented, "While I am a strong believer in racial equality, I believe this picture brought it out too forcibly and may do more to incite racial unrest than relieve it." One Los Angeles viewer warned that the film "will cause resentment, as you will see in future—your propaganda scenes [are] too obvious. If you wish to promote Jewish antagonism, leave [the] picture as is." Another viewer suggested, "If this picture is shown to ignorant people who actually are not biased, might they not bring seeds of anti-Semitism just by the realization that Jews can be hated just because they are Jews?" "It will arouse some thought but feelings again will be biased," noted a viewer from Los Angeles. "The people it actually should teach are the ones who will say 'Jews in Hollywood.'"

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Indeed, some of the comments clearly illustrated the AJC's contention that *Crossfire* would inflame latent prejudices: far and away the most frequent criticism of *Crossfire*—from audiences in both Los Angeles and New York—was that it was "propaganda for the Jews." As one viewer asked, "Why all the Jewish propaganda? I think the Jews are treated all right in this country. So why try to get across the idea that they are not? And on top of that—do you mean to imply that all the Protestants are mistreating the Jews and Irish Catholics? You are only creating the very thing you think exists—which doesn't." One viewer noted that the film tied "right in with Jewish War Relief and the efforts to make Palestine a

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Jewish state. Picture starts out very realistic as regards dialogue but the continual hampering of Jewish propaganda insults the intelligence of the audience." Another wrote, "I think that any race should be able to stand on its own record and should not need a propaganda picture to help it. It is fine to state true facts but don't try and make it seem as if the race is being picked on without giving any reason as to why if any." Another suggested ominously, "One leaves the picture with the feeling Robert Young and other actors in this picture played in this picture without their whole hearted consent or whether they were more or less forced to by a Jewish executive."

A variation on this familiar theme was, not surprisingly, the Communist influence in Hollywood, and particularly on *Crossfire*. Though one Los Angeles viewer simply dismissed the film as "the most communist inspired picture that I ever seen," others had more substantive critiques. A Yorkville moviegoer, for example, saw a parallel between the "drawing [of] race lines" in *Crossfire* and "the job done by communists to establish worker and capital class lines." Another, arguing that the film "will establish definite race consciousness which is not an asset—nullifying the 'Melting Pot of America,'" wanted an "assurance there are no 'party line' people involved." One Los Angeles viewer wrote, "[I]t seems to me that Finlay's speech, though good up to a point, would be a springboard for Communists to further infiltrate their ideology, i.e. destructive viewpoint for Americans." Another objected to the story of Finlay's grandfather on the grounds that it framed the issue of anti-Semitism incorrectly by "comparing Catholic persecution with Jewish." Rather than being a problem of religious intolerance, this viewer argued, "actually anti-Semitism is a racial characteristic antipathy," and should be compared to the "Negro race problem—Jap, Mexican, etc."

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Though the AJC's fear of "unconscious identification" is, of course, impossible to document from this kind of evidence, the preview audience itself was also deeply concerned with the issue of identification. However, they hoped that the latent anti-Semites in the audience would identify with Monty and thereby recognize their ideological error and become more tolerant of difference. Rejecting the AJC's emphasis on the unconscious, they believed that *Crossfire* could be a consciousness-raising experience. Indeed, many argued, with Trager and Raths and the ADL, that *Crossfire* would awaken moviegoers to their own latent anti-Semitism, enabling them to "release" their intolerant feelings. As one Yorkville respondent commented, "The suddenness with which Monty voiced his dislike of the Jews made everyone sit up and think—Why I know someone just like that—perhaps it was themselves they recognized. This picture did not preach, it did something better; it brought to the people the realization that discrimination is senseless, that without realizing it they themselves might be fanning the fires of hatred." A viewer in Los Angeles predicted, "People will flinch in the right

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places—probably not those who should, but you'll get plenty of decent flinches from plenty of decent Americans. Which is better than nothing." Another confessed to "a queer sense of embarrassment of hearing the word 'Jew' said out loud and a deep sense of shame that we should all need this."

Others, however, were concerned that *Crossfire's* focus on the "lunatic fringe" let audience members off the hook: "How many anti-Semites or the 'on the fence' people will recognize a kinship with Monty the killer, the mentally ill guy?" asked a moviegoer in Los Angeles. Another argued, "The problem of intolerance is not subtle enough [in the film]. Many people who should will not see in themselves potential Montgomerys." Noting that most Americans were simply "casual" anti-Semites, one viewer commented, "Monty is so completely unsympathetic that the common anti-Semite of Leroy's type refuses to identify himself with him. . . . His type of anti-Semitism is more common, therefore more harmful, and harder to overcome." Los Angeles respondent James McLain, however, disagreed: "This killer or his prototype is not overdrawn. I have met him dozens of times on the streets of downtown Los Angeles. . . . And right now if he was at the preview of your picture is writing you a letter denouncing you as 'filthy communist Jews' trying to overthrow the government."

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Interestingly, some of the audience responses to the representation of Monty also suggest the growing influence of the AJC's psychosocial model of prejudice even among "ordinary" Americans. Seeing Monty's intolerance as a psychological problem, one viewer argued that "Monty the psycho needed doctoring more than killing," while another wrote, "It seems to me modern psychiatry could cure Monty and he should have been cured instead of killed in the picture." In this context, particularly, the film's ending was troubling to some viewers. One, for example, believed that the murder of Monty set a disturbing precedent: "So the guy hates the Jews, so he gets shot in the back from behind. I do not think this is a wise policy to bring such controversial matter out into the public in the spirit of eye for eye and tooth for tooth. . . . Hate can only be overcome by love and not with a bullet in the neck." This viewer believed that Monty could have been rehabilitated, if only he had been made aware of the truth: "Monty should have been shown the record of the Jew, his sacrifices at Okinawa, and he would have been ashamed of his behavior."

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The representation of Samuels in *Crossfire* provoked similar controversy. Several of the moviegoers applauded Sam Levene's performance. One remarked, "Would have liked to hear more of what Samuels had to say. He was wonderful." A viewer from Los Angeles wrote, "It made me proud to be a Jew. I think it made anyone proud of what they are too." Others, however, objected to Samuel's "goodness." As one viewer commented, "Was it necessary to make Sam so-o perfect? His

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characterization was not as true as the situation and therefore detracted from the realism of the story." Similarly, one critic on the left noted, "[A] typical pitfall of bourgeois doctrinaire drama is inevitable compromise with idealism. In the end you make Samuels a kosher vet. This is rank deference to romantic tradition. Would it not have been equally despicable to murder a Jew with no service background? The impression on an anti-Semite or potential anti-Semite is that the 'happenstance' of his vet status saves him from being rightfully obliterated." Other responses to Samuels were blatantly anti-Semitic, such as "Jews should correct their obnoxious ways, brazen ideas, etc. if they want to be liked in this world," and "You can't force people to like the Jews. I don't go to the movies to be told what I should like or dislike." Perhaps the most interesting, however, was the comment from the only respondent who had read *The Brick Foxhole*. This viewer noted, "It seems a shame that censorship and public opinion should force you to change the true character of Samuels, and the reason for his murder. To me, sexual discrimination is worse than all the others put together."

For the most part, the preview audiences applauded *Crossfire* and praised Hollywood for finally taking a stand on America's social problems. One viewer expressed "amazement that Hollywood would have the guts to turn out such a picture." Several hoped that *Crossfire* would inaugurate a new trend in political filmmaking and suggested other social issues for the film industry to tackle. "At long last Hollywood seems to have become adult enough to face in basic terms those basic problems which still exist," one viewer wrote. "Now if they would do one on anti-Negro discrimination!" James McLean, who included a lengthy letter with his reply card, urged RKO to follow *Crossfire* with a series of films that show "'anti-Semitism' and 'red-baiting' and race and labor-baiting as the well planned, well thought out means whereby millions of Jews and others have been murdered by the sadistic killers of fascism and imperialist monopoly and that other millions may die unless you and I speak out for truth, democracy and peace in the world for all men of all religion, race and progressive political beliefs."

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Most significantly, in light of subsequent events, a small but prescient portion of the preview audience predicted a backlash by reactionaries outraged by *Crossfire's* political message. "Of course you know you are going to get denounced for producing a picture that speaks out on the question of race and religious hate," one viewer wrote, adding, "I and my whole family compliment you on your honesty and courage. We feel that pictures can speak out, deal with so called 'controversial' issues, and still be good entertainment." Another viewer, who felt *Crossfire* should be "required seeing," predicted, "Every open fascist in America will denounce it as 'Jewish Communist.' . . . Undercover fascists will call it unreal, un-American, and propaganda, and say that it only harms the cause of Jewish people by calling attention to it." Another respondent bluntly warned, "The

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fascist—the anti-Semites—the race-baiters—and the Thomas Committee won't like it."

Significantly, the Los Angeles preview audience was especially cognizant of the pressures on Hollywood from right-wing crusaders, both nationally and locally, and several invoked not only the House Un-American Activities Committee, but also the Tenney Committee—the California version of HUAC—chaired by conservative Jack Tenney. In 1945, Tenney had supported the decision of the Los Angeles Board of Education to allow rabid anti-Semite Gerald L. K. Smith to speak at a public high school, as several of the audience members were clearly aware. Thus, one wrote, "Jack Tenney and the Los Angeles School Board will raise hell with you to cut out the statement of Robert Young about the persecution of the Irish Catholics not being history as taught in our schools." Some viewers predicted the filmmakers would cave in to public pressure: "Every anti-Semite and fascist will lambast [the] hell out of this picture. If you are subject to such pressure you will run like hell." Others were more supportive, arguing, "We need to counteract all and any such ideas of prejudice in regard to race, color or creed and pictures such as *Crossfire* are a good means of doing this. You will no doubt get pressure from certain groups to not show this, but please do not listen to them, show it!" James McLean neatly—and accurately—summarized the trajectory of *Crossfire's* reception:

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The KKK—fascist, anti-Semites—America-Firsters will denounce you. Call for your investigation by Tenney and Thomas . . . Others not so open will say it's a poor picture, mostly propaganda, hurts the cause of democracy and better race and religious understanding. . . . Anti-fascists will praise it, urge their friends and organizations to see and support it; [the] great majority will see it and discuss it and accept it as good entertainment and a great picture. . . . Then you will: 1) "run for cover," "cut and edit," try to make it OK for both sides, and completely spoil it or, 2) stick by your guns. Advertise it as a great picture carrying a lesson in "American Democracy" and a must for all movie-goers.

### **The RKO Publicity Campaign**

Despite the extremely positive response of the preview audiences to *Crossfire's* political message, the RKO front office remained concerned that the American public would reject the film as "an out-and-out propaganda piece," and therefore decided to downplay *Crossfire's* political message in marketing the film. According to S. Barret McCormick, head of the advertising and publicity department, "We don't want people to be kept away from the theater because they're given the impression that the film is straight pamphleteering." Instead, as in the case of *Cornered*, RKO publicity efforts focused on selling *Crossfire* as a traditional murder mystery. "Besides cleverly working its plea for tolerance into the plot," McCormick continued, "the film is also a fast-moving murder mystery. Patrons will

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draw their own lessons from the film, once they see it."<sup>9</sup>

McCormick's comments reveal RKO's strategic campaign to shape the public response to *Crossfire*. Though RKO executives certainly expected the anti-anti-Semitism theme to draw "considerable editorial, radio and magazine comment," the publicity department preferred to wait and see how film critics responded to *Crossfire*. As *Variety* reported, "[RKO would] rather have word of its nature spread via this comment than plug it in ads. Hence, the decision to lay off any reference to anti-Semitism in fanfaring the film. As part of the buildup, RKO will invite newspapermen, radio commentators, officials of tolerance groups and other to a series of prelim screenings. Company is counting on a wide word-of-mouth reaction before the pic preems [premieres]."<sup>10</sup>

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Adrian Scott, unhappy with the hush-hush approach in the studio's "teaser" campaign, embarked on his own informal campaign to market *Crossfire* as a serious, political film. With Schary's help, an excerpt of Finlay's "grandfather" speech was included in the weekly bulletin of the Common Radio Council. Compiled by Jacques Ferrand, president of the Free World Association, the bulletin was distributed to 500 independent and foreign-language broadcasters across the nation. With the help of an old screenwriting partner, Bernard Feins, now an agent with MCA, Scott also worked to get the screenplay of *Crossfire* published as a book, with the proceeds to be donated to charity. Feins was enthusiastic—"I feel strongly this project is a natural and most important, important"—and offered advice on format, publishers, advertising strategies, and so on. Though Feins suggested they approach Simon and Schuster, which was then handling *Gentleman's Agreement*, Scott took the project to his friend Bennett Cerf at Random House.<sup>11</sup>

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Scott also gave a number of public talks in which he made a point of discussing the film's political message. In June 1947, he spoke on *Crossfire* to a group of Jewish students on the Hillel Council at the University of Southern California and to 600 members of the American Veterans Committee (AVC), founded in 1944 as a progressive alternative to such veterans groups as the American Legion. An article in the *AVC News* brought the lecture to the attention of RKO executives, and Scott soon received an interstudio memo from Leon Bamberger, admonishing him: "If we are going to try to keep these items out of publicity I am sure you will agree that such handling should be started at the studio." Scott fired back his own memo, criticizing the studio's publicity strategy: "It is my opinion that it is impossible to keep the subject of this picture a secret. When the picture is released a number of columnists and commentators will pick it up and discuss the subject. Their comments inevitably will reach a public that is not the usual motion picture-goers. From the comment the picture should benefit incalculably." Scott

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noted that the AVC audience had been extremely enthusiastic about a film exposing the problem of anti-Semitism, and the AVC leadership—representing 100,000 members nationally—expressed interest in sponsoring the opening of the film. Schary, however, felt this was "not wise," urging instead that they invite "endorsement without our seeking it and this the AVC will give us."<sup>12</sup>

Scott was also critical of RKO's advertising strategy for *Crossfire*. Instead of the single national ad campaign, he suggested a more sophisticated marketing approach that recognized regional audience variation: "Where there are groups adult enough to understand and want this sort of picture, I think we should lay it on the line frankly. Where ignorance or indifference prevails I think the teaser approach is the best. I believe we have an untapped public for this picture. . . . I think we ought to get 'em."<sup>13</sup> 29

Predictably, RKO ignored Scott's advice and marketed *Crossfire* as a traditional murder mystery. The studio's publicity campaign covered all major media outlets: radio and print advertisements, promotional materials such as reviews, star biographies, and interviews prepared by RKO publicists, merchandise tie-ins, and a marketing package for exhibitors that included full-size posters and glossy photographs, window cards, lobby cards, slides, and suggestions for in-theater contests and games.<sup>14</sup> RKO spent an enormous sum of money advertising *Crossfire*, blanketing the nation with print ads in a staggered campaign that ran from late June through September. The publicity department developed four different ads, which appeared in major lifestyle slicks such as *Look*, *Life*, *Collier's*, and *The Saturday Evening Post*; in upscale news magazines such as *Time* and *Newsweek*; and in the major fan magazines such as *Modern Screen* and *Screen Romances*. RKO even advertised their ad campaign to prospective exhibitors, promising, "Provocative Magazine Ads Such As These—Stimulate Interest in *Crossfire*, Screen's Most Unusual Story. . . . National Weeklies, Leading Fan Publications, Arouse Expectancy of Picture Patrons Toward Mystery Murder Drama 'That Had to Be Made!'" 30

The full-page ad that kicked off *Crossfire*'s publicity campaign appeared first in *Time* on June 30, reaching 1,554,323 readers. Running nearly a month before the film officially opened, this ad set the "teaser" tone for the rest of the campaign. The investigative thriller theme was emphasized in the very graphics: a photograph of Robert Young as Finlay fills the top half of the page, dominating the smaller pictures below him. Finlay, looking very serious, dour, and even puzzled, holds his pipe in one hand and a gun in the other as if proffering it to the viewer. The text ballooned off his shoulder refers only obliquely to the film's anti-anti-Semitism theme, quoting a brief passage from Finlay's exhortation speech to Leroy: "Some people carry HATE inside of them like a loaded gun. And 31

if they carry it too long, it goes off AND KILLS . . . the way it killed a stranger last night!" In the bottom half of the page, a cut-out head shot of Robert Mitchum as Keeley looks up at Finlay, inquiringly, as if expecting him to have the answer. The blurb at his shoulder reads ". . . the hero who recovered the rage he thought he lost on the battlefield—to help avenge the killing!" And below Keeley is a column of inset photos with accompanying taglines. At the top is Robert Ryan, glowering below heavy eyebrows, with the descriptor, ". . . the ex-Army sergeant who thought he knew all the answers!" In the middle is Gloria Grahame, provocatively posed with chin on hand, described as ". . . the dance-hall girl who met a lot of men—but how was she to remember *all* of them!" Below her, anxiously looking off to the side, is Jacqueline White—"The wife who begged an alibi from her rival—to save her husband from the chair!" This, the campaign's most generic ad, was run again on July 26 for the nearly 4 million readers of the *Saturday Evening Post*, and in the September issues of three major fan magazines, *Movie Show*, *Screenland*, and *Silver Screen*, with a combined circulation of 1,165,227.

The second ad ran one week later, in the July 7 edition of *Life*, and again in *Collier's* on July 19 (reaching a combined circulation of 9 million readers). This ad epitomized the "whodunit" approach, describing each of the characters as a "type" and offering a number of suspects for murder. Hinting obliquely at the political angle, the ad pitched *Crossfire* as a thriller with a difference, with a headline reading, "These are the people who tell the screen's most daring story!" The graphics feature head shots of the stars arranged in a checkerboard pattern, with a tagline underneath each photo. In the top row, Finlay with his pipe and fedora looks intense; his blurb reads, "Relentless detective, confronted with the most baffling murder case of his career!" Beside him is Keeley, looking a bit distant, with the tag line: "Cynical and secretive sergeant . . . did he know more than he dared reveal?" And Robert Ryan is glowering, moody, his eyes hidden in the shadow of his brows: "Tough and full of hate . . . but did he have a *special* reason to kill?" In the next row, George Cooper looks rather greasy and hung over: "Lonely, down in the dumps . . . was he a brutal killer without a memory?" And Gloria Grahame, in the center of the checkerboard, again looks sultry and provocative, her chin resting on her hand and a knowing look on her face: "Many men sought Ginny . . . especially when they were lonely!" In the bottom left corner, below Cooper and oblique to Grahame, is Jacqueline White, her photo a bit askew so that she seems to be looking up at her husband and her rival: "To save her husband, she braved a truth that might cost her marriage!" The romantic triangle and innuendo of marital infidelity are suggested by both the graphic layout and the "loneliness" attributed to Cooper and Grahame's characters. And finally, at the bottom, is a remarkably unflattering shot of Sam Levene, his photo also askew and his head bent down. He appears a bit hunched and his eyebrows dominate his moon-shaped face. With his eyes raised, almost

imploing, he bears a striking resemblance to Harpo Marx. His tag line reads: "Just a stranger . . . why did anyone want to kill him?" In the very corner of the ad is a charcoal drawing of a man being strangled. This ad, though introducing the characters in "whodunit" style, hinted at the political message obliquely through the suggestion of a "special" reason to kill in the tagline by Ryan's photo.

The third ad, which appeared on July 14 in *Newsweek*, and again on August 5 in *Look* (reaching a total readership of over 3 million), used stills from the film rather than head shots of the actors. The headline "Whose were the hands that killed this man . . . What was the motive?" accompanies a cropped still from *Crossfire's* opening scene: a man in khakis, seen only from the waist down, his hands hanging limply—yet menacingly—over the body of Sam Levene sprawled dead on the floor. In a side bar, three stills feature other "couples" from the film: a photo of Keeley and Mary with the blurb, "Were they the hands of the tough, cynical sergeant, who refused to tell all he knew?" Below that appears a photo of the adulterous couple, Mitch and Ginny; they embrace, looking deeply into each other's eyes, above the line "Were they the hands of the lonely artist whose only alibi was a gin-mill blonde?" Next is a shot of the "deviant" couple, Monty and Floyd, in the scene before Monty kills his "buddy." The tagline to this shot reads, "Were they the hands of the cocksure ex-army sergeant who thought he knew all the answers?" At the very bottom of the page is a photo of Finlay, smoking his pipe and looking thoughtful. This picture stands out from those above it, both because it is a cut-out head shot rather than a still from the film, and because Finlay is the only "solo" character in the ad. The text below Finlay's photograph is the most explicit thus far in the advertising campaign, and its visual link with the character of the detective reinforces the importance of the narrative of investigation. The text, however, emphasizes not the plot, but the political point, albeit obliquely: "This is the story of an outrage . . . the story of how one man's evil hatred led to another man's murder . . . a story that had to be told . . . that took daring and courage to tell . . . that will leave its savage imprint forever in your memory." This is certainly the most "menacing" ad of the series, and the use of stills from the film lends authenticity to the ad copy, particularly to the scene of the murder. Interestingly, Sam Levene appears in only two of the four ads—posed as a dead body on the floor in one of them.

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The final ad ran in the August 2 edition of *Liberty*, as well as in the September issues of three other fan magazines, *Modern Screen*, *Screen Romances*, and *Movieland and Screen Guide*. This ad is particularly reminiscent of 1940s pulp fiction paperback covers, with vigorous graphics and a blazing banner headline in the upper left corner that screams "Murder! Manhunt!" A full-figure, "cheesecake" drawing of Gloria Grahame in a sexy pose, feet arranged prettily, one hand on her hips, bisects photo cutouts of the heads of the three Roberts, with Robert Young

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alone to her right and Mitchum and Ryan grouped together to her left. A drawing of the dead body and the soldier's lower body looms in the lower left-hand corner. Opposite that is a drawing of Monty, trapped in the street, looking for a way out. In small print above Young's head, the "serious" text reads: "Raw-nerve realism and terrific excitement thrill . . . In this high suspense drama of the kind of a killer who makes you mad all over."

In addition to the print ads, RKO also prepared a series of one-minute radio spots, notable only for their Hollywood hyperbole. One ad screamed, for example, "*Crossfire!* A scathing denunciation of hatred within our midst. A picture which tears the pretty language off an ugly outrage. *Crossfire!* Starring Robert Young, Robert Ryan, and Robert Mitchum, in a terrific drama!" A second ad attempted to implicate the audience into the unnamed problem: "This is your picture . . . It's about a subject you know . . . It's a tale of a murderer you live with . . . It's *Crossfire*, a stark drama of a senseless hatred. For the first time the screen shows prejudice for what it is. *Crossfire* . . . blazing, dangerous and tremendous." 35

In-theater advertising was a critical component of the studios' publicity strategy in an era when the average American attended the movies two or three times a week. The RKO publicity department developed an elaborate saturation campaign for use by theater owners. The publicists recommended that exhibitors begin with teaser ads that could be printed in theater programs, used as window signs, or even run in local newspapers. The teasers were simple black-and-white ads, with *Crossfire* emblazoned across the center and a banner headline above the title. These headlines were, as promised, teasing: "Hate Is Like a Loaded Gun!" and "Its Drama Blisters the Screen!" and "If They Gave Oscars for Courage—This Picture Would Get It!" Space was provided at the bottom to insert the name of the theater and the film's opening date. Exhibitors were instructed to use these ads "as far in advance as your situation warrants." 36

The RKO publicity department also provided "follow-through" ads, a "natural second-step" to the teasers. Exhibitors were instructed to run these ads several weeks before displaying the larger display posters and film stills. These follow-up ads eschewed photographs from the film in favor of lurid graphics reminiscent of pulp fiction paperbacks. Each of the ads featured blazing text and drawings of the disembodied heads of the film's stars—Robert Young, Robert Ryan, Robert Mitchum, and Gloria Grahame. Two of the ads also featured a line drawing of a body sprawled face-down on the ground. The headlines are strikingly sensationalistic: "An Outrage!" "It'll Knock You Over!" and "Sensational? No! It's Dynamite!" The most interesting ad includes taglines with the drawings, providing snapshot guidelines to "understanding" each of the characters and constructing the film unmistakably as a traditional Hollywood thriller. Perhaps attempting to 37

create suspense, the tagline below Ryan's picture reads, "Me kill? Why should I kill a stranger?" while the tagline below Mitchum's picture reads, "Sure, I've killed. But I got medals for it!"

The third step in the in-theater advertising campaign was full-size movie posters, lobby and window signs, and glossy star photos for lobby display. The posters and signs featured banner headlines screaming the "teaser" themes: "killing without motive," "taboo theme," and "the ultimate victim of prejudice and bigotry." The word "anti-Semitism" never actually appears in any of this material; the farthest these ads were willing to go is to describe the murder as "a killing based on religious bigotry." The most incredible publicity-still, however, is the photo clip from the opening scene, with the unidentifiable killer—seen only from the waist down—standing over Samuels's body. In the wake of the Holocaust, the headline is almost terrorizing to contemplate: "His Only Crime Was Living!"

The RKO publicity department also provided clippings of reviews as well as plot summaries, star biographies, and articles for reprint in theater programs. First-run theaters often provided programs for their patrons, mimicking the practice of live stage theaters to lend an air of "class" to the moviegoing experience. The studio offered five different plot summary options, allowing exhibitors to choose the version they felt was most appropriate for their local audience. There is markedly little variation, however, in these summaries. Four of the five don't actually use the term anti-Semitism; instead they simply refer to the "murder of a Jewish ex-serviceman." The fifth is as brave as RKO could get: "The springboard of the story is the murder of a Jewish ex-serviceman for the sole reason that he is a Jew."

The star biographies reflected the screen personas so assiduously cultivated by the studios. The biography of Robert Young, for example, while emphasizing a new screen role for him, recapitulates his family-man persona: "Young is a heavy contributor to charity; but he is not charitable toward night clubs, which would go out of existence if dependent on such a home-lover as he." The biography of Robert Mitchum constructs him as a city boy, emphasizing his rebelliousness, his working-class roots, his "regular guy" attitude, and supplying factoids such as "he wears no makeup on the screen," and "just as his approach to life is casual and unconventional so is his dress." Mitchum's own "real life" history was used to advantage by the studio in the project: "There was a long period in his life when lady luck looked the other way. He had odd jobs, on a freighter, as a machinist, factory work. Memories of these years stay with him, and he is determined not to 'go Hollywood.'"

The biographical material on Robert Ryan is even more fascinating, constructing

him as a thinking man's real man:

When one first meets Ryan, it is hard to think of him as an artist, a writer, an actor. Standing 6 ft. 3 inches, and with his 194 pounds packed solidly on a lean frame, he brings to mind a football player, a boxer, a man of action. But beneath his surface hardness there lies a desire to reach for the highest in artistic expression, and the desire is still there in spite of the battering Ryan took during the depression, when he took such odd jobs as sand-hog, seaman, chauffeur, bill-collector and laborer. While in the Marine Corps, with no outlet for his interest in dramatics, Ryan turned to painting, and in his leisure hours dabbled away at canvas with oils.

Ryan's "hobbies"—according to the PR department—are horses, novels, and contemporary politics. He is a family man "with no inclination to gad about in the bright spots," and he does the same chores around the house that "most husbands" do—he mows the lawn, dries the dishes, takes the baby for a stroll. As with Mitchum, the studio worked to cast Ryan's personal history in an "everyman" model: "Considered one of the most promising stars to appear on the Hollywood horizon in many years, and with a salary of four figures a week, Ryan recalls only too clearly the days when living was a day-to-day affair. He acts accordingly, has no airs, no pretensions."

The studio publicity machine also made much of Ryan's decision to play the heavy in *Crossfire*. An article entitled "Despite Baleful Onus Ryan Chose Heavy Role" valorizes Ryan for his bravery in accepting such a part:

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It isn't every up-and-coming movie star who will take an obnoxious role in a screenplay over the protests of practically all his friends and advisers. Robert Ryan did! . . . "Nobody'll love me after this," said Ryan. "But the problem is one to be dragged into the light. If I can center public contempt of a hateful type, I'll feel I'm doing something worthwhile. So, career or not, I'll chance it!

In contrast, the studio marketing materials did little to pitch Sam Levene to the American public. There are no "star" biographies of Levene, though that may simply reflect that fact that his role was comparatively small. There is no article like that featuring Ryan, however, touting Levene's "courage" in accepting such a controversial role in such a controversial film. Similarly, there is no public exploration of Levene's feelings, as a Jew, about playing the victim of murderous anti-Semitism, no opportunity for him to comment publicly on his own commitment to "dragging this problem into the light." Levene does emerge once, however—and most tellingly—from between the cracks in RKO's monolithic marketing strategy. The program for the Rivoli Theater, which reprinted excerpts from the star biographies of Robert Young and Robert Mitchum, also includes a behind-the-scenes anecdote on the filming of *Crossfire*:

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Make-up Man Charles Dudley had a relatively easy time of it during the shooting of *Crossfire*, for Director Dmytryk is a realist who insists that his male stars use no make-up. In the case of Sam Levene, however, it was different. Since Levene has a scene in which he is a corpse, a problem arose when it was found that the "dead" man was perspiring under the hot incandescents. The result was that Dudley had to apply many coats of heavy, protective powder to absorb the beads of sweat so they would not show on Levene's face.<sup>15</sup>

Read against the manly biographies and the "realistic" and natural faces of the Gentile stars, this anecdote presents a Sam Levene who is distinctly different and, indeed, Other—a sweaty (dirty?) Jew, a feminized man who must wear makeup while the real men remain "natural."

Not surprisingly, Sam Levene is absent from the merchandising tie-ins that played on the actors' screen personas. Apparently, RKO was unable to imagine a product that Levene might help to advertise. A series of "specially posed stills suitable for window displays and counter use" for advertising Old Spice toiletries featured a photo of Robert Ryan, in a suit, smiling and holding a bottle of Old Spice, and one of Jacqueline White, smiling in an off-the-shoulder blouse, dabbing perfume behind her ear. Photos advertising the Sunbeam Shavemaster featured the manly Mitchum and Ryan posed with electric razors. An advertisement for Decca Records played on Mitchum's rebel persona; the photo shows him looking like a real hep cat, snapping his fingers, his hair falling over his forehead. The merchandising tie-ins also played with the images of specific characters in *Crossfire*. Thus, the photo still for Rowe Vending Cigarette Machines features B-girl Ginny (Gloria Grahame), smiling, leaning into the cigarette machine, in a low-cut black gown, while the photo for Modern Hygiene Vacuum Cleaners features good wife Mary (Jacqueline White) in a house dress and heels next to an easy chair, holding the vacuum hose. And smiling, of course.

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*Box Office Slant*, a trade paper for film exhibitors, collaborated with RKO's efforts to manage the marketing of *Crossfire*. Explaining the film's message to theater owners, the magazine suggested that screening *Crossfire* was something of a public service:

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It is the theme of Jew hating, Catholic hating, etc., usually carefully avoided in the film industry up to now, that brings a poisonous thing out into the open and uses the powerful medium of the screen to call a spade a spade and to try to do something about it. This is not a crusade, but it is a powerful argument for the elimination of intolerance, and it is this fact that gives the picture so many angles for an exploitation campaign that can very well be close to a civic enterprise where the film is shown.

However, the magazine also warned theater owners that the film required special

marketing strategies: "Handle the intolerance angle with extreme care." *Box Office Slant* urged that exhibitors follow the guidelines prepared by RKO to avoid "pitfalls," noting that "the controversy can be a weapon in the hands of smart showmen; improperly handled it can be a boomerang." Nonetheless, *Box Office Slant* also promised a solid return for exhibitors: "The fact that this is the first film which brings intolerance into the open and does it powerfully, opens the gates to extraordinary exploitation possibilities. Good marquee names and a top-notch story, in addition, are certain to make this one of the most talked-about films yet produced, resulting in top box-office potentialities."<sup>16</sup>

In July 1947, syndicated entertainment columnist Billy Rose took direct aim at RKO's publicity strategy: "I think these ads are pretty stale. They employ such chewed-over phrases as 'It's Sensational! It's Dynamite! It's Coming!' They make it sound like just another cops-and-robbers program picture." Rose believed *Crossfire* was "much too important a picture to be advertised like a catchpenny potboiler," noting that on "18,000 screens it can do more good than a whole passel of tolerance societies with fancy names on the stationery." Arguing that the advertising strategy would ultimately backfire on RKO, he wrote:

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I think it sick-making that some Eastern promotion executive hasn't got the moxie to advertise it for what it is. Even in terms of dollars and cents, I think he's a chump. My guess as a showman is that this 'fraidy-cat policy will cost this movie at least a million domestic at the box office. A smart and literate job of pre-selling it would be a cinch to create the kind of talk that fills theaters. And I'd like to see *Crossfire* play to a lot of people. I think an occasional departure from passion, platitudes and popcorn can only make our screens more interesting. Once a month I think Joe Citizen and his missus should be able to walk into an American movie theater without checking their minds at the door. When you see *Crossfire*, I think you'll be proud it could have been made in this country. If you're a right guy, you'll be ashamed it had to be.<sup>17</sup>

Others, however, disagreed with Rose's critique and wrote to Schary to express their approval of RKO's publicity campaign. MGM publicist Bernard Feins enthused, "To my way of thinking it was simultaneously the most industry-dignifying, ticket-selling campaign yet to hit this town."<sup>18</sup> J. R. Cominsky, of the *Saturday Review of Literature*, approved of the "thriller" emphasis, arguing, "I think your promotion people are sound in trying to interest the masses in any way that will get them to see the film." However, he also believed that RKO should develop a second ad campaign, to run in major cosmopolitan dailies like the *New York Times* and the *Daily News* and aimed at "readers of a higher I.Q.," which would advertise "very frankly and bluntly" that *Crossfire's* theme was anti-Semitism. Apparently, Cominsky tried this on several of his friends. Though not avid moviegoers, they became eager to see *Crossfire*

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once he explained that it was not just another hard-boiled thriller as the ad campaign suggested, but a serious, even highbrow film.<sup>19</sup> Schary, defender of the taste of "ordinary" Americans, replied with great diplomacy: "I, too, do not believe with Billy Rose that the campaign was wrong. I think they [RKO's admen] had a difficult job, and I think they handled it very well."<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps recognizing the inadequacies of RKO's ad campaign, however, Schary also agreed to "star" in a publicity trailer for *Crossfire* that hinted, albeit very obliquely, at the film's political message. "The basic theme was Schary patting himself on the back for his courage," remembers Leonard Neubauer, head of RKO's trailer department in the 1940s. "This was a political move by Scott and Dmytryk, who wanted to 'butter up' their boss." Written by Scott and Neubauer, and directed by Neubauer while Scott stood behind the camera (perhaps part of his training to direct on his own), the trailer "didn't say 'this is about a Jew hater.' Instead, it was a general tease. This was a purely commercial decision. The goal was to say 'this movie is gonna give you a real wallop,' but not to tell them what the wallop was."<sup>21</sup> 48

Presented as a "personal message" from RKO's head of production, the trailer opened with Schary sitting behind his executive desk, explaining to the audience that, while many in the film industry doubted whether moviegoers wanted to see such "outspoken" entertainment, Schary, "remembering the success of films like *Grapes of Wrath* and *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang*," forged courageously ahead, certain that "audiences still want to see courageous motion pictures." Schary then explained earnestly for the camera and the audience that *Crossfire* was rushed into completion and tested before "ordinary" Americans, whose response to the film proved the filmmakers right. Thus, Schary, the champion of the taste and integrity of the "little people," continued, 49

Ordinarily we picture-makers use words like sensational, terrific and colossal to describe our product. But this time you, the American picture audience gave us our words and here they are: "*Crossfire* is one of the best pictures I've seen in years." "At last Hollywood comes of age." "I and my whole family compliment you on your honesty and courage." "Don't cut one frame or one word of *Crossfire*." "I shall remember *Crossfire* as long as I live."<sup>22</sup>

### The Critical Response

*Crossfire* premiered "in a blaze of glory" at RKO's Rivoli Theater in New York on July 22, 1947. According to the *Radio Flash*, RKO's exhibition newsletter, "[C]rowds started storming the theatre hours before opening, despite rainy weather. Soon after the opening, there were standees in the back of the house . . . [and the] first day's gross was the highest of any RKO picture to play the Rivoli." 50

The program continued, "a glance at the line in front of the theater waiting to buy tickets brought home the fact that here was a true cross-section of all types of people attesting to the GENERAL appeal of this unusual film."<sup>23</sup> Despite RKO's best attempts to sell the movie as a conventional murder mystery, film critics across the nation followed Billy Rose's lead in "outing" *Crossfire* as an exposé of the dangers of anti-Semitism. In the flurry of reviews that followed the film's premiere at the Rivoli, there was widespread consensus that the film was a "first" for Hollywood. Across the board, critics applauded *Crossfire's* "courageousness" in challenging a long-standing Hollywood taboo and expressed their belief that the film performed an important public service in bringing the problem of American anti-Semitism out into the open.

Two of New York's leading cultural arbiters, Archer Winsten, film critic for the *New York Post*, and Bosley Crowther of the *New York Times*, set the tone for the film's reception. Winsten described *Crossfire* as "a step into another world of thinking and doing. Here's a picture that recognizes a rotten spot in American democracy, shows what it looks and sounds like, traces a tragic result and states the counterbelief. This is the first time in the movie experience of this writer that anti-Semitism has been handled openly, with complete definition, in the notoriously timid motion picture industry."<sup>24</sup> Bosley Crowther crowed, "An unqualified A for effort in bringing to the screen a frank and immediate demonstration of the brutality of religious bigotry as it festers and fires ferocity in certain seemingly normal American minds. . . . For here, without hints or subterfuges, they have come right out and shown that such malice—in this case anti-Jewish—is a dark and explosive sort of hate which, bred of ignorance and intolerance, can lead to extreme violence."<sup>25</sup> A week later, Crowther wrote a second review, again praising the film for boldly attacking anti-Semitism, "a canker which festers and poisonously infects the very vitals of American democracy." Pointing to all the timid evasions in films like *The House of Rothschild*, *Disraeli*, *Zola*, *Mr. Skeffington*, and *The Hucksters*, he predicted a new wave of political filmmaking in Hollywood, "now that this hard-hitting *Crossfire* has come right out and said that there is such a thing as intolerance of some people just because of their names or their creeds or their pigmentation—and that such intolerance can lead to violent wrongs."<sup>26</sup> Billy Rose, in his syndicated column "Pitching Horseshoes," made the same point in his own more colorful, colloquial style:

Around reel two, I realized I was looking at a Hollywood picture which had the guts to be important. Out of the land of flapdoodle and nymphomania had finally come a movie which had something to say and wasn't afraid to say it. And it was saying it with boxing gloves, not dancing pumps. . . . *Crossfire* is the first Hollywood picture I remember seeing which has had the courage to speak right out about something that 140,000,000 people

have been thinking about for a long time—race hatred.<sup>27</sup>

James Agee, writing for *The Nation*, was more critical. Though he found the "serious stuff"—the anti-Semitism angle—"very good and very heartening," he was uncomfortable with the very idea of an anti-anti-Semitism film: "In a way it is as embarrassing to see a movie *Come Right Out Against Anti-Semitism* as it would be to see a movie *Come Right Out Against torturing children*." Agee was also quick to deflate the "bravery" of Hollywood, seeing instead "safe fearlessness." Though he did not doubt the good intentions of the filmmakers—citing only Schary by name—he also noted that "at best, Hollywood's heroism is calculated to land buttered side up. Movies about Anti-Semitism aren't so desperately chancy, after all. Millions of people will look forward to them if only for the questionable excitement of hearing actors throw the word 'Jew' around." Agee also argued that the filmmakers equivocated on the issue of discrimination against African Americans, noting, "They have the sardonic courage to preach the main persuaders to a Southern boy, taking painfully embarrassing care never to mention Negroes; but they lack the courage to make that omission inescapably clear to the audience."<sup>28</sup>

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Interestingly, the most overtly political review appeared, not in the radical press, but in a magazine called *Nite-Life*: "Anti-Semitism—here in our midst, and not in some far-off land of tyrants—is the theme, and whodunit the style, a combination that packs a mighty wallop, pulls no punches, and defies the audience to sit back for a snooze. If this be propaganda, then perhaps it is what the movie industry has been needing all along." The reviewer, Maxine Garrison, was one of the only commentators to draw explicit parallels between European fascism and American anti-Semitism:

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History itself has shown too plainly how the small social and economic injustices can be built into mass murder against which a whole nation fails to raise its voice—or has everyone forgotten Nazi Germany and the Jews, and our own hideous record of lynchings, to name just two instances. The individual history of anti-Semitism in *Crossfire* is violent indeed, but in its violence lies not only the necessary drama for a first film of this kind but also the only-too-logical outcome of the small intolerances carelessly practiced by so many. . . . All Hollywood can be proud of *Crossfire*, and can hope that it really does herald a new era in which entertainment will not be afraid of the so often disregarded facts of life.<sup>29</sup>

In contrast, critical commentary in the radical press, though particularly enthusiastic, was barely distinguishable from the mainstream reviews in terms of content. Nevertheless, the *Daily Worker's* cultural critic, David Platt, virtually served as a one-man publicity unit for *Crossfire*, writing four articles on the film over the course of the summer. Platt was the first to "expose" the film's

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anti-Semitism theme in an article on July 11. Though he was not supposed to review the film until it opened later that month, Platt could not contain himself. Taking advantage of his advance access to the screenplay, he printed Finlay's "propaganda" speech to Leroy in its entirety, concluding, "Not since Charlie Chaplin's eloquent six-minute appeal for brotherhood at the end of *The Great Dictator* in 1940 has anything this powerful come across the screen. Hats off to *Crossfire*."<sup>30</sup> Platt's official review two weeks later urged, "Everyone should see *Crossfire* [because] it frankly links anti-Semitism with murder, brands the anti-Semite as a dangerous menace to society who must be stopped."<sup>31</sup> A later *Daily Worker* review by John Ross praised *Crossfire* as "an intelligent film, a film of integrity. . . . Dramatically, this film has all the tension and smoothness of a well-made whodunit, but it has much more—a real ring of authenticity that very few American films attain."<sup>32</sup> The Southern edition of *The Worker* also brought *Crossfire* to the attention of the masses, printing an article by Robert Ryan entitled, "My Role in *Crossfire*."<sup>33</sup>

Cecelia Ager, writing for the Popular Front daily, *PM*, enthused: "With one clean blow, a long-festering, a sniveling, a contemptible movie taboo is smashed. To *Crossfire* for shattering it, for naming names, for squaring up, for looking straight at the world we live in—our profound gratitude and deep respect. The movie audience and the industry are in its everlasting debt for being shown that a movie can be both good, and about something." Emphasizing the melding of the political message with a thriller plot, she argued, "The valuable thing about *Crossfire* is that it's primarily and above all an exciting movie. It's above all a knock-out job of movie-making. It's above all 'entertainment.' For *Crossfire* is wholly absorbing, virile, direct, dramatic, suspense-packed—as well as extraordinarily articulate." Ager particularly applauded the film's frank language, writing, "It feels fine, hearing at last 'Jew-boy' and 'Jew' and 'Jewish person' from the screen. It's like hard rain after a long-brooding thunderstorm. It clears the air. It brings release. It spreads elation."<sup>34</sup>

Indeed, one of the reasons *Crossfire* seemed so refreshingly daring was Monty's overt use of racial slurs. Several other critics were both shocked and exhilarated to hear words that were largely forbidden by the Production Code. The reviewer at *Time Magazine* found "its accurately ugly talk" especially memorable, and wrote, "It is exciting to hear anti-Semitism discussed openly in a movie."<sup>35</sup> Another critic noted, "It comes as something of a shock to hear that word [Jewboy] roll off the soundtrack. I would like to hear it oftener. I would like to hear it so often that it would become obscene, like the words we are not allowed to use in print. Then perhaps, we would begin to regard anti-Semitism as a blight and not as a sociological problem to be discussed in high-academic tones."<sup>36</sup> Even the reviewer for the *New Yorker*, a magazine that rarely found anything praiseworthy

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in Hollywood films, was struck by the language:

If *Crossfire* . . . didn't have the word 'Jew' on its sound track, it would be a favored candidate for that crowded hamper where hackneyed mystery pictures go. The frankness of its dialogue, however, often makes the piece exciting, which is beyond the power of the plot. There is no attempt to use any euphemisms for that troublesome term 'Jew,' and most of the xenophobic nonsense that one hears so constantly these days is bluntly attacked. There isn't much of a mystery about who did it, but the dialogue frequently has enough shock effect to jolt you out of your indifference.<sup>37</sup>

Similarly, Robert Ryan's portrayal of Monty struck a chord with almost every reviewer, suggesting a widespread recognition of the truth in his performance. The postwar understanding of the anti-Semitic personality is particularly evident in the emphasis on Monty's "pathology," his "brutishness," indeed, his very Otherness. Thus, for example, the critic for the *New York World* described Monty as "one of the loud ignorant bullies among whom racial prejudices seem to flourish more readily. . . . Robert Ryan is the vicious braggart, arrogantly proud of his ignorance and glorying in his freedom from both ideas and ideals."<sup>38</sup> According to the *New York Herald Tribune*, "The story's emotional force lies in the supreme hatefulness of a really noxious villain. . . . This killer is an overbearing, ignorant smart aleck. . . . The picture explores the facets of a warped personality through his arrogant conduct in a barroom, his brash and uninvited entry into the home of a chance Jewish acquaintance, and his rising drunken nastiness. . . . Eloquent close-ups show him airing his bigoted views with slack-lipped certainty."<sup>39</sup>

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The *Daily Worker* made the connection between the military and the fascist personality, describing Monty as a "regular Army type," a "prejudiced, ignorant, sadistic—the embryo Fascist, in fact,"<sup>40</sup> while Bosley Crowther linked him to a wide range of organized protofascist groups: "We clearly recognize his ugly type. Here is the bigot, the fanatic—loud-mouthed, self-assertive, narrow, cruel. Here is the Klansman, the bundist, the lynch mobster—the American fascist in the flesh. And in his solidier pals . . . we see a cross-section of the people who tolerate such characters heedlessly. True, the reasons for the hatred which poisons this anti-Semite's mind are not explained in this picture outside of the vague suggestions of ignorance, egoism and fear. That is a limitation of the melodramatic form."<sup>41</sup> Perhaps the most eloquent description, however, came from *PM's* Cecilia Ager:

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Especially vivid is Robert Ryan as the murderer, for there is time to study him to the last sickening detail. He is ignorant, and he feels his inferiority, but it so happens that he is physically strong and has a certain animal cunning. It follows naturally that he is a bully and a brute and a loud-mouth and a free loader, and that no one chooses to associate with

him, and that therefore he strives to crash the company of others by means of a gross charm, and when that fails, as it always must, to batter his way out. It follows naturally that he is a Jew-hater. . . . The basic truths about him are ignorance, inferiority, and so—murdering rage. Ryan's performance of his role is a masterpiece of revelation, as if his contempt for its ugliness drives him to search out its faintest nuance.<sup>42</sup>

In marked contrast to these lavishly vitriolic descriptions of Monty's authoritarian personality, the critics virtually ignored the film's representation of Jewishness and the character of Samuels. Certainly several reviewers praised Sam Levene's performance as Samuels: Bosley Crowther described him as "affectingly gentle in his brief bit as the Jewish victim," and the *Hollywood Reporter* commented that the casting of the "able Sam Levene" reflected the filmmakers' sense of the importance of the brief role.<sup>43</sup> Only one review went into any detail on the character of Samuels: "The Jew is the only man in sight who understands what ails the sensitive artist. He tries to help him, by inviting him to dinner."<sup>44</sup> Significantly, the *New Yorker* critic, arguing that the performance of [Sam Levene] is as good as you'll come across in a long, long time," privileged geographic over "racial" origins, describing Samuels as "a Jew, who might be anybody, from a Syrian to a Nova Scotian."<sup>45</sup> Though this comment might suggest that, despite his screen "history," Sam Levene was not immediately perceived as Jewish, it also may reflect Scott and Paxton's attempts to portray Samuels as an "everyman" whose Americanness superseded his Jewishness. If so, the *New Yorker* critic was the only one to pick up on it.

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Despite the heated debate among the Jewish organizations about *Crossfire*, only a few of the reviewers expressed concern about a possible backlash. Edwin Schallert of the *Los Angeles Times* merely noted that the film would divide the audience into two camps—those who felt the film was educational and those who believed it "feed[s] a dangerous flame by emphasizing it."<sup>46</sup> Archer Winsten of the *New York Post* noted, "There will always be people who object that public treatment is not the best method for such diseases of society as race prejudice. But others have a strong argument in the fact that most diseases of the mind and body thrive in the darkness and silence of those who try vainly to ignore an enemy out of existence."<sup>47</sup> As might be expected, conservative Hollywood gossip columnist Hedda Hopper had grave concerns about the film, fearing that "there's a possibility that *Crossfire* may backfire in its intent." Hopper praised the film, noting, "In the very first shot *Crossfire* grips your interest, because you see a man beaten to death merely because he's a Jew. And he's killed by an Army veteran still wearing his uniform. It's not a pretty sight, but the film has a mighty telling effect." Nevertheless, she argued that "placing emphasis on race" was not the best way to fight intolerance:

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I believe the subtle and entertaining propaganda Leo McCarey and Bing Crosby put over in *Going My Way* is more effective. The same thing may be said of *The Jolson Story*. After seeing the latter picture you don't leave the theater saying 'The film was about a Jewish family.' Rather, you say 'What a wonderful family!' Christians won't love Jews—or Jews Christians—just because a film tells them to. You love people, regardless of race or creed, because they're fine American citizens and because of their contributions to our country and to humanity. And it is on these lines that I believe pictures should place emphasis.<sup>48</sup>

Though most critics generally agreed that it was high time Hollywood addressed serious social issues, there was extensive debate over *Crossfire's* representation of anti-Semitism. Two issues were particularly controversial: Finlay's "propaganda" speech to Leroy and the film's focus on the "lunatic fringe" rather than "casual" anti-Semitism. Many applauded the speech, seeing not propaganda or preaching, but a stirring message woven into an exciting plot. Noting the rising interest in racial and religious intolerance among "some of the country's top writers in the last year," *Liberty Magazine* said: "The picture never preaches at the audience as it so easily might have done. For all its moral, it still is a mystery that is as terse as its title, *Crossfire*."<sup>49</sup> *Newsweek*, describing *Crossfire* as "one of the year's best films," argued that "[a]lthough *Crossfire* emphatically bears a message, it is less a preachment than an absorbing, suspenseful melodrama."<sup>50</sup> *Box Office Digest* agreed: "The suspense heightens, the characters grow more vividly real, the 'message' comes when you are yearning for it, and socks home with trip-hammer force. The theme is not injected by the story-teller, it is part and parcel of the fabric."<sup>51</sup>

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Other reviewers were not so complimentary. *Life Magazine* fired the opening salvo on the other side. Though *Life* described *Crossfire* as a "grade-A thriller" and chose the film as its "Movie of the Week" in its July 30 edition, the review was markedly critical of the handling of its "controversial" theme. "By making their murdering sergeant a villain of the deepest dye, the creators of *Crossfire* discourage the audience from disliking him solely for being a Jew-hater," the *Life* reviewer argued. "He also becomes unbelievable: a man whose feeling against Jews is so intense that it drives him to murder seems far removed from the problems of a nation whose anti-Semitism is expressed largely in the insidious but less spectacular methods of social discrimination." Finlay's "litany" of intolerances also came in for special criticism: "*Crossfire* is also marred by the reduction of reasoning to absurdity ('If we hate Jews today, we may hate men who wear striped neckties tomorrow.')"<sup>52</sup>

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Kate Cameron, reviewer for the *New York Daily News*, agreed with *Life's* assessment, arguing that the message got confused in the melodrama. Pointing particularly to the "striped necktie" comment, she wrote witheringly that the film's

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arguments against "the spread of this poisonous hate" are "specious and tend to make the problem, as presented here, ridiculous, rather than a serious threat to peaceful relations between all the peoples that make up our population." Cameron believed that only an "appeal to reason" could combat anti-Semitism. Unable to find that in *Crossfire*, she looked forward to the release of *Gentleman's Agreement*, hoping that film would be "less impassioned and more reasonable."<sup>53</sup> Though Otis L. Guernsey Jr., writing for the *New York Herald Tribune*, praised *Crossfire* as a "savage melodrama" and "as grimly realistic as a brass-knuckled punch in the jaw," he also found Finlay's "harangue" "extraneous, irritating and condescending," since the point had already been made dramatically. Even Archer Winsten, who clearly applauded the film, wrote, "It is too bad that *Crossfire's* single weakness, a tendency towards diagrammatic simplicity of propaganda, should be as extensive as it is. This brings into question many parts of the picture which should not be questioned at all. It makes some of the speeches sound as if they had been planted for propaganda effect. . . . *Crossfire* could have been a subtle, brave and great film. It is a right-thinking, brave and worthy film."<sup>54</sup>

Similarly, a handful of reviewers were critical of the film's focus on the "lunatic fringe" of anti-Semitism. For example, *Washington Daily News* critic Tom Donnelly tellingly titled his review, "But It's Not About You and Me," and took the film to task for letting the audience off the hook.<sup>55</sup> Alton Cook of the *New York World*, pointing out that in the past Hollywood had shied away from the "explosive" theme of anti-Semitism, argued that *Crossfire* should not "be blamed for making a slow start." Though he praised the film for dramatizing "the combination of apathy and fear which promote these evil discriminations," he was disappointed that "all these brave ideas are pretty well smothered in the hubbub of a murder story."<sup>56</sup> Similarly, the *Time Magazine* reviewer argued that "chances are that this well-meant film will exasperate at least as many anti-Semites as it dissuades. It is gruesome to watch such a character as that played by Robert Ryan. But his hatred is so extravagant that most semiconscious anti-Semites will just comfortably set themselves apart from him."<sup>57</sup> Edwin Schallert of the *Los Angeles Times* agreed, writing, "The man who kills in the picture harbors hate against the Jewish race. . . . He is the victim of an insane aberration. It is an aberration that might have been stirred up by anti-Semitism or anything else for he is basically a homicidal maniac. So from that standpoint *Crossfire* can never be regarded as having any great documentary significance, but it is a fascinating picture regardless."<sup>58</sup>

The Hollywood trade press followed the lead of the film critics. Arguing that *Crossfire* "sets the standard for frankness, sincerity and thoughtfulness," the *Motion Picture Herald* proclaimed, "It can be easily predicted that this feature will find no lukewarm reception. Audiences will either be appreciative for it or

violently against it and there will be plenty of discussion."<sup>59</sup> *Daily Variety* reported, "Producer Dore Schary, in association with Adrian Scott, has pulled no punches. There is no skirting such relative fol-de-rol as intermarriage or clubs that exclude Jews. Here is a hard-hitting film whose whodunit aspects are fundamentally incidental to the overall thesis of bigotry and race prejudice. Ryan [is] a commanding personality, in this instance the bigoted soldier-killer, whose sneers and leers about Sam Levene and his tribe are all too obvious." Commending the film's flashback technique and Dmytryk's direction, *Variety* argued, "It deserves to do well at the box office because of its message. . . . It would be to the demerit of the American film public should *Crossfire* fail to get [box office] support."<sup>60</sup>

In fact, *Crossfire* performed tremendously at the box office. "The size of the box office reception to the daring attraction can be spelled 'smash'," said the *Hollywood Reporter*. Soon after the New York City premiere at the Rivoli Theater, Hollywood insider Red Kann devoted an entire column to the film, reprinting juicy quotes from the New York film critics and reporting on box-office performance. According to Kann, *Crossfire* "did better than \$8,000 on its opening day, in excess of \$7,000 on its second day and was heading toward \$7,000 last night." If the trend continued toward the anticipated \$55,000 in its first week, he reported, *Crossfire* would give the Rivoli its biggest week so far in 1947 and take in twice as much as *The Farmer's Daughter* for the same seven-week run. "Interesting things are already taking place there. On Wednesday evening, for instance, there was one time when the theatre was full and plenty of paying customers had to wait for an hour for seats; they waited, too. Not completely unusual, but unusual enough, was the fact patrons took the trouble to compliment the management of the calibre of the attraction." Once *Crossfire* shows it can make money, Kann commented, its success would begin to break down "whatever resistance may have reared its head on the part of exhibitors who are speculative about any hard-hitting film concerning itself with subject matter not normally touched upon in Hollywood."<sup>61</sup>

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*Daily Worker* critic David Platt also weighed in on *Crossfire's* impressive box-office performance. "'The business being done by the film is unbelievable for mid-summer,'" said Montague Salmon, the Rivoli's managing director, in an interview with Platt. Dore Schary "expressed himself as 'greatly pleased'" with the film's popular and critical reception, while Scott, Paxton, and Dmytryk were reportedly "jubilant." Platt also noted that executives at RKO and other studios were watching *Crossfire* as a test case on the response of the moviegoing public: "Many had doubts. Now that they have been proven wrong maybe they'll do something about it. That the people are thirsting for something different must be obvious by now to everyone concerned with the making of films."<sup>62</sup>

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Both Adrian Scott and Dore Schary certainly shared Platt's sentiments. In the summer of 1947, at a conference titled "Thought Control in America," Scott proclaimed his faith that ordinary American moviegoers wanted to see progressive "message" films like *Crossfire*: "That tired, dreary ghost who has been haunting our halls, clanking his chains and moaning, 'The people want only entertainment,' can be laid to rest once and for all. The American people have always wanted and more than ever want pictures which touch their lives, illuminate them, bring understanding. If we retreat now, because of our own fears, not only do we do a great disservice to the American audience, but we do a most profound disservice to ourselves."<sup>63</sup> At a national conference of theater exhibitors, Schary echoed Scott, touting his own commitment to progressive filmmaking and his belief that "message" movies also could be money-makers. According to Schary, "I contend that motion pictures can be a happy blending of entertainment and education, and that such a compromise is definitely due at this time." Like Scott, Schary was confident that American moviegoers would respond to "adult" films:

Audiences must learn and be willing to accept pictures that are about something. Audiences are no longer the babies they were years ago, and producers must not underestimate the intelligence of the men and women they are seeking to attract to the theatre. If they are given more adult fare, they'll thrive on the diet, and so will the exhibitor and the picture maker—and so will the world. Hollywood will not follow any given entertainment pattern in these postwar years, but will explore a variety of story fields never before placed on the screen. There are many intelligent adult subjects not yet touched upon, which writers and directors with imagination will find and develop.<sup>64</sup>

Inspired by the success of *Crossfire*, Schary and the RKO front office decided to implement a new B-film unit devoted to low-budget "experimental" films. Adrian Scott was to have a key role in the new B-unit, and he looked forward to repeating his winning formula: low-budget, high-quality films that expressed his Popular Front political vision. Along with left-wing screenwriters Ben Barzman and Alfred Leavitt, Scott had written a screenplay entitled *The Boy with Green Hair*. The antiwar theme of this full-color fantasy film was inspired by his own experience with his foster son Mike, a British war orphan.<sup>65</sup> Scott intended to make the film in 16 mm and Eastman Color to save on costs; a new young director, Joseph Losey, who had been brought to RKO from MGM by Schary, was slated to direct *The Boy with Green Hair* as his first feature film. Another upcoming Adrian Scott production was *Mr. Lincoln's Whiskers*, a fanciful Popular Front comedy about a little girl who convinces Abraham Lincoln that he would be more popular if he wore a beard, illustrating that it is the "people's will which directs the action of the chief executive, and not the other way around." Based on a one-act play Scott had written in the early 1940s (which was produced on stage in the spring of 1947 by both the Actor's Lab and a local Los Angeles high school)

and expanded into a full-length screenplay by John Paxton, *Mr. Lincoln's Whiskers* was to be Scott's first opportunity to direct his own film. In addition to his feature-film projects, Scott was developing a series of documentary shorts "for use in combating minority prejudice," and had convinced a number of leading Hollywood talents to donate their services to this educational project.<sup>66</sup>

Despite their brave words and plans, however, Scott and Schary had badly underestimated the power of the opposition. Perhaps the most telling sign of the impending backlash against *Crossfire*—indeed, against progressive filmmaking in general—was an informal boycott by the U.S. military. General C. T. Lanham, head of the Troop Information and Education Division of the War Department, had enthusiastically endorsed *Crossfire*, saying, "It's one of the best pictures I've ever seen. In my opinion, its approach to the anti-Semitic problem is far more effective than the one in *Gentleman's Agreement*. I think Fox is going to have a helluva time competing with *Crossfire*."<sup>67</sup> Nonetheless, both the Army and the Navy refused to book the film for overseas troops, arguing that it was "not suitable entertainment," particularly since "native employees and friends" as well as military personnel often attended the screenings of Hollywood films.<sup>68</sup>

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Indeed, following World War Two, America's image abroad became increasingly important as the tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union increased. To convince the beleaguered Europeans that the future peace and security of the world lay in democratic capitalism rather than in "totalitarian" Communism, the United States embarked on a wide-ranging campaign to export the American Way of Life. In this campaign, cultural diplomacy—particularly in the form of Hollywood films—buttressed the economic diplomacy of the Marshall Plan. Thus, Hollywood, led by MPPA president Eric Johnston, collaborated fully with the State Department to ensure that the films exported to Europe presented the correct image of American abundance and democracy; films that exposed the slippage between rhetoric and reality were deemed unsuitable and refused export licenses.<sup>69</sup>

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Though the first attack on Hollywood's progressive filmmaking agenda would come from the reactionaries in HUAC and from the industry's own Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals, the cooperation of such corporate liberals as Eric Johnston, concerned about Hollywood's reputation at home and America's reputation abroad, proved critical to the final triumph of anti-Communist Americanism.

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## Notes

**Note 1:** Otto Friedrich, *City of Nets: A Portrait of Hollywood in the 1940s* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986), 16–17, 90.

**Note 2:** David Bordwell et al., *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of*

*Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 324.

**Note 3:** Olivier Zunz, *Why the American Century?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), especially 69. For an excellent discussion of cultural production and changing American tastes, see Michael Kammen, *American Culture, American Tastes: Social Change and the Twentieth Century* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999).

**Note 4:** Scott had his first experience with the "Gallup bunch" during his work on *Murder, My Sweet*. When audience surveys suggested that a Dick Powell film with Chandler's original title, *Farewell, My Lovely*, evoked a musical or a romantic comedy, RKO changed the title to *Murder, My Sweet*. Though the pollsters guaranteed a gross of over \$2 million, when the picture came in half a million under their predicted figures, the Gallup pollsters laid the blame on Dick Powell, claiming that the audience didn't expect to see him in that sort of picture, even though Powell had been cast originally—against type—to "help" the picture with his huge fan following. Scott also pointed out that though Gallup pollsters predicted huge success for *Sister Kenny* and *It's a Wonderful Life*, both films bombed at the box office. Adrian Scott to Allan Scott, May 28, 1947, in Scott Papers, AHC.

**Note 5:** "Crossfire: Movie-goers' Reactions to Two Treatments of the Subject Matter," Confidential ARI Report to RKO Executives, April 30, 1947, in Schary Papers, B127-F1, WHS.

**Note 6:** Ibid..

**Note 7:** Nonetheless, some broad generalizations can be made. According to the studio's breakdown, the preview audiences were divided fairly equally by gender. Slightly more than 50 percent were between 18 and 30 years of age, while 25 percent were between 31 and 45, 14 percent were over 45, and 10 percent were under 18. However, because the documents I have used here are not the preview cards themselves, but the studio's breakdown of preview responses, it is unfortunately impossible to correlate the demographic information with the individual responses. My count for the preview responses is based on RKO's own count, which was noted on the front page of each breakdown. Schary's count of 2,200 (cited in his *Commentary* article) may indeed be correct; however, I only found evidence for about 1,000 respondents. The following analysis and all quotations are drawn from RKO's Breakdown of Preview Cards, which are scattered through the papers of Scott, Schary, and Paxton. Italics in quotations are mine.

**Note 8:** In the Trager-Raths test, over 50 percent of the distributed cards were returned, and the audience response to the film was markedly positive. Between 80 percent and 90 percent of the respondents rated the film "pretty good" or "very good" and said that they would recommend it to their friends. Nevertheless, there were significant drawbacks to the "controlled" questions asked by Trager and Raths. For example, audiences gave mixed responses to the question, "What is your opinion of Montgomery's character?" In Denver, 24 percent said they "liked him," as did 17 percent in Boston. In hindsight, Trager and Raths realized that the question did not adequately distinguish between the audiences' perception of the anti-Semite and Robert Ryan's performance in the character of Monty. See Louis E. Raths and Frank N. Trager, "Public Opinion and *Crossfire*," *Journal of Educational Sociology* 21:6 (February 1948): 366–367.

**Note 9:** "RKO to Sell *Crossfire* as Whodunit, Sans Any Anti-Semitism Reference," *Variety*, June 18, 1947, 2, 55.

**Note 10:** Ibid.

**Note 11:** Jacques Ferrand to Schary, August 26, 1947, and Common Council Radio Bulletin, August 26, 1947, both in Schary Papers, B127-F1, WHS; Feins to Scott, n.d. [1947], in Schary Papers, B126-F16, WHS. Though Scott and Cerf first met through their wives and often socialized and vacationed as a foursome, the two men also developed a close friendship of their own. Though Cerf was excited about publishing *Crossfire* and exchanged a number of letters with Schary about details of the project, it eventually fell through, most

likely a casualty of Scott's indictment for contempt of Congress later that year. In fact, Scott's friendship with Cerf was another casualty of his run-in with HUAC. See chapter 9 for details.

**Note 12:** These concerns of Schary and the RKO publicity department may have been as much about politics as publicity strategy. At this point HUAC investigators were already nosing around Hollywood and had expressed interest in *Crossfire*; an endorsement by the progressive, outspokenly antisegregationist AVC was likely seen as a hindrance rather than a help to *Crossfire's* public reception.

**Note 13:** Gloria Reiter, "Studio Producer Hilites Awards Banquet," *Student Courier* (June 1947), and Scott to Perry Lieber, June 4, 1947, both in Scott Papers, AHC.

**Note 14:** Unless otherwise noted, all information in the following analysis of RKO's publicity and advertising campaign is taken from the Exhibitors Manual for *Crossfire*, in Scott Papers, AHC.

**Note 15:** "Odds and Ends on *Crossfire*," Rivoli Theater Program, July 22, 1947, in Scott Papers, AHC.

**Note 16:** "*Crossfire*," *Box Office Slant: Showmen's Trade Review*, June 28, 1947, in Schary Papers, B127-F3, WHS.

**Note 17:** Billy Rose, "Pitching Horseshoes," July 21, 1947, in Schary Papers, B127-F3, WHS.

**Note 18:** Bernard Feins to Schary, October 14, 1947, in Schary papers, B126-F16, WHS.

**Note 19:** J.R. Cominsky to Schary, July 25, 1947, in Schary Papers, B126-F16, WHS.

**Note 20:** Schary to J.R. Cominsky, August 5, 1947, in Schary papers, B126-F16, WHS.

**Note 21:** Leonard Neubauer, interview with author, April 1999, Los Angeles, CA.

**Note 22:** *Crossfire* Trailer Cutting Continuity, July 1, 1947, in *Crossfire* Script Files, B-1, RKO Collection, ALSC-UCLA.

**Note 23:** "*Crossfire* Takes New York by Storm!" *The Radio Flash*, July 26, 1947, in Scott Papers, AHC.

**Note 24:** Archer Winsten, "*Crossfire* at Rivoli: The Race Hatred Murder," *New York Post* (July 23, 1947), in Schary Papers, B127-F3, WHS.

**Note 25:** Bosley Crowther, "*Crossfire*, Study on Tolerance," *New York Times*, July 23, 1947, in Schary Papers, B127-F3, WHS.

**Note 26:** Bosley Crowther, "Straight to the Point," *New York Times*, July 27, 1947, in Schary Papers, B127-F3, WHS.

**Note 27:** Billy Rose, "Pitching Horseshoes," n.s., July 21, 1947, in Schary Papers, B127-F3, WHS.

**Note 28:** James Agee, "Films," *The Nation*, August 2, 1947, 129–130.

**Note 29:** Maxine Garrison, "RKOs *Crossfire* a Triumph in Human and Dramatic Values," *Nite-Life*, n.d., in Paxton Bio File, AMPAS.

**Note 30:** David Platt, "*Crossfire*, an Exciting Mystery with a Purpose," *Daily Worker*, July 11, 1947, in Scott Papers, AHC.

**Note 31:** David Platt, "*Crossfire* Hits Target," *Daily Worker*, July 23, 1947, in Scott Papers, AHC.

**Note 32:** John Ross, "Murder with a Difference," *Daily Worker*, January 3, 1948, in Schary Papers, B127-F3, WHS.

**Note 33:** Robert Ryan, "My Role in *Crossfire*," *The Worker-Southern Edition* 12:29 (July 20, 1947), in Scott Papers, AHC. Interestingly, according to biographer Franklin Jarlett, Ryan was "a bit mystified and amused by the public's enthusiasm over his interpretation of the

loudmouthed bigot, Montgomery, and failed to see the 'bone-chilling evil I presumably project.' He viewed *Crossfire* as a 'fast murder mystery rather than a social polemic.'" Jarlett, *Robert Ryan: A Biography and Critical Filmography* (Jefferson, N C.: McFarland, 1990), 25. In 1947, however, Ryan wrote—or at least lent his name to—a very stirring condemnation of the evils of anti-Semitism and the importance of *Crossfire* in raising the cry of alarm.

**Note 34:** Cecelia Ager, "Crossfire Names Names, Packs Thrills, Wins Our Deep Gratitude," *PM*, July 23, 1947, in Schary Papers, B127-F3, WHS.

**Note 35:** "New Picture," *Time*, August 4, 1947, in Paxton Bio File, F12-1, AMPAS.

**Note 36:** L.G., "An Oscar for Effort," *The Week in Florida and the Caribbean*, October 31, 1947, in Schary Papers, B127-F3, WHS.

**Note 37:** "Anti-Semitism and Advertising," *The New Yorker*, July 19, 1947, in Paxton Bio File, AMPAS.

**Note 38:** Alton Cook, "Crossfire Opens Drive Against Anti-Semitism," *New York World*, July 22, 1947, in Schary Papers, B127-F3, WHS.

**Note 39:** Otis L. Guernsey Jr., "Crossfire," *New York Herald Tribune*, July 23, 1947, in Schary Papers, B127-F3, WHS.

**Note 40:** Ross, "Murder with a Difference."

**Note 41:** Crowther, "Straight to the Point."

**Note 42:** Ager, "Crossfire Names Names."

**Note 43:** Jack D. Grant, "Crossfire Dramatic Smash Indicting Anti-Semitism," *The Hollywood Reporter*, June 25, 1947, in Schary Papers, B127-F3, WHS.

**Note 44:** L.G., "An Oscar for Effort," *The Week in Florida and the Caribbean*, October 31, 1947, in Schary Papers, B127-F3, WHS.

**Note 45:** "Anti-Semitism and Advertising," *The New Yorker*, July 19, 1947, in Paxton Bio File, AMPAS.

**Note 46:** Edwin Schallert, "Crossfire Controversial, Fascinating," *Los Angeles Times*, n.d., in Scott Papers, AHC.

**Note 47:** Archer Winsten, "Crossfire at Rivoli: The Race Hatred Murder," *New York Post*, July 23, 1947, in Schary Papers, B127-F3, WHS.

**Note 48:** Hedda Hopper, "Looking at Hollywood," n.d., in Schary Papers, B127-F3, WHS.

**Note 49:** *Liberty*, September 1947, in Paxton Bio File, AMPAS.

**Note 50:** "Prejudice Under Fire," *Newsweek*, July 28, 1947, in Paxton Bio File, AMPAS.

**Note 51:** "Crossfire," *Box Office Digest*, n.d., in Schary Papers, B127-F3, WHS.

**Note 52:** "Movie of the Week: *Crossfire*," *Life*, July 30, 1947, in *Crossfire* Production Files, AMPAS.

**Note 53:** Kate Cameron, "Rivoli's *Crossfire* Deals with Anti-Semitism Problem," *Daily News*, July 23, 1947, in Schary Papers, B127-F3, WHS.

**Note 54:** Winsten, "Crossfire at Rivoli."

**Note 55:** Tom Donnelly, "But It's Not About You and Me," *Washington Daily News*, October 16, 1947, in Scott Papers, AHC.

**Note 56:** Cook, "Crossfire Opens Drive Against Anti-Semitism."

**Note 57:** "New Picture," *Time*, August 4, 1947, from Paxton Bio File, AMPAS.

**Note 58:** Schallert, "Crossfire Controversial, Fascinating."

**Note 59:** Ray Lanning, *Motion Picture Herald*, June 298, 1947, in Schary Papers, B127-F3.

**Note 60:** *Variety*, June 25, 1947, in Schary Papers, B127-F3, WHS.

**Note 61:** Red Kann, "Insider's Outlook," *Motion Picture Daily*, n.d., in Schary Papers, B127-F3, WHS.

**Note 62:** David Platt, "Crossfire Box Office Terrific, Says Variety," *Daily Worker*, August 1, 1947, in Scott Papers, AHC.

**Note 63:** Adrian Scott, "You Can't Do That," in *Thought Control in the U.S.A.: The Collected Proceedings*, ed. Harold J. Salemsen (Hollywood, Calif.: Progressive Citizens of America, 1947), 330.

**Note 64:** Virginia Wright, *Daily News*, July 25, 1947, in Schary Papers, B127-F3, WHS.

**Note 65:** Scott's wife, Anne Shirley, "found" Mike when they were in England in 1946 filming *So Well Remembered*. Though she had a daughter, Julie, with her first husband, John Payne, Anne desperately wanted a family with Adrian. She had had several miscarriages over the preceding three years, however, and Mike, an angelically beautiful boy in dire need of care and love, seemed a godsend. British law prevented the Scotts from formally adopting Mike, but they brought him with them when they returned to the United States and raised him as their own. Mike was a deeply disturbed child; in his late teens he was diagnosed with schizophrenia. But in 1947, Scott was certain that Mike's emotional difficulties stemmed largely from the trauma of the war and the loss of his parents. Joan Scott, interview with author, April 1999; Barzman, interview with author, April 1999.

**Note 66:** Thomas F. Brady, "Hollywood Buzzes," n.d., in Schary Papers, B127-F3, WHS; Scott, typescript of "Some of My Worst Friends," in Scott Papers, AHC; Virginia Wright, *Los Angeles Daily News*, March 20, 1948, in Scott Papers, AHC.; Affidavit of Adrian Scott in Opposition to Motion for Summary Judgment, U.S. District Court, Southern District of California, Central Division, n.d., in Kenny-Morris Papers, B10-F11, WHS; Bernard Dick, *Radical Innocence: A Critical Study of the Hollywood Ten* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1989), 133–134; Brian Neve, *Film and Politics in America: A Social Tradition* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 99. See also Douglas Gomery, "They Live by Night (Nicholas Ray)," in *Kings of the Bs: Working within the Hollywood System*, ed. Todd McCarthy and Charles Flynn (New York: Dutton, 1975), 186–187.

**Note 67:** Fred Herzberg to Dore Schary, August 4, 1947, in Schary Papers, B126-F16, WHS.

**Note 68:** "Anti-Semitism Pic Nixed by Navy," *Variety*, August 27, 1947, 1, 54. The Navy also declined to show *Duel in the Sun* or *The Outlaw*, films it found offensive on sexual rather than political grounds.

**Note 69:** Reinhold Wagnleitner, "The Irony of American Culture Abroad: Austria and the Cold War," in *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War*, ed. Lary May (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), especially 293–294; Lary May, *The Big Tomorrow: Hollywood and the Politics of the American Way* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 177. For a more comprehensive study of the postwar exportation of American culture to Europe, see also Wagnleitner, *Coca-Colonization and the Cold War: The Cultural Mission of the United States in Austria after the Second World War*, trans. Diana M. Wolf (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).