

BOOK vs. FILM

Brian Light



William McGivern was self-conscious about not finishing high school, but it didn't prevent him from eventually embarking on a prolific career as a first-class crime writer. He attended Loyola Academy, a Jesuit high school near Chicago, but with money tight during the Depression he dropped out to help support his family. Soon he began writing science fiction and fantasy stories for magazines such as *Amazing Stories* and *Fantastic Adventures*. He served a three-year stint in the Army starting in 1943, then studied at the University of Birmingham in England before returning stateside to work as a police-beat reporter for the *Philadelphia Bulletin* from 1949 to 1951. In 1948 he published his first novel, *But Death Runs Faster*.

The 1950s were fertile years for McGivern. He cranked out eleven hard-edged crime novels, five of which were adapted for the big screen, and one for the small screen—a half-hour production of *The Crooked Frame* for the CBS series *Suspense*

in 1952. McGivern's breakthrough came the following year: Columbia's *The Big Heat*, helmed by Fritz Lang. Hollywood quickly started mining McGivern's camera-ready novels, with adaptations of *Shield for Murder* and *Rogue Cop* released in 1954. *The Darkest Hour*, published in 1955 was filmed as *Hell on Frisco Bay* the same year. McGivern then churned out three novels studios passed on before *Odds Against Tomorrow* (1957) came to the attention of Harry Belafonte.

Disillusioned with the lack of roles for young black actors in the late 1940s, Belafonte had accepted a gig performing at New York's Royal Roost jazz club, backed by Charlie Parker and Miles Davis. This led to a successful recording contract and nightclub act, performing traditional folk songs from around the world. In 1953 Belafonte debuted (alongside Dorothy Dandridge) in his first film, *Bright Road*, but his musical and acting skills didn't coalesce until later that year when he hit the boards in the Broadway production of *John Murray Anderson's Alma-*

na, netting himself a Tony Award.

But in his next two films—*Carmen Jones* (1954), and *Island in the Sun* (1957)—he garnered only mixed reviews. Increasingly frustrated, Belafonte formed his own company, Harbel Productions, and for his first effort he partnered with MGM's Sol Siegel to produce and star in 1959's *The World, the Flesh, and the Devil*, a postapocalyptic tale where only Belafonte, Inger Stevens, and Mel Ferrer have survived. Initially intrigued by the material, Belafonte—as well as Stevens and Ferrer—was ultimately disappointed by how the interracial triangle was portrayed. All three voiced their concerns to Siegel, to no avail. Belafonte resolved to use his production company, now aligned with United Artists, to find challenging roles for black actors—and the Johnny Ingram character in McGivern's *Odds Against Tomorrow* would be his first opportunity.

Belafonte greatly admired Robert Rosen's *Body and Soul* (1947), particularly Abraham Polonsky's original script. He



Burke (Ed Begley) struggles to keep the peace between Ingram (Harry Belafonte) and the hot-headed Slater (Robert Ryan)

decided to gamble on the then-blacklisted writer. When he gave Polonsky the book, Belafonte's first two words were: "Fix it." Belafonte also respected Robert Wise's directing work, especially his treatment of the controversial death penalty issue in *I Want to Live* (1958). He sent an outline to Wise, and after a meeting in which he revealed Polonsky as the scriptwriter, Wise eagerly signed on. To cover his tracks, Belafonte tapped his close friend, the critically acclaimed black novelist John O. Killens, to front for Polonsky. Nelson Gidding, who cowrote the screenplay for *I Want to Live*, also shared a writing credit, but only supplied minor script revisions.

McGivern's novel—at least in part—offered Belafonte an opportunity to explore many of the social justice causes he had become devoted to through his support of Martin Luther King Jr., who was then just emerging as an activist. In the fall of 1958, Belafonte sent a script to Robert Ryan, whom he wanted for the role of Earl "Tex" Slater. But Ryan was weary of playing racists and other unsavory characters, lamenting, "I'm either killing a Jew, a Jap, or a negro." Ryan passed.

In December of that year, Shelley Winters came on board as Lorry, and Lloyd Nolan was set for the role of Dave Burke, the disgraced cop who plots a bank heist. Anthony Franciosa (in a rocky marriage to Winters at the time) was briefly considered for Slater. But after reevaluating Polonsky's screenplay, Ryan signed on: "I've changed my mind about playing Slater. . . . The drama strongly suggests that bigotry is based on fear and envy and that the most important thing that

keeps a bigot operating is the feeling that he is better than another man." When Nolan dropped out, Ed Begley stepped in, portraying Burke as a man splintered by ethical affliction, his peering eyes like pools of haunted desperation.

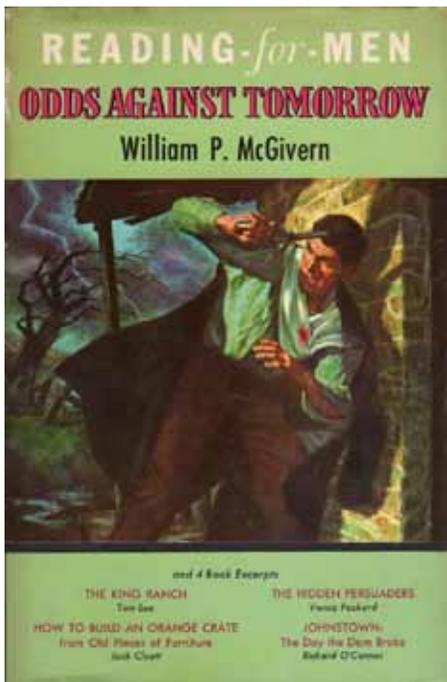
Interiors were shot at Gold Medal Studios in the Bronx (where Elia Kazan's *A Face in the Crowd* was made the year before); exteriors were done on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, in Central Park, and in the upstate New York town of Hudson, which stands in for the fictional town of Melton (Crossroads, Pennsylvania, in the book).

"The geography of traffic," taken ver-

batim from Polonsky's screenplay, inspired Wise to capture an overhead view of the cloverleaf ramps leading to the Triborough Bridge interchange, which he shot from an adjacent rooftop. This later influenced the now-iconic opening sequence of Wise's next film, *West Side Story* (1961). The director had a specific sense of how the film should look: "I wanted it to have some edges to it. If there were a little extra gray in there it would be alright with me." He shot the opening sequence and the "waiting" sequence in Hudson using infrared film to establish the "overtone of premonition, of tragedy, of people in trouble and doomed," and he instructed DP Joseph Brun to "ignore the rules and regulations of conventional visualization."

Encouraged by Wise to experiment with her own ideas, editor Dede Allen began to develop her innovative shock/jump cutting technique, which would reach maturation in films like *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and *Dog Day Afternoon* (1973). Throughout the shooting script, Polonsky meticulously notated music cues to enhance the mood of key scenes. Belafonte recruited his friend John Lewis and his Modern Jazz Quartet to compose the score. In addition to the quartet, Lewis assembled a lineup of stellar musicians, including Jim Hall on guitar, Bill Evans on piano, and a ten-piece brass section led by "Third Stream" (a synthesis of jazz and classical) proponent Gunther Schul-





Ingram realizes Slater's violent nature could cause the heist to go off the rails

ler on French horn, all adding to the film's sparse and plaintive sound design.

There's not a lot of detecting in McGivern's crime novels. A precisionist, he excelled at fleshing out complex psychological profiles of characters caught up in systemic corruption or ethically eroded by institutional and societal forces beyond their control. Within the framework of a bank heist, *Odds Against Tomorrow* is an exploration of race personified by its central characters, Earl "Tex" Slater and Johnny Ingram. In the book, there are two additional players in the heist: Novak, the "plan man," and Burke, an embittered ex-cop. Polonsky's screenplay eliminates Novak, reducing the players to a trio and designating Burke as the mastermind.

The opening chapter introduces us to Slater. It's as if McGivern wrote him with Robert Ryan in mind:

For what seemed like a long time he couldn't make himself cross the street and enter the hotel. He stopped in the middle of the sidewalk and frowned at the revolving doors and canopied entrance, indifferent to the nighttime crowd drifting past him, his tall body as immobile as a rock in a stream. People edged around him carefully, for there was a look of tension in the set of his shoulders, and in the appraising frown that shadowed his hard even features. . . . People weren't often attracted to him; they might be touched by the hunger in his eyes, or

impressed by the power of his body, but the cold and delicate anger in his face usually kept them at a distance.

Unlike other malevolent characters Ryan had portrayed, Slater is a low-rent "kept man"—living off his girlfriend Lorry—who has lost himself along the way. Unable to find a job due to his prison record, he's migrated to the margins of society. Belafonte drew a cogent parallel: "Slater is more than a racist. He's a working-class guy in America

who gets trapped in the system—who does not know how to work his way out of the system—and has bought the story that it is race that is causing him to fail. He doesn't have a job, he's looking for a way out. He's in exactly the same stuff Ingram's in."

Also sharply drawn is McGivern's portrait of Ingram as a savvy black man who has learned to "stay in his lane" in a white man's world:

As he approached Novak's door he fashioned a discreet and self-effacing



Tension builds as Ingram and Burke await Slater for the last meet-up before the heist

smile for his lips, this was armor of a sort, a conciliating politeness that usually protected him against slights or condescensions. The pose was also a weapon; he could exaggerate it if necessary, broadening the smile and accentuating the obsequious head-bobbing, until his manner became a decisive burlesque of terrified humility. This upset white people, for some reason; it usually prodded them into foolish and pretentious reactions, making them unwitting partners in his sardonic charade. There was some satisfaction in that, not much, but some.

In the novel, Ingram is a card sharp up to his eyeballs in poker debts; on the screen his losing vice is the ponies. In both, the men are brought in separately—Slater, then Ingram—for the “job” interview. But in the film, only a few brief exchanges are needed to reveal Polonsky’s mastery at developing character through dialogue. When Burke prods Slater about his criminal record and calls him just another “down and outer” foraging for deliverance, Earl rails: “What’s so big about you, Burke? How come you make so much noise? You’ve been sniffing around trying to find a hole in the fence just like everybody else.”

McGivern’s Ingram initially comes to Novak for cash to pay off a loan shark; he gets backed into the heist, protesting lamely, “But I’ve never done anything like that. . . . I don’t have the guts for it.” Novak replies: “Guts you don’t need. I’ve got other guys for that end of the job. It’s your skin I’m buying, nothing else.” In Polonsky’s hands, however, Ingram is a shrewd man with flair, and a commanding sense of self-possession. This trenchant exchange underscores the distinction:

Ingram: Are we social climbing, David?

Burke: This is easy money.

Ingram: Man, you’re drifting.

Burke: I’m serious.

Ingram: It’s not your line, Dave. That’s the firing squad. That’s for junkies and joy boys. We’re people.

Burke: You don’t even want to hear?

Ingram: I did all my dreaming on my mother’s knee.

On the page, the racial tension is palpable when Slater and Ingram first meet. Burke offers Slater a drink, and he replies: “Yeah,

give me a little something. I’ve got a kind of funny taste in my mouth.’ Ingram chuckled amiably and said: ‘I bet you got a dark brown taste in your mouth, Mr. Slater. That’s the worst kind.’” Slater and Ingram continue to exchange barbs, which escalate violently:

One instant Slater stood six feet from him, relaxed and indolent, a thumb hooked over his belt, and a faint little smile on his lips; the next instant he was on Ingram like an animal, slamming him back against the wall with a spine numbing crash. . . . He slapped Ingram savagely with an open hand then, and the impact of the blow was like a pistol shot in the room.

Polonsky’s screenplay omits this humiliating scene, nor does his Slater refer to Ingram as “Sambo,” as he repeatedly does in McGivern’s book. At one point, late in the novel, Slater asks Ingram: “You mind me calling you Sambo?” Ingram replies obsequiously: “It’s as good a name as any.” Belafonte explained why he felt Polonsky was the right man to transform this material:

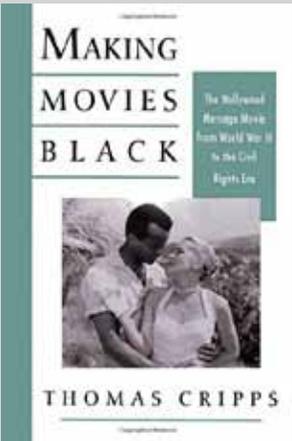
Abe wanted to create a character which would be significantly different from the way black men had been portrayed. . . . The basis for equality in the relationship is seen in how he talked to white people. He had to have a certain confident ability in who he was and what he was doing, even if he has flaws. He moved with a certain

kind of strength and ease through life and made decisions with an independence that black characters in film had never expressed before.

In the novel, Ingram is just a mechanism in the heist, nothing more. Novak coldly objectifies him: “A colored guy is the shoe-horn that gets us into the bank. That’s you, Johnny. A nice shiny shoe-horn.” But the film includes a significant difference: it’s Ingram who cleverly untangles the heist’s key obstacle, a security chain on the bank’s side door. This wrinkle is not in the book, and Polonsky’s change reveals that Ingram has an intelligence that Slater lacks, a realization that registers bitterly on Slater’s brooding face.

While Slater’s relationship with Lorry is detailed in both book and film, McGivern only briefly references Ingram’s mother and offers little else about his personal life. Polonsky, however, sketched in Ingram’s complex relationship with young daughter Eadie (Lois Thorne) and ex-wife Ruth (Kim Hamilton), significantly deepening his character. When Ingram interrupts a PTA meeting—blacks and whites in attendance—hosted by Ruth, Ingram snaps at her, revealing his own ingrained racism: “You and your big white brothers. Drink enough tea with them and stay out of the watermelon patch and maybe our little colored girl will grow up to be Miss America, is that it? . . . Why don’t you wise up, it’s their world and we’re just living in it.”

Setting up the heist sequence in Hudson, Wise benefited from some unexpected technical assistance. Bank of Albany executive



In one of those rare marvels of a confluence of complementary ambitions, everyone received a payoff of sorts. Youngstein and UA broke even in the short run and made an eventual profit, not to mention an enrichment of their reputation for blending politics and quality; Polonsky grasped an opportunity to do work he could feel good about; Killens, by fronting, earned a welcome screenplay credit and added to his reputation as a politically aggressive black writer; Wise reasserted his reputation for turning out small gems of genre films; and Belafonte by hanging out “the shingle of producer,” the only African American to do so at the time, successfully circumvented the Hollywood politesse that had hobbled earlier black material, including his own few films. Indeed, decades later, Belafonte still thought of *Odds Against Tomorrow* as one of a growing canon of realistic genre films meant to win back audiences by offering them socially significant movies as against bland television; “it changed the face of Hollywood forever,” he proudly remembered it.

—Thomas Cripps, *Making Movies Black*, 1993



Slater's upstairs neighbor Helen (Gloria Grahame) drops in for a visit, advertising her intentions

F. I. Ellenberger—who made a lifetime study of robberies, including case files on all American bank holdups of the previous thirty-five years—schooled Wise on exactly how a real robbery should look. When asked why he was so obliging, Ellenberger replied: “How would it look for a fine bank like ours to get held up in some old-fashioned way? . . . We strive to please, even movie bank robbers.”

In both formats, the heist kicks off according to plan, but quickly falls apart when Burke is spied by a cop exiting the bank’s side door with a cash-heavy satchel. In the book, he’s shot dead. Slater takes a bullet in the shoulder, and Ingram drags him into the car for the getaway. They hole up in a remote farmhouse belonging to a senile old couple, and the entire second half plays out with the two bonding as Ingram slowly earns Slater’s grudging respect. Slater is gradually convinced by Lorry, who has driven to the farmhouse, that they have a better chance of evading the police if they leave Ingram behind. But Slater has a soul-searching change of heart and returns to rescue Ingram, only to be gunned down by FBI agents.

Belafonte dismissed this second act as “romantic” and inconsistent with the state of race relations in the United States at the time. Wise concurred, offering: “We were too close on the heels of *The Defiant Ones* (1958), where the two came together at the end. I didn’t think we could make a film about the same racial problem and have the same resolution. . . . I wasn’t comfortable with that.” Polonsky, clearly of like mind, completely discarded the last hundred pages of the book and crafted his own nihilistic climax.

Polonsky also fleshed out characters vaguely referenced in the novel, like Bacco

(Will Kuluva), the “all business” loan shark, and his colorful cohorts, Moriarity (Lew Gallo) and Coco (a flaming Richard Bright), who supply the pressure that pushes Ingram into the heist. Polonsky also conjured a vivid part for Slater’s upstairs neighbor Helen, a slyly lascivious Gloria Grahame in her last great role. The bravura sequence between her and Slater in his apartment may appear to be the inspired handiwork of Wise, but it was precisely detailed in Polonsky’s shooting script.

In the on-screen finale, Burke is pinned down, shot to pieces, and opts to off himself like a horse with a broken leg. Inextricably yoked by their anger and hatred, Slater and Ingram—without the money or a getaway car—are consumed by pursuit of their mutual annihilation. All three robbers meet a fate presaged earlier by Ingram: “Wake up Dave, we’re committing suicide.” In Polonsky’s original script, Slater and Ingram simply gun each other down in the alleyway, but Wise preferred a more catastrophic climax. The final image as the credits roll is a charred caution sign—STOP DEAD END—offering a bleak visual coda and concluding the “unholy trinity” of apocalyptic noir endings that includes *White Heat* (1949) and *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955).

Upon release, *Odds Against Tomorrow* received mixed reviews and did little at the box office, despite publicity stunts such as inviting five hundred beauticians to a preview at the Fox Wilshire Theater in Los Angeles so they might spread the word to their clients. Polonsky did not receive a screen credit until 1996, and, notably, it was a decade before Belafonte starred in another movie. He turned down many roles, including *Lilies of the Field* (1963) and *To Sir, with Love* (1967), both of which were enacted to great fanfare by his close friend Sidney Poitier. Belafonte refused to tone down his sexuality (as Poitier did) because he felt every script offered him neutered the black male lead. Instead, he devoted his efforts throughout the 1960s—and continuing to this day—to social and political causes, tirelessly trying to improve humanity’s odds for a better tomorrow. ■

Special thanks to John Schultheiss, Telecommunication Studies, California State University, Northridge. All quotes are from *Odds Against Tomorrow: A Critical Edition*, Abraham Polonsky and John Schultheiss, Sadanlaur Publications, 1999



Good friends Ryan and Belafonte share a light-hearted moment on the set