

**D**URING THE 1940'S ROBERT SIODMAK was one of the most interesting, and enigmatic, of Hollywood directors. Clearly a superior technician, to say the least, he chose—if choice it was—to do his best work in the misprized genres of the horror film and psychological thriller. His evident fascination with dramatic chiaroscuro and morbid psychology appeared at first glance an obvious extension of the classic German silent cinema; but seemed more curious if one remembered that his own contribution to the silent cinema in Germany was *Menschen am Sonntag* (1929), a charming piece of realistic observation. Siodmak made several films in Germany, then worked for some years in France (directing *Mister Flow*, *Cargaison Blanche* and *Pièges*, among others) before leaving Europe for America in 1940. During the last few years he has again been working in Europe.

I was able to meet Robert Siodmak on the set of his latest film, *The Rough and the Smooth*, which was then in its second week's shooting at Elstree. A small, balding man in his fifties (the textbooks say fifty-eight), he strikes one at once as energetic, cheerful and intensely efficient. He obviously knows just what he wants from players and technicians, and just how to get it with the maximum of good humour. In the intervals of setting up and shooting a short scene between Tony Britton and Najda Tiller over the dinner-table, he talked volubly about his films and their histories, darting off from time to time to adjust a light, check props or discuss points of interpretation with the players. Encouragingly, he turned out to like all the films one had hoped he would like—*The Spiral Staircase* is his favourite, closely followed by *Phantom Lady*, *The Suspect* and

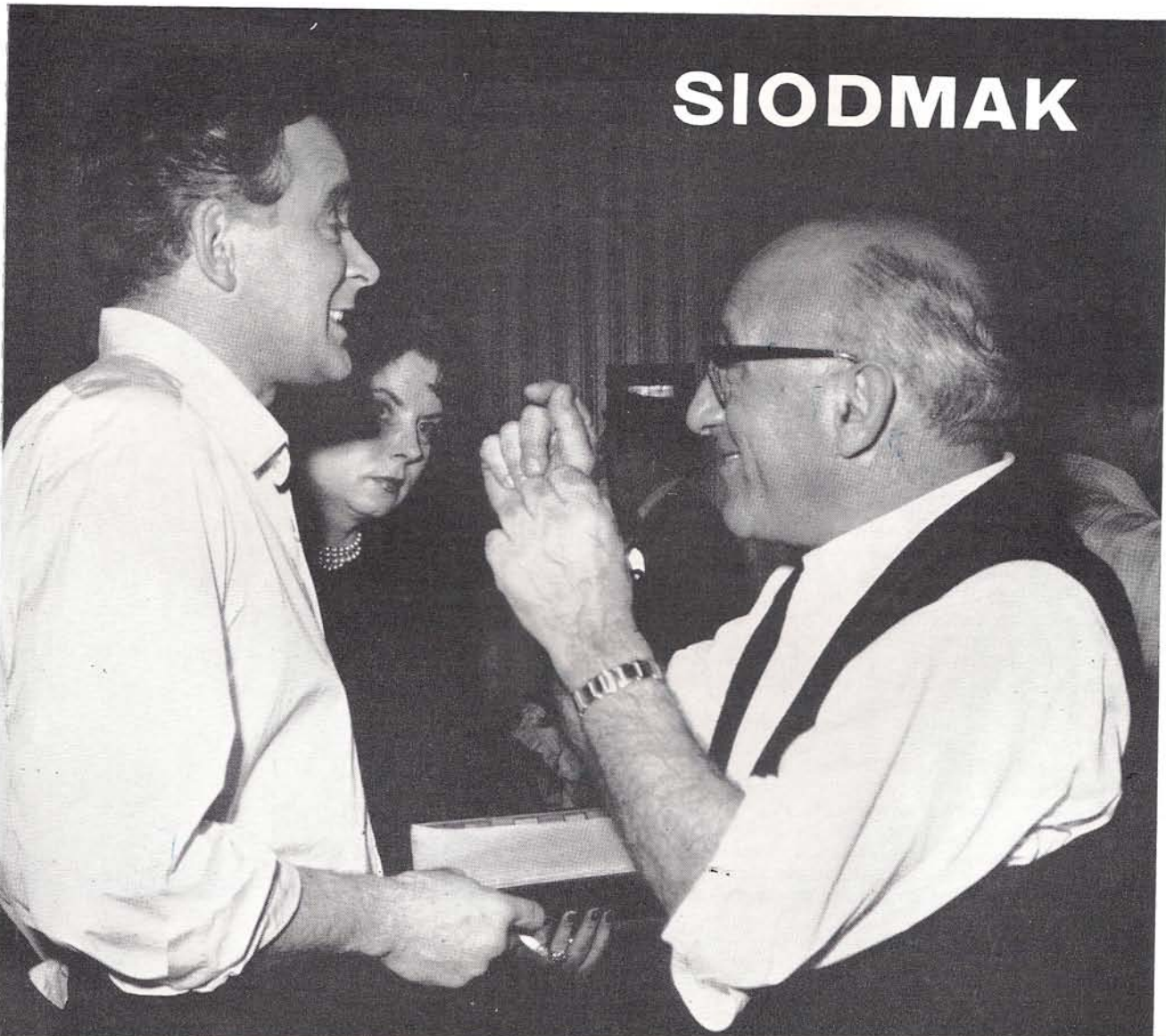
*Uncle Harry*—and to have trenchant comments to make about those he didn't and why he made them. He had little good to say of the first seven films he made in America (though he admits an affection for *Someone to Remember*), and dismissed most of the films after *The Dark Mirror* as pot-boilers. I said that I thought *Cry of the City* was easily the best of the really-shot-on-the-streets-where-it-happened cycle. He agreed that, "I thought it was good, but it's not really my type of film: I hate locations—there's so much you can't control." In any case, his standards are high: "Even in a film you make as you want to and because you want to, you're lucky if there are five minutes which satisfy you, in which you see just what you intended on the screen."

After more than thirty years in films, Siodmak retains an extraordinary enjoyment of the whole business of film-making:

RUSSELL TAYLOR:

## Encounter with

# SIODMAK



one suspects he found much pleasure and amusement in his battles with producers and stars as well as annoyance and frustration. Certainly he recounts his defeats as well as his victories with a relish which seems not entirely retrospective.

## *Menschen am Sonntag*

YOU KNOW REALLY that was a nice little film. I saw it again recently at the National Film Theatre after many years, and I was very surprised to see how well it looked. I expected it to be much slower and heavier. It's amazing how simply you could film then: the little scene in the wood, when the girl takes the boy's hat and throws it into a tree, and then they have to climb to get it—that was quite impromptu. We just thought of a scene and filmed it straight off. Nowadays with all the technical paraphernalia of the studio, I often look at a set-up—a massively mounted camera and hordes of technicians—and think it's like an enormous zeppelin with a tiny gondola underneath: one says to oneself, there must be a more economical way of doing it.

Nowadays Billy Wilder is generally credited with the screenplay, but originally he got no screen credit, and in fact he didn't really work on the film for more than a few minutes. He and I are old friends, and at that time we were sharing a flat in Berlin; his mind was always teeming with ideas, for his friends' films as well as his own, and his only contribution to *Menschen am Sonntag* was the suggestion that we should leave the wife asleep at home, and when the husband returned in the evening she should still be sleeping. By the way, the version of *Menschen am Sonntag* shown at the N.F.T. is considerably shorter than the original. I have since seen a copy in Germany which has the whole of the first section missing, but the rest is much fuller.

## *Hollywood*

WORKING IN HOLLYWOOD to get your own way you have to be cunning; you have to compromise sometimes, make films you don't want to from time to time (as Ford makes one or two to please producers for every one he makes to please himself). I developed a technique to get my own way about scripts. You see, if you refuse scripts too often or argue, straight away you get the reputation of being difficult; so, instead, when I was offered a script which I thought had a basically good idea, however mishandled, I would say, "Yes, fine, of course I'll do it," and then sit back while preparations went ahead. Then about a week before shooting was due to begin I'd go to the producer and say, "Look, this is a wonderful script, but there is just one little point . . ." and suggest a small but vital alteration. This would always be accepted, if only to keep the peace, and then of course other things would have to be altered to fit in with it, and gradually the thing would start coming to pieces at the seams. By the time we started shooting everything would be so confused that I began with no set script at all, and could do as I liked, which was the way I wanted it. . . .

## *Contract with Universal*

IN 1943 I HAD BEEN in Hollywood for three years, doing what work I could get. Then Universal sent me the script of *Son of Dracula*: it was terrible—it had been knocked together in a few days. I told my wife I just couldn't do it, but she said to me: "Look, they've been making these films for twenty years, they know just what to expect from a director and just how much they're going to pay him," (I'd been offered \$150 a week for the three weeks shooting) "so if you're just that little bit better than their other directors . . . then they'll see right

away and it'll lead to better things." So I took the job, and on the third day of shooting they offered me a contract, with options, for seven years. I took it and our association was very happy: in fact, though my salary was supposed to rise gradually until I was earning \$1,100 a week in the seventh year, if I lasted that long, in fact they tore up the contract and by the third year I was earning about \$3,000 a week. As for *Son of Dracula*, we did a lot of rewriting and the result wasn't bad: it wasn't good, but some scenes had a certain quality . . .

## *Cobra Woman*

COBRA WOMAN WAS SILLY but fun. You know, Maria Montez couldn't act from here to there, but she was a great personality and believed completely in her roles: if she was playing a princess you had to treat her like one all through lunch, but if she was a slave-girl you could kick her around anyhow and she wouldn't object—Method acting before its time, you might say.

## *Christmas Holiday*

A GOOD PLOT (though the studio always wanted to change my psychological endings into physical ones, when the Hayes Office didn't intervene, as in *Uncle Harry*), and interesting casting Gene Kelly in such a way as to suggest a sinister quality behind a rather superficial charm. Deanna Durbin was difficult: she wanted to play a new part but flinched from looking like a tramp: she always wanted to look like nice, wholesome Deanna Durbin pretending to be a tramp. Still, the result was quite effective, and oddly enough did very well: I suppose everyone was so interested to see what Deanna Durbin would be like in a dramatic role. However, she never tried it again . . .

## *The Suspect*

CHARLES LAUGHTON IS ONE of the few lasting friends I made in Hollywood (another is James Mason), but I hardly knew him



"Some scenes had a certain quality . . ."  
Lon Chaney in "*Son of Dracula*".

at the time of *The Suspect*. I had heard he was difficult to work with, and certainly we had the greatest difficulty in finding anyone to act with him. I had his last four or five films run through for me, and then went and talked to him. "I think I've found out why no one wants to act with you: it's because you're a perfectionist. You read and consider the whole script until you know just how the film should be made and all the parts played to fit in with your conception, and if you don't get sympathetic co-stars and director, you just give up and take refuge in playing your own part all out and swamping the rest of the picture. I'll tell you what we're going to do: I'm not going to give you a script. Each evening we'll go over the next day's material and discuss anything in your part, but not talk at all about the rest." He agreed to this, and then on set to keep him occupied I'd invent dozens of special jobs for myself; beg him, as a favour, to rehearse the other players in his scene for me (he's a brilliant director of actors), and then shoot the result the way I wanted it, which kept us both happy.

I had also been warned that about half-way through a film Laughton always had a bout of uncertainty and convinced himself that the interpretation was wrong from beginning to end. Eventually he arrived one morning, hair all awry, and began, "Robert, I haven't slept a wink. I've just realised we've been completely wrong . . ." But this time I jumped him at the post, throwing the biggest hysterical fit of temperament I've ever thrown in my life, so that in the end he forgot his qualms trying to quieten me and keep me happy. After the film was over he told someone, "You know, Robert's a good director, but so temperamental: I had to soothe him every morning we were shooting."

### *The Killers*

I THINK IT'S NOT widely known that the script was in fact by Huston. His name didn't appear on the credits because he was under contract to another studio at the time, but he wrote the script for us in his spare afternoons (with Tony Veiller cracking the whip occasionally). He was very pleased with the result and what we made of it. Hellinger was quite a reasonable producer, but with his journalistic training he always insisted on each scene ending with a punch line and every character being over-established with a telling remark, which in my opinion took a lot of the reality out of the film. So I always cut out the punch-lines when he wasn't looking: it drove him wild for a bit, but finally he got the idea. The robbery scene in one long crane shot was done in a single take: everything was very confused, with people not knowing where they ought to be, a car backed

up wrong and left in the middle of the road, and so on, but curiously enough the result turned out to give just the right effect when we printed it.

### *Time Out of Mind*

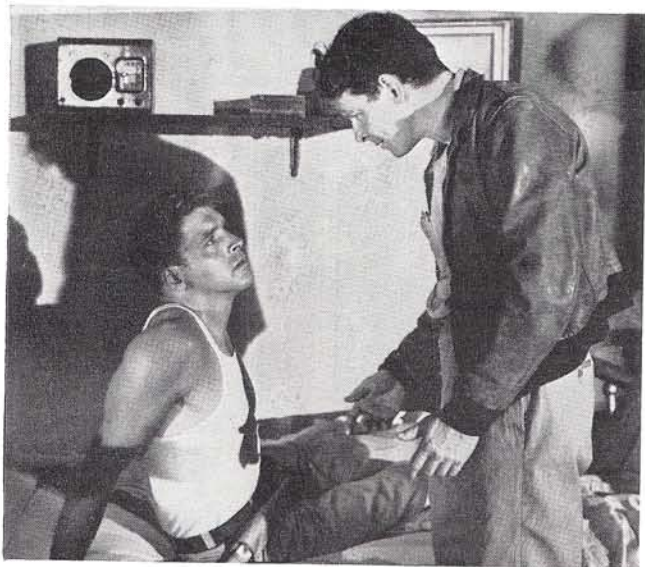
THAT WAS A preposterous film. When Universal-International made their agreement with Rank I was due to make a film in Britain, and I was just ready to set off when they gave me the script of *Time out of Mind*, which was to be Phyllis Calvert's first American film. I said the story was absurd (who can sympathise with a main character who doesn't believe steam will ever supplant the sailing ship?), refused to direct it and left as planned for New York. Apparently this put the studio on the spot and they sent a deputation literally on its knees begging me to come back and direct it. I said no, and after my agent had taken over they gave me a mad contract whereby they trebled my salary for two years and gave me the right to veto the finished film's release if I didn't like it. Of course Maury Gertsman and I had a great time loading the film with every crazy effect we could think of, and in the end I didn't have to use my veto, as they played the film for just one day in a tiny Park Avenue cinema and then it disappeared for ever . . .

### *The Great Sinner*

FOR THE GREAT SINNER I was loaned out to MGM. They gave me an enormous script, and after reading it I said that if it was filmed the way it stood the picture would run for six hours. No one took any notice, so I went ahead and filmed it, with any elaborations that occurred to me as we went along, and when we had cut out anything superfluous (my elaborations being the first things to go) it still ran for six hours. After that we cut and cut until it came down to three hours, but it was still too long, terribly slow (Gregory Peck, naturally a slow talker, seemed so impressed by the idea of acting in Dostoevsky that he played at about a third even of his usual speed), heavy and dull, with the additional disadvantage that now the story didn't even make sense. By the first preview we had cut it down to two hours and ten minutes. Bits of it went well, especially the death scene at the beginning, with Ava Gardner in silhouette (I liked that, but it was later removed). At that point I washed my hands of the film, and heard nothing for some time until a message came that "they"—at MGM it is always "they"—had decided that what was needed was a new and stronger love story. They wanted me to reshoot, but I refused and Mervyn LeRoy was given the job. When I eventually saw the finished film, I don't believe that a single scene was left as I had made it.

### *After Hollywood*

LE GRAND JEU WAS just a pot-boiler, but I have made my three recent German films entirely as I wanted. Filming *Die Ratten* I made an English-speaking version with my own money, gambling that before long Curd Jurgens and Maria Schell would become international stars. It looks as if my gamble is about to pay off. Last year I co-produced a series of half-hour television films, *O.S.S.*, directing the pilot and one other myself, and this year I directed a couple of pilots for a series called *The Killers* (no connection, but it's a good title). I haven't been able to sell them yet: sponsors say they're too intelligent . . . I'm pleased with *The Rough and the Smooth*. I wanted to film Robin Maugham's book four years ago, but lost it to two successive producers who failed to film it. Then out of the blue came an offer to direct it for George Minter. I think it'll be good . . .



Burt Lancaster and Phil Brown in "The Killers".