

Step with us into the shadows of B-movie history, where shabbily budgeted productions are shrouded in eerie atmosphere and fate completes its ironic work in a scant sixty minutes. Yes, this is the world of *The Whistler*. Inspired by a radio program that had been haunting American living rooms since 1942, Columbia's screen version of *The Whistler* borrowed the radio show's unsettling signature melody and mysterious narrator, and added another compelling element: actor Richard Dix, who starred in seven episodes of what became an eight-film series. The square-jawed, big-framed, tired-eyed Dix plays a different character in each installment, but whether wealthy industrialist, sleazy flatfoot, deranged amnesiac, or down-and-out hustler, he always ends up desperate, facing some outrageous predicament posed by a capricious destiny. And what of the Whistler himself? He is perceived only as a trench-coated shadow and a disembodied voice, delivering ominous pronouncements like some creepy, malapropism-prone oracle, or taunting the characters from outside the frame like a sarcastic superego.

This summer, PFA showcases new and restored prints of all seven of the Dix-starring *Whistler* films, including four directed by William Castle before he made his ballyhoo breakthrough with works like *The Tingler* and *13 Ghosts*. With two double features and a triple—economical storytelling at an economical ticket price—the series offers a rare chance to witness every detail of these strange tales, none of which have been released on DVD. What secrets lurk in the darkness of the theater? Only the Whistler knows.

Juliet Clark

EDITOR

SATURDAY MAY 29

6:30 **The Whistler**

William Castle (U.S., 1944) New Print

"Life is so uncertain," said the insurance salesman to the would-be suicide: a typical existential gag in a film whose only certainty is irony. Richard Dix plays Earl Conrad, whom we first encounter as he hires a contract killer to knock off a man named . . . Earl Conrad. When unexpected good news causes Conrad to reconsider his plans, he finds that the contract can't be canceled. One bizarre twist begets another in a supremely paranoid plot involving multiple murders and overlapping manhunts, a hit man-as-amateur psychologist whose favored reading is the scholarly tome *Studies in Necrophobia*, a missing wife who may or may not be a casualty of war—and, of course, the enigma of the Whistler, who casts an otherworldly shadow over the action. Dix's performance is disarmingly distraught; director William Castle later wrote, "To achieve a mood of desperation, I insisted that Dix give up smoking and go on a diet."

• Written by Eric Taylor, from a story by J. Donald Wilson. Photographed by James S. Brown. With Richard Dix, J. Carroll Naish, Gloria Stuart, Alan Dinehart. (59 mins, B&W, 35mm, From Sony Pictures)

Followed by:

The Mark of the Whistler

William Castle (U.S., 1944) New Print

The Dix we meet this time is "a human derelict"—Lee Nugent, a man fallen from a position of wealth and power to a spot on a bench in a public park. "Ironic, isn't it?" the Whistler mockingly asks as Nugent peruses a newspaper notice of dormant bank accounts: people have all that money and don't even bother to claim it. Noticing a different Lee Nugent among the listings, our antihero concocts a plan to put some of that abandoned dough to better use. But in taking another man's identity, he will become heir to an ugly legacy. Adapted from a Cornell Woolrich story and briskly directed by Castle, *The Mark of the Whistler* is a fable of debt and destiny in which the con man may be the ultimate mark.

• Written by George Bricker, based on the story "Dormant Account" by Cornell Woolrich. Photographed by George Meehan. With Richard Dix, Janis Carter, Porter Hall, Paul Guilfoyle. (60 mins, B&W, 35mm, From Sony Pictures)

• (Total running time: 119 mins)



WEDNESDAY JUNE 2

7:00 **The Power of the Whistler**

Lew Landers (U.S., 1945) New Print

"Here is a strange man," intones the Whistler as Richard Dix enters the empty frame. The name of the stranger, we're told, is William Everest. But who is he, really? That's the mystery—even, at first, to Everest. While an attractive new acquaintance (Janis Carter) tries to help the amnesiac recover his identity, unsettling events accrue around the man. Why do kittens and canaries just happen to drop dead when he's around? Compounding the layers of confusion and cunning, the teasing narrator seems to revel in the secret of what Everest might really be up to. The sheer creepiness of Dix's performance is rivaled only by the weirdness of the Whistler himself.

• Written by Aubrey Wisberg. Photographed by L. W. O'Connell. With Richard Dix, Janis Carter, Jeff Donnell, Loren Tindall. (66 mins, B&W, 35mm, From Sony Pictures)

Followed by:

Voice of the Whistler

William Castle (U.S., 1945) New Print

Now the Whistler walks not down urban alleys but along a rocky coastline, where a remote lighthouse is the setting for a striking tale. "Loneliness is a disease," a doctor tells terminally ailing industrialist John Sinclair (Dix). So Sinclair seeks palliative care in the form of pretty nurse Joan (Lynn Merrick), making her a business proposition: after a few months as his wife, she will inherit his vast fortune. But can Sinclair really uphold his end of the bargain? In a series of ironic reversals—often announced by the narrator with malevolent glee—what begins as a paean to human connection becomes a case study in resentment and other fatal diseases of the heart.

• Written by Wilfrid H. Pettitt, Castle, from a story by Allan Rader. Photographed by George Meehan. With Richard Dix, Lynn Merrick, Rhys Williams, James Cardwell. (60 mins, B&W, 35mm, From Sony Pictures)

And:

Mysterious Intruder

William Castle (U.S., 1946) New Print

"I may not be the greatest detective in the world, but I am the most unusual," boasts Don Gale (Dix). Indeed, Gale goes in for some unconventional methods as he tracks a complicated trail of falsehoods, adding his own for good measure, in this swift-moving mystery. It begins with an old man looking for a girl named Elora, hoping to deliver a box that rightfully belongs to her. The search turns up not too few clues, but too many: there are multiple "Eloras," boxes within boxes, and corpses cropping up at inconvenient moments. (Cop: "Who discovered the body?" Gale: "I did." Cop: "What, again?") Even the Whistler seems caught up in the oddball action, calling "Look out!" before a shot is fired. Unfortunately, we're the only ones who hear him.

• Written by Eric Taylor. Photographed by Philip Tannura. With Richard Dix, Barton MacLane, Nina Vale, Regis Toomey. (62 mins, B&W, 35mm, From Sony Pictures)

• (Total running time: 188 mins)

SATURDAY JUNE 5

5:30 **The Secret of the Whistler**

George Sherman (U.S., 1946) New Print

The life of the artist is a lonely one; that of the artist's wife, even lonelier. We meet the wealthy and terminally ill Edith Harrison (Mary Currier) as she orders her own tombstone; we meet her husband Ralph (Dix), a painter, as he dances with an elegant blonde who is not Edith. The blonde (lissome Leslie Brooks) is an artist's model not in it for art's sake, quite willing to offer Ralph the companionship he craves while awaiting Edith's legacy—but the legacy will be more than either of them bargained for. With notably eccentric compositions and an appropriately cynical tone—even Ralph's friends seem to have nothing but contempt for him—*Secret* is a fine addition to the Whistler's gallery of artful ironies.

• Written by Raymond L. Schrock, from a story by Richard H. Landau. Photographed by Allen Siegler. With Richard Dix, Leslie Brooks, Michael Duane, Mary Currier. (62 mins, B&W, 35mm, From Sony Pictures)

Followed by:

The Thirteenth Hour

William Clemens (U.S., 1947) New Print

Stopping to give a stranger a lift changes the course of a life in this impossibly eventful saga of bad luck and bad choices. Naturally, the life and the luck (or lack of it) belong to the Richard Dix character, Steve, a truck driver who runs off the road and straight into big trouble. Picked up by a cop who's also his romantic rival, he's threatened with losing his livelihood, then implicated in a killing; the Whistler's voice seems to echo in his mind: "You didn't kill him, but will anyone believe you?" The punchy plot packs a dizzying number of blind curves into its sixty-five minutes, yet the film still finds time for comedy and sly references to earlier Whistler works, like the copy of *Studies in Necrophobia* that inexplicably turns up in the possession of an innocent preteen. As Steve flees from increasingly outrageous persecutions, Dix's exhaustion feels poignantly real; this would be the final film of his career.

• Written by Edward Bock, Raymond L. Schrock, from a story by Leslie Edgley. Photographed by Vincent Farrar. With Richard Dix, Karen Morley, John Kellogg, Jim Bannon. (65 mins, B&W, 35mm, From Sony Pictures)

• (Total running time: 127 mins)

SERIES ORGANIZED BY STEVE SEID. PROGRAM NOTES BY JULIET CLARK.

THE WHISTLER SERIES WILL ALSO BE SCREENED AT THE ROXIE CINEMA IN MAY, DURING THEIR NOIR SERIES. THANKS TO ELLIOT LAVINE FOR PUSHING TO REVIVE THESE FILMS.

ABOVE *The Power of the Whistler*, June 2