

Review #61 : *The Narrow Margin* (1952)

Charles McGraw and Marie Windsor

TRAILER

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RKQKm-S3cmY>



SYNOPSIS

The Narrow Margin is a 1952 B-Noir thriller that works with a precision and exactitude that very few features ever find. In 72 minutes, the film is blessed with **perfect pacing and laudably controlled direction** by Richard Fleischer. The economy of setting and action is remarkable, breathlessly taking the viewer through a brief battle before anyone would probably expect the action to begin —Brown's aging partner is fatally gunned down as the two cops are simply endeavouring to take Mrs. Neall down a staircase — to the discomfiting confines of a train, on which the great bulk of the film plays out, with Brown navigating his way through the maze of deceit, treachery and evildoing aboard with the cop and moll.

CHARACTERS

Detective Sergeant Walter Brown is a man made up of inclement parts, but morally salubrious when weighed as a whole. His gruff, stoically shielded oafishness gives him a kind of impervious protective coating. With a face that looked like it was **chiselled from a solid block of sandstone**, augmented with a deep, growling snarl of a voice that sounded as if it had been steeped in whiskey and filtered through barbed wire – supplemented by the three packs of cigarettes McGraw smokes in this 71 minute movie – thick-shouldered, lantern-jawed and hardboiled, he is in so many physical ways, the embodiment of the cop belonging to the genre of Film Noir. While less garrulous than another detective sergeant, Dave Bannon in the next year's *The Big Heat*, Walter Brown is just as **fearlessly principled and perilously heedless in his gritty determination and unbending righteousness**. Like Lieutenant Leonard Diamond in *The Big Combo* three years later, Brown is temerarious when confronted to thuggish gangsters who are his fore-ordained foes, his innumerable faceless *bête noire*...

The dame, a spitfire vixen of doubtful ethics, is literally and figuratively defined by the man to whom she married, a killed crime boss named Frankie Neall. **Mrs. Neall must be protected by Brown on the trip from Chicago to Los Angeles so she can testify** to the grand jury about the graft and corruption she knows about. Her moral mercurialness contrasts perfectly against Brown's tautly linear code of ethics. Made out to be cheap, unflatteringly ostentatious and routinely shrill, Mrs. Neall is a real piece of work, as the protagonist might say. It's a role demanding a fine actress to play it, and in that role queen of Hollywood B-movies Marie Windsor radiates, making it into a fully fleshed-out, indelibly personable figure of reason and sensible reaction.

Windsor is a B-movie treasure, reliably turning in gutsy, candidly authentic performances in her pictures, often stealing the show in small supporting parts. Here she is given a full stage on which to work and she is, behind the surface of rasping scratchiness and calculous persona, smashingly elegant and splendidly incisive.

Character actors such as the **sunny Jacqueline White** as a woman named Ann Sinclair, the corpulent Paul Maxey as a humorous but possibly fiendish passenger named Sam Jennings and the peculiarly miry Peter Brocco as a loathsome mob confederate who offers Brown a juicy bribe, show up, aiding the film in suspensefully portraying the labyrinthine train as one **overwhelming receptacle of malice and superbly menacing intrigue**.

NOIR ENVIRONMENT

Landscapes and environment were undeniably **integral aspects of many classic film noirs**. They seemed nearly as important in conveying the crucial noir elements of suspense and dread as the actors starring in them. From the cobblestone streets of Vienna in *The Third Man*, the seedy underworld of London in *Night and the City*, the sprawling metropolis of Los Angeles in *Double Indemnity* and *Sunset Boulevard*, and of course the concrete jungle of Manhattan in *Scarlet Street* or *Pickup on South Street* are just few of some of the numerous possible match-ups. These environments **breathed aesthetic life into these films** and set the stage for the players to interact, investigate, pursue, be chased, live and die on their streets...



But what if our film noir protagonist didn't have the streets of New York City to hide from his pursuers... just a **narrow compartment in a passenger train** speeding along at 60 mph? With a mob of goons bent on killing the witness inside that same train, and a similar amount of killers outside keeping pace with them in a car travelling alongside on the highway, the film sounds about as **appealing as being a diver in a shark cage** during a feeding frenzy. Only these sharks are inside the cage with the diver! With near perfect lighting and camera work, Fleischer expertly **plays with the claustrophobic and restricted space** of the train throughout the film and as the tension increases, **the shots seem to get tighter and tighter**. Wheels are set in motion for this **claustrophobic cat and mouse** chase about to take place on a passenger locomotive...



Another extraordinary aspect and bold choice on Fleischer's part is the **omission of a music soundtrack**. In place of a score, Fleischer prominently features the **sounds of the train**, utilized to startlingly brilliant effect. Underlying the tension is the moiling steam engine wheels, **simulating the meticulous engineering of the richly layered plot**, the loud banging together of boxcars forewarning gunplay, and the driving power behind Felton's commoving narrative...

An unforgettable cutaway from Windsor's Mrs. Neall **nervously furbishing her fingernails with a file** to the roaring train rhythmically churning, mechanized synchronization and incessant repeated movement of the wheels of the train lingers forever in the mind of anyone who has viewed the spectacle...



REVIEW

One of the thematic interests at work is the old lesson about **never judging a book by its cover**. As Brown and his partner discuss the woman to whom they are assigned before meeting her, they make a bet. Brown believes Mrs. Neall will be a low-class tomato with an ugly personality, conjectured even before seeing her that she would be just another example of the **unkempt human debris** — only in the form of a *'poison under the gravy'* — ; his partner, older, more sensitive, wants to believe otherwise, and so they wager five dollars on it. When Mrs. Neall appears, Brown believes **he has found precisely the woman he figured he would be stuck with**. As the **relationship slowly deepens**, however, defined as it is by the ceaseless struggle to keep the woman alive, Brown gradually empathizes with the woman he is charged with protecting, though his eyes tend to wander to the far more luminous Ann

Sinclair, thus angering Mrs. Neall, who herself comprehends just how repulsed Brown is of her in so many ways. Fleischer, working from a screenplay written by Earl Felton, which would be nominated for Best Original Screenplay by the Academy Awards for its **crackling dialogue and tightly wound narrative pacing and ingenuity**, commendably presses the point down like a ceramicist moulding clay, without ever clumsily crushing the creation with an overdone thesis.

The film is almost perfect, but with a few dark spots. The late major twist is questionable in its internal logic. The **fate of a major character** is negligently handled by the screenplay, yet those sore spots do not in the least sour our experience of this briskly travelled yarn of celerity. The themes resonate, and the characters are victoriously attendant in the mind of the viewer, as these two particularly well-drawn, **superbly human individuals wrestle with each other and finally themselves**.

Film Noir is an expansive genre, with a great depth of spiritually vanquished or desperate figures, which, for some of them only, will find redemption in the process :

- The **pitiless and periodically psychotic** gangster
- The **shadowy** informant
- The hapless **dupe**
- The feral **femme fatale**
- The **misunderstood** vixen
- The cop **gone crooked**
- The cop who allows his **lawful uprightness** to counterbalance all other deficiencies

Most of them are nothing less than amaranthine in their undying importance. Those onerous thematic undercurrents may be more difficult to delve into with a film so enjoyably fun and vibrant as *The Narrow Margin*, but they are just as easily appreciated, perhaps more so, distilled as they are as the exemplar beings, woven into the fabric of this B-movie of valiant aspirations.

The Narrow Margin is not a classic, but it's still a **wonderful crime thriller**, and one that I strongly recommend for fans of the genre. With its **ingenious finale**, Earl Felton flap-jacks the plot so cunningly that to elaborate here would be to ruin an ingratiating swindle ! +++