



T-MEN U.S. (1947)

Director Anthony Mann **Producer** Aubrey Schenck, Turner Shelton

Screenplay John C. Higgins **Cinematography** John Alton **Music** Paul Sawtell

Cast Dennis O'Keefe, Mary Meade, Alfred Ryder, Wallace Ford, June Lockhart, Charles McGraw, John Ardell, Vivian Austin, Louis Bacigalupi, Jim Bannon, Trevor Bardette

T-Men can be considered a perfect example of the semi-documentary pictures that were produced in the wake of the success of Henry Hathaway's *The House on 92nd Street* (1945), as well as an example of the strong contradictions that informed some entries in this subgenre. Before becoming a well renowned western director, Anthony Mann built his reputation during the forties thanks to a convincing series of noir B movies. Made for Eagle-Lion Films, *T-Men* tells the story of two U.S. Treasury Department agents who have to go undercover in order to break up an important ring that counterfeits both money and revenue stamps. The ensuing investigation will lead them from Detroit to Los Angeles and tragically will be resolved at high human cost.

The film's very beginning is a codified one that mobilizes all the usual tricks: A pompous music and voiceover, shots of government buildings, a direct address to the spectator by an official, the mention of the actual case on which the film is based. *T-Men* seems to engage in a shameless celebration of a government agency, a conformist stance that is usually contrary to noir politics. However, as the investigation starts, we enter a

◀ **"Terrific ... and True!" announces the poster. *T-Men* was shot in a semi-documentary style, not that you'd guess from the sensationalized movie poster.**

much darker world. One of the film's major assets is John Alton's black and white cinematography, and the use of pronounced high and low angles, extreme close-ups, short focal lenses, images reflected in mirrors or windows, and unusual perspectives that combine to create a disturbing environment that manages to subvert from the inside the semi-documentary bias while still in a way remaining realistic.

*“DID YOU EVER SPEND TEN NIGHTS IN A
TURKISH BATH LOOKING FOR A MAN?
DON’T.” DENNIS O’BRIEN*

But *T-Men* there are further delights on offer here, in addition to Alton's cinematographic symbiosis with Mann's vision. It offers a vast variety of precisely characterized villains (from bullies to a cold-blooded woman, and an invisible mastermind), but it also makes it clear that the undercover men are entrapped by their roles as mobsters (or are they at ease with them?), and Dennis O'Keefe's agent appears as violent and sadistic as the nation's enemies. Far from the Hollywood mainstream, *T-Men* depicts acts of violence that are truly painful to see and can't be easily offset by few but intense moments of emotion. Finally, it stresses the hierarchy that the agents discover inside the gang and then points to a form of international gangsterism that takes on a deceitful veneer of respectability, and indeed, after *T-Men*, both Mann and Alton themselves soon moved up to the apparently more respectable productions of MGM. **FL**

► **Tony Genaro (Ryder) leans over Dennis O'Brien (O'Keefe): Are they still only playing at being gangsters?**

