



FORCE OF EVIL U.S. (1948)

Director Abraham Polonsky **Producer** Bob Roberts **Screenplay** Abraham Polonsky, Ira Wolfert **Cinematography** George Barnes **Music** David Raksin
Cast John Garfield, Beatrice Pearson, Thomas Gomez, Howland Chamberlain, Marie Windsor, Roy Roberts, Paul McVey, Tim Ryan, Sheldon Leonard, Stanley Prager

Writer and director Abraham Polonsky's career—before being brutally stopped in 1951 by the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC)—took a most promising turn with the 1948 movie *Force of Evil*. In this rather short but dense film noir, John Garfield plays Joe Morse, a young lawyer who becomes too mixed up in the shady business of one particular client. In order to finally fulfil the American dream, Joe must make a legitimate corporation out of a much fragmented and low-yielding numbers racket, and somewhere along the way must take care of his older brother Leo.

Original and subversive as it is, *Force of Evil* nevertheless belongs to a group of post-war narratives that takes into account the evolution of organized crime into rackets that have the appearance (or are dissimulated behind) a real business such as gambling. Joe's client, Ben Tucker, is an old gangster from the Depression era (on several occasions, he is clearly associated with illegal beer smuggling, Tommy guns and bloody gangland murders) who is now trying to gain respectability and large sums of money through rationalization of costs and workforce. Joe himself is the one who is supposed

◀ Edward Hopper's "Third Avenue" paintings were an influence on the movie's cinematography but not, unfortunately, on the poster design.

to deal with the local authorities as he offers an apparently yet-unstained face. *Force of Evil's* new form of gangsterism is a powerful metaphor of capitalism and America's forced centralization of both institutions and enterprises after the war.

Central to the film is also a discourse about class differences: the upper middle class Joe and his partners are consistently contrasted with the working class embodied by Leo. It confronts

“THE IDEA IS TO SHOW THAT IN AMERICA, CRIME IS PART OF THE BUSINESS.” ABRAHAM POLONSKY (DIRECTOR)

the dehumanizing way of treating people in the corporation (everything from blackmailing to killing) with the warm caring that informs the relationship between all the employees of the small bank ran by the paternal figure of Leo—even the book-keeper turned stool pigeon out of fear succeeds in arousing some kind of sympathy from the spectators. The script is often particularly poetic, and is delivered by a very strong cast that includes an always convincing Garfield, an emotionally profound Thomas Gomez, and an unusual Beatrice Pearson in the role of Joe's love interest. However it is Polonsky's abilities as a strikingly visual director that are most impressive. He makes great use of sets and various New York locations in order to symbolically translate the dichotomy between the two worlds he describes, as well as portraying the fraught ambitions of his cynical and yet somewhat naive protagonist. **FL**

► **A weary Leo Morse (Gomez) finds that taking a stance against large corporations, whether criminal or not, is never easy.**

