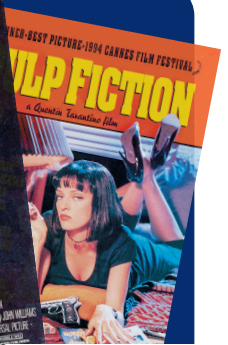
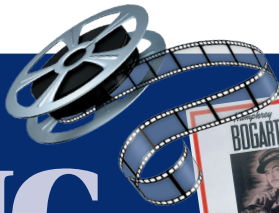


THIS WEEK'S CLASSIC MOVIE

by Madeline Pritchard



In the opening scene of 1947's *Crossfire*, we see a man beaten to death by two shadowy figures. The murder victim, we learn, was Joseph Samuels (Sam Levene), a Jewish veteran who had served in Okinawa. Three demobilised US Marines had been the last people to see Samuels alive; the next day, one of the three witnesses is missing – Mitch (George Cooper), who had hit it off with the deceased in a hotel bar.

It seems initially to be an open-and-shut case. But as Captain Finlay (Robert Young) and Mitch's comrade Sergeant Keeley (Robert Mitchum) investigate, they struggle to determine a motive – that is, until Monty (Robert Ryan) opens his mouth, spouting anti-Semitic vitriol while he attempts to implicate his friend for a crime it seems clear he has committed himself.

The film's taut script and impeccable performances disguise the oddness of the circumstances of the man's death – why would Samuels invite three strange men into his apartment in the middle of the night?

This framing is a hangover from the original novel, *The Brick Foxhole*, written by Richard Brooks while he was still a serving Marine. In this version, the murdered man is killed not for being Jewish, but for being gay.

Even before the book was passed onto the desk of the Production Code's administrator, Joseph Breen, it had been decided by RKO studio head Dore Schary and producer Adrian Scott that the central hate crime would have to be changed. Breen only confirmed this – calling the original story 'thoroughly and completely unacceptable'.

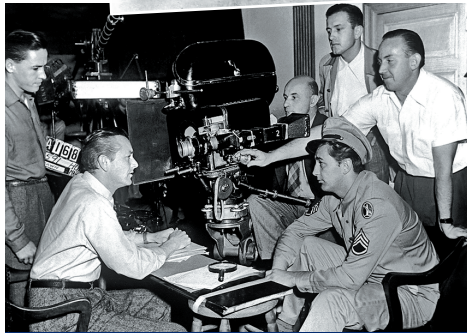
After the plot had been altered, and Breen had reluctantly

'Hating is always the same, always senseless.'



Crossfire

endorsed it, he gave one final warning – that there should be 'no suggestion of a 'pansy' characterization about Samuels



Reds under the bed? Robert Young and Robert Mitchum with Edward Dmytryk and crew; above, the body is discovered

or his relationship with the soldiers'. It wasn't until 1961, well over a decade after *Crossfire*, that *Victim* and *The Children's Hour* could portray gay and lesbian characters openly and sympathetically for the first time; it would be a further nine years before William Friedkin's landmark *The Boys In The Band*, which revolved entirely around realistically drawn gay characters.

Crossfire's altered premise did not preclude it from securing a place in cinema history. Released a few months before Elia Kazan's *Gentleman's Agreement* addressed the same issue, it was among the earliest Hollywood films to tackle the subject of anti-Semitism.

Finlay's impassioned speech against prejudice and hatred is a powerful statement, especially given the political climate in the US at the time, when mass panic could set in at even the faintest whiff of



a socialist ideal. Hollywood's paranoia about supposedly subversive elements in the industry would affect the lives of *Crossfire's* creators in the months after the film's release.

Director Edward Dmytryk and Scott were among the 'Hollywood Ten', a group of film-makers found in contempt of Congress for refusing to state to the House Un-American Activities Committee whether or not they were Communists. The 10 were tried and convicted, all served prison terms and all were blacklisted – although Dmytryk later recanted and saved his career by implicating some of his colleagues as Reds, including Scott, who never worked in Hollywood again.

Friday ■ GREAT! classic ■ 1.40am