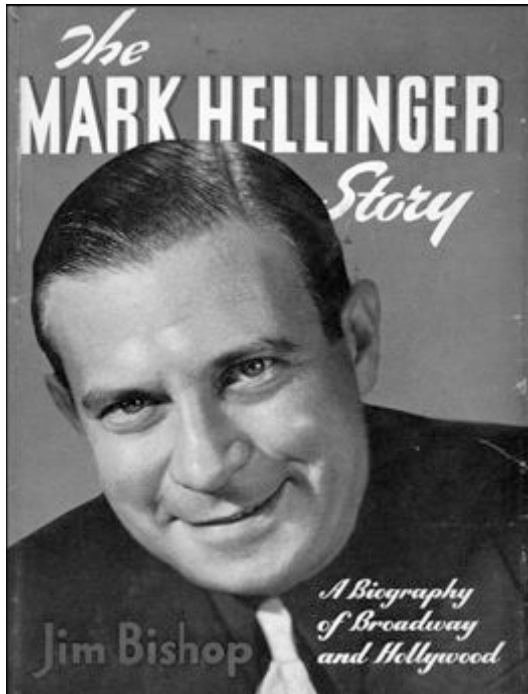


MARK HELLINGER



By Alan Rode

There might have been a million stories in the Naked City, but there was only one Mark Hellinger.

He's nearly forgotten by anyone who isn't a historian, film buff, or over the age of eighty. But everyone used to read Mark Hellinger's column over their morning coffee — an estimated 15 million Americans, when the country's population was less than half its present size. Then there were his terrific, melodramatic, film noir movies.

So who was this guy?

Mark Hellinger was born in New York City in 1903. He had a congenital heart condition, bad acne and rotten teeth, but was fast as a speeding bullet. He started out writing short stories for magazines and newspapers — he'd eventually write over 4500 of them — and soon achieved his ambition of becoming a Broadway columnist. He was best buddies with his contemporary, Walter Winchell, and there was just enough of New York City for both of them.

It was the era of the Ziegfeld Follies, Jack Dempsey, Babe Ruth, George M. Cohan, Owney Madden and thousands of speakeasies. Hellinger married Flo Ziegfeld's most gorgeous showgirl, Gladys Glad and settled into the night owl life of the "gentle chronicler of the joys and sorrows of New York."

When the Depression dimmed the Great White Way, Hellinger became restless. His yarns were much more than a stream of staccato gossip and invective like Winchell's column. Hellinger was a storyteller along the lines of O'Henry, so he naturally had to go to Hollywood to see what he could do in the picture business..

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Hellinger wrote a couple of screenplays based on his intimacy with New York including *Night Court* (1932) and *Broadway Bill* (1934). They didn't catch on so he returned to Broadway. Hollywood wasn't ready for him. Mark Hellinger wanted to make films that reflected the authenticity of life by placing its depravity side-by-side with its glamour:

"Pictures should be a lot more realistic," he declared. "I don't claim to be a genius... But I think I know the real from the unreal."

A deal with Warner Brothers was struck and Hellinger returned to Hollywood as a writer. It wasn't easy. He continued his syndicated column as a weekly feature while the movers and shakers in the picture business treated him like an upstart. After falling on his face with an initial Bette Davis screenplay, Hellinger was assigned to the Warner's 'B' unit under Bryan Foy, who taught him that words are complimentary to a visual medium. The nascent screenwriter listened and learned.

Hellinger's treatise to his era, *The Roaring Twenties* (1939), starring James Cagney as a blue-collar rumrunner who rises to become a New York gangster (before memorably dying on the steps of a church) anointed him as a star writer. Becoming a producer, the pictures bore his indelible stamp of romantic realism: *They Drive by Night* (1940), *High Sierra* (1941), and *Manpower* (1941).

Although successful, Hellinger became unhappy at Warner's toiling under a dictatorial Hal Wallis and volatile spendthrift, Jack L. Warner who checked with the gate guard each morning to find out when his employees showed up for work. Mark Hellinger was larger than life, and had the vanity and ego to go with it. He required free rein, unstinting praise and unrequited love to be happy. Anything less made him miserable. He freelanced for Fox before World War II intervened. Movies were suddenly irrelevant; Hellinger had to get in on the fight. Despite all of his influence, he was repeatedly rejected for service due his heart condition. One doctor told Hellinger that he was not in good enough shape to receive the medical vaccinations needed to travel overseas! Knowing his life was now on the clock, he wrangled a four month assignment as a war correspondent, writing human interest stories about the troops.

When he returned to Hollywood, he made his sixth film with pal Humphrey Bogart, *The Two Mrs. Carrolls* (1947). The studio sat on the film, and Hellinger obtained his contractual release from Jack Warner. He set up shop in August 1945 as an independent producer at the newly-melded Universal-International.

He bought Hemingway's short story, *The Killers* for \$36,700 only because he couldn't afford to buy one of the author's books. Hellinger hocked himself to the tune of \$875,000 with Bank of America and U-I and set about making a hit. He cast a former circus acrobat in the leading role after his wife, Gladys looked at a screen test and told her husband, "Well, he isn't handsome, but the women will go for him." After Hellinger watched the first dailies with Burt Lancaster, he hollered, "So help me, may all my actors be acrobats."

Next was Metro ingenue Ava Gardner, who was known for being Mickey Rooney's ex-wife and little else. Then Edmund O'Brien, Sam Levene and a group of mostly unknown character types: Jeff Corey, Jack Lambert, Charles McGraw and William Conrad. He had Anthony Veiller hole up in a New York hotel with John Huston to finish the script — a beautifully leavened story within a unique thicket of flashbacks.

Hellinger used Universal's noir maestro, Robert Siodmak, to helm the film. It all worked.

The Killers (1946) was bigger than a smash hit; it was an ethereal movie that not only cemented Hellinger's reputation as a great filmmaker, but made nearly every actor in the film a legitimate movie star or actor of consequence. After a year in release, the picture grossed nearly \$3 million — serious money in 1946. The picture remains the *Citizen Kane* of film noir.

Brute Force (1947) was a daring follow-up. Hellinger wanted to make a realistic prison picture but also inserted 'the woman on the outside' angle — much to the distaste of director Jules Dassin — to play to the box office. He used Lancaster again along with Metro's Hume Cronyn as a sadistic captain of the guards and featured a host of new faces, such as Howard Duff, Whit Bissell, Jack Overman and Yvonne De Carlo. He had to go toe-to-toe with Hollywood's prelate censor, Joseph I. Breen, to get this picture released with some of the more brutally violent scenes trimmed. What remained was a jolt of postwar nihilism that was a figurative left hook to the gut.

The Naked City (1948) would be Hellinger's valentine to his beloved New York — he even served as the voice-over narrator in this one. Shot on location by Dassin, the picture was written by Malvin Wald, who prowled autopsy suites and police interrogation rooms in New York City to attain the realism that Hellinger exhorted his production team to achieve. More of a groundbreaking police drama than a true film noir, *The Naked City* would be another smash, winning Academy Awards for best cinematography and editing. Sadly, Hellinger wouldn't be around long enough to savor his latest success.

While he was observing the filming of 'Willie Garzah' (Ted de Corsia) chased across the Williamsburg Bridge, Hellinger suffered a massive heart attack and was confined to an oxygen tent in his hotel room. His bum ticker, along with the daily intake of Hennessy brandy and endless cigarettes, had done him in.

Hellinger never fully recovered and succumbed to a second heart attack on

December 21, 1947. His other properties, *Criss Cross* and *Act of Violence* were sold off and made into memorable film noirs. Mark Hellinger was a populist storyteller in print and later on film who pursued the essence of dramatic realism. His innate sense of the public taste and sensibilities during the immediate post-World War II era remains unparalleled. For this and much more, Hellinger deserves to be remembered as one of the great producers of film noir.

