

Comments on *Pickup on South Street*

Pickup on South Street is about a petty thief, Skip McCoy, who gets caught up in a spy ring desperately trying to recover two strips of microfilm that the thief stole. The movie is set in New York City and includes exterior location shots. The cinematography creates a somber and sinister mood, with many scenes filmed using dim light. The urban landscape is generally seedy, which corresponds with the kind of characters that populate the story.

The principal character, Skip McCoy, is a cross between Slip Mahoney from *The Bowery Boys* and Charles Tatum, the flamboyant newspaperman, except that Skip is neither funny nor particularly bright. The idea of a petty thief and three-time loser trying to shake down a Communist spy ring stretches plausibility to the limit. Trying to appeal to his sense of patriotism is a waste of time. The character is simply too shallow to be taken seriously. All he wants is money. He is a nobody existing in a shack under a bridge, away from society. The only reason why anybody wants anything to do with him is because he has something that somebody wants, and even after he realizes that what he stole is something serious, his thinking remains incredibly myopic.

Then there is Candy, the woman who falls in love with Skip. She is unbelievable. First, she falls in love with Skip, the man who victimizes her, and then tries to use her as go-between with the "Commies." Later she clobbers Skip over the head with a bottle, leaving him sprawled on the floor. Then Candy insists that she is not a Communist, even though she is a courier for a Communist spy ring, has in her possession top secret information, and her boyfriend is a Communist. For the plot to make any sense, the audience must believe that Candy, who is part of a Communist spy ring, is not a Communist.

Regarding the boyfriend, Joey, his behavior is hysterical. By necessity a spy has to keep a low profile and maintain self-control but not in this movie. Here the spy is running around with a gun shooting people and attracting a lot of attention. Joseph Stalin would not have been pleased. If anyone needed to be leaving the United States fast, it was Joey.

Then there is Moe, the woman informant who fronts as a street vendor selling ties. To believe that this woman, who makes Skip McCoy look mainstream, would have any information worth paying for is a stretch. At first, it seems that Moe is in the story for comic relief, but then she goes from being brash, cynical and sarcastic to maudlin and melodramatic, and then this wishy-washy woman is murdered by Joey the out-of-control spy who's running around New York City with a gun looking for Skip, and she is not even the lead character. In fact, she's not even likable. Why should anyone care what she thinks?

Despite these anomalies in the story, what makes the movie watchable is the terrific acting. Richard Widmark, Jean Peters, Thelma Ritter and Richard Kiley deliver strong performances. Thelma Ritter is especially impressive. The stunt doubles are impressive too in the fight scenes. Also the movie has a campy quality, especially in its exaggerated theatrics that seem to parody more serious works in the crime and spy genres, such as *The Maltese Falcon* in which the lead character also possesses a valuable object, or *Sunset Boulevard* in which the lead character also craves money. But in those movies, these characters have depth, which adds richness to the plot and makes the stories compelling works of drama. Although entertaining, *Pickup on South Street* does not make it to that level.