



Caged!

CLASSIC, NOT CAMP

By Alan K. Rode
Sentinel Senior Editor

I was initially startled when Warner Brothers released *Caged* (1950) on DVD as part of a Cult Camp Classic Boxed Set back in 2007. Although grateful that one of my favorite films was finally available on a remastered DVD, it was perplexing why a classic noir, nominated for three Academy Awards (Best Actress—Eleanor Parker, Best Supporting Actress—Hope Emerson, Best Original Story and Screenplay—Virginia Kellogg and Bernard Schoenfeld), would be packaged in this manner.

The metamorphosis of Eleanor Parker from a tear-streaked pregnant teen, imprisoned as a robbery accomplice, into a steely-eyed, con prostituting herself for parole, is compelling cinema that holds up magnificently after six decades. *Caged* remains a groundbreaking picture that seamlessly melded social commentary with high drama. *Caged* also initiated important censorship battles that would prove a harbinger of future changes in the Production Code Authority (PCA).

Why was this distinguished film released with an aged-in-vodka Joan Crawford costarring with an ape-man in the forgettable *Trog*, and Lana Turner portraying an ersatz Norma Desmond on LSD in *The Big Cube*? No doubt it was due to a Hollywood-created paradigm that caused the public to assume that *any* film about women in prison couldn't be taken seriously.

From their inception, women in prison movies have been mired in clichés that quickly evolved into parody; *Ladies of the Big House* (1931) starred Sylvia Sydney as a florist framed for murder who pulled hard time in full makeup and coiffed hair, while Barbara Stanwyck, in *Ladies They Talk About* (1933), wore negligees and enjoyed manicures in a prison that was more like a spa.

Women's Prison (1955) put the sex front-and-center, with convict Warren Stevens sneaking over to the women's side of the Big House to impregnate his wife (Audrey Totter), proving that not even separate cellblocks can keep a happily married couple apart.

As censorship strictures evaporated, lust and mayhem behind bars became viable—and profitable: exploitation flicks *The Big Doll House* (1971), *The Big Bird Cage* (1971), *Black Mama, White Mama* (1973) and *Caged Heat* (1974) permanently

Wallis departed for Paramount, his long relationship with Jack L. Warner having imploded over contractual hassles—and which of the two titans would keep the Best Picture Oscar for *Casablanca*.

Originally a newspaperman, Wald scripted some of Warner Bros. best films during the late 1930's-early 1940's: *The Roaring Twenties* (1939), *They Drive By Night* (1940), *Out of the Fog* (1941), and *Manpower* (1941). Moving into production, he scored repeatedly, at the box office, with the reconstituted Joan Crawford—*Mildred Pierce* (1945), *Humoresque* (1946), *Possessed* (1947) and *Flamingo Road* (1949)—while producing some of the most distinguished and successful of Warner's post-war titles, including *Key Largo* (1948), *Johnny Belinda* (1948) and *Task Force* (1949).

Wald was a whirling dervish. It has been said that Wald was the model Budd Schulberg used to create the unforgettable character of Hollywood hustler Sammy Glick in *What Makes Sammy Run?* He creatively shaped his films, using more of a coach's style compared to the autocratic Wallis. He was also a ceaseless cheerleader.

Endless memos on casting, story, dialogue, publicity, set design, location, titles, thank-you notes, script changes, etc. spewed from his typewriter, blanketing everyone from Jack L. Warner down to the most minor supporting players.

Wald's original notion for *Caged* was set forth in a May 1, 1948 memo to Jack Warner: It was called *Women without Men*, and was to star Bette Davis as a reform-minded prison warden alongside Joan Crawford as a hardened prisoner. The concept foundered due to differences between the stars and the fiscal realities of the postwar movie market.

The producer was also inspired by his screenwriter brother, Malvin Wald, who'd researched police



Does *Caged* really belong in a DVD set of "Cult Camp"?

enshrined Pam Grier as The Incarceration Queen; prison seemed desirable with her as a cellmate. In short order, such over-the-top sexploitation fare stifled any trace of realism in women's jailhouse dramas. Tom Eyen's 1975 stage parody *Women Behind Bars*, in which the warden was played by transvestite star Divine, took WIPs (as they are now called) into gay territory—a move that has retroactively managed to reclassify all such films as "camp."

What made *Caged* different from the prison pictures that preceded and followed it was the vision of producer Jerry Wald.

Wald had ascended to the top rank at Warner Brothers in 1945 when major-domo producer Hal B.



files and observed autopsies while writing *The Naked City* (1948). By the late 1940s, escapist fare—Mickey Rooney playing Andy Hardy or Maria Montez in a sarong—had taken a back seat to forceful stories with a dark, authentic edge, such as *Brute Force* (1947), *Crossfire* (1947), *Boomerang!* (1947) and *The Snake Pit* (1948). These films put studios in greater conflict with the Production Code Authority—but they also created longer lines at the box office.

Women without Men was the brainchild of Virginia Kellogg, a former *L.A. Times* reporter, now under contract to Warner Bros., who had been writing for movies since the 1930's. More a story developer than a screenwriter, she possessed a laser-like focus for authenticity and a reputation for integrity.

It's worth noting that Virginia Kellogg earned a screen credit for the original story of the classic *White Heat* (1949), which was thematically similar to her story for *T-Men*, released by Eagle-Lion the previous year. Precious little from her final *White Heat* treatment, other than the title and opening train heist, made it onto the screen. Ivan Goff and Ben Roberts expanded upon her work and created the script that forever emblazoned Cody Jarrett (James Cagney) in public consciousness. Although Kellogg would be nominated for a Best Writing Oscar, she was aware that Goff and Roberts did most of the heavy lifting on *White Heat*. She was eager for a project she could call her own.

Kellogg's idea was to spend time inside a woman's prison, developing a realistic story of life behind bars. Jerry Wald enthusiastically agreed, arranging to have his writer visit several prisons incognito, a plan made easier via WB's juice and contacts Kellogg retained from her reporting days. In a letter to his screenwriter, Wald stressed the need for authenticity:

"Our story will be a success only if it is an HONEST portrayal of life in prison and because the women in it behave the way women would under the circumstances in which we find them. I have always felt that presenting a story on the screen is not an excuse for not having your actors behave like human beings."

During the final month of 1948, Kellogg spent two weeks in various prisons, "...in the East and one in the Middle West." Some of her notes, gleaned from the *Caged* production files:

New York December 17, 1948

One down two to go, Material incredibly good have enough for book so far...About Monday tackle Michigan then Ohio. Last two worst except South.

Chicago, Illinois, December 28, 1948

"Caroled with colored through cellblocks

Christmas dawn saw clipped heads and seamy side you want contrasted with hilarious comedy incidents. Also two crime syndicates actually recruiting inside prison... Shocking facts far surpass *Snake Pit*. Am not quite stir bugs yet.

Kellogg's article "Inside Women's Prison," published in the June 3, 1950 edition of *Colliers*, was timed to coincide with the release of *Caged*. It exposed the horrific conditions she witnessed during her undercover prison sojourn, including a young inmate collapsing in the kitchen and hemorrhaging from advanced syphilis, as well as routine practices such as solitary confinement, hair shearing, and immersion in cold water baths. Kellogg expressed contempt for the prison matrons, several of whom she asserted were on the payroll of organized crime syndicates:

"Most of the guards were broad-beamed Amazonian spinsters," she wrote, "who are somehow related to politicians or are decrepit widows of men who had influence, hanging on long enough to get a pension."

Interviewed later by a Boston paper, Kellogg admitted to being "haunted" by her prison experiences. She reportedly began carrying a revolver in her purse for protection.

Jerry Wald engaged Bernard Schoenfeld, whose noir resume included *Phantom Lady* (1944) and *The Dark Corner* (1946), to collaborate on the screenplay and refine Kellogg's sensational material. He contributed original material and polished the dialogue, but in the end needed a Writer's Guild arbitration decision to earn a shared screen credit with Kellogg.

John Cromwell was hired to direct the film, now titled *Locked In*, after Michael Curtiz and Vincent Sherman expressed no interest in the assignment. Working for a flat fee of \$40,000 and no profit percentage, Cromwell came relatively cheap. He'd bring the picture in five days over schedule, at a cost just under \$1 million.

Casting the virtually all-female ensemble was a particular challenge for Wald. The only male character with more than a single scene was the crooked politician played by Taylor Holmes, who got the part after Norman Lloyd turned it down.

For the lead role of Marie Allen, the producer contemplated Doe Avidon, Betsy Drake and Ruth Roman, whom he equated to "...a young Bette Davis" in a gushing memo. Wald's enthusiasm could at times trump common sense.

The producer also struggled with the casting of Warden Benton, mentioning it casually to Joan Crawford—who arched a dissenting eyebrow—and Patricia Neal, who angrily rejected it, telling Warner's production chief Steve Trilling that "... she didn't want to support whoever played the plum role of Marie."

After arranging a test with the consummately professional Agnes Moorehead as the warden and studio contract star Eleanor

Parker as Marie Allen, Wald had his two principal players.

Casting the sadistic matron, Evelyn Harper, was a no-brainer. Wald had noticed Hope Emerson throttling Richard Conte in *Cry of the City* the previous year, and after she tested Wald instantly offered her \$1,250 a week with a five-week guarantee. The towering actress—6'2" and 230 pounds—abandoned a job offer at Universal and signed on. Her presence would ensure that Kellogg's first-hand reporting of the worst type of prison matrons would be accurately recreated.

Betty Garde, Jan Sterling, Ellen Corby, Lee Patrick, Olive Deering, Jane Darwell and Gertrude Michael rounded out the cast, all handpicked by Wald.

Glamour was not permitted on the set. Wald told make-up czar Perc Westmore: "I am in complete agreement with you that none of the women should wear make-up of any kind at all. This is important in order to give the film the documentary feeling we want." The lone concession: five wigs designed by Westmore to show Eleanor Parker's various tonsorial transitions.

Principal photography began on July 18, 1949 and proceeded without incident; shooting was entirely on Warner sound stages, except for brief sequence of Parker working in the prison laundry that was shot in Culver City, and another in which the old Power and Light building in downtown L.A. was used as the prison exterior. The always-prepared Parker gave the performance of her career, and reportedly she and the rest of the splendid cast required little direction.

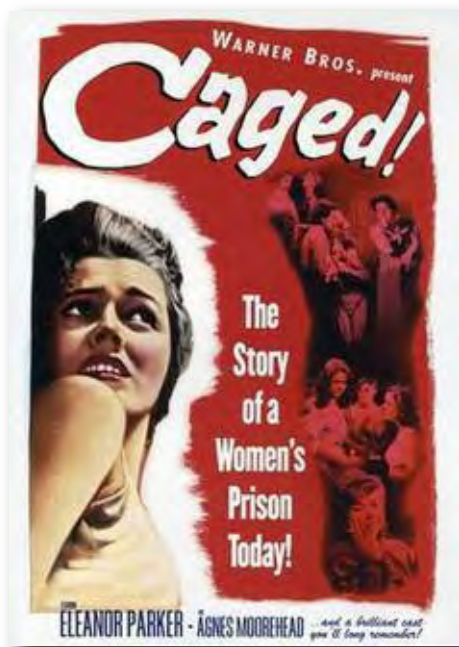
Jerry Wald loathed the title *Locked In* and peppered Jack L. Warner with memos begging him to change it: *House of Correction*, *The Outcasts*, *Condemned*, *The Damned Don't Cry*, *Behind Iron*, *Girls Like Us*, *The Forsaken*, and *Fallen Women* were all suggested.

The Cage was approved, but the studio couldn't obtain the rights to it. Wald spewed more memos with additional title recommendations. Fed up, Jack Warner issued a directive on September 19, 1949 announcing the title of the picture would be *Caged*. A routing sheet was attached on which everyone of prominence at the studio was required to sign off on the boss's selection. Wald's signature was first on the list.

The next, and biggest, hurdle for *Caged* was obtaining a Production Code Authority seal. The Code had governed Hollywood since the Legion of Decency and local censorship boards threatened a boycott in the early 1930's. The PCA had been managed since its inception by prelate censor Joseph I. Breen. *Locked In* was in pre-production when Breen met with Kellogg, Schoenfeld and John Cromwell. The quartet struggled to find a middle ground in



Hope Emerson as the sadistic matron



which the movie would pass through the PCA without its sharp edge of realism and social commentary being dulled.

During her research Virginia Kellogg had been shocked by the availability of narcotics in prison, and as a result she created a character called “Twitch,” who was clearly an addict. Breen found this to be the most insoluble problem in the script, as the Code specifically forbade the subject: “We pointed out that this would be a clear-cut Code violation for which we had no immediate solution.” Neither did Warner Bros., except for inclusion of a subtle line from Evelyn Harper asking Marie if she could help her with “...a habit that is hard to break,” all mention of drugs was deleted, and “Twitch” was eliminated. Drug addiction wouldn’t be mentioned until five years later, when Otto Preminger released *The Man with the Golden Arm* (1955)—without the PCA’s Seal of Approval.

The other touchy issue was Marie, in Breen’s words, “...presumably leaving prison at the end of the story to join a house of prostitution.” Breen agreed to Bernie Schoenfeld’s notion of “simply emphasizing the fact that she seemed to have some talents as a booster.”

A significant dispensation by the PCA board was allowing Jan Sterling to play a prostitute and state openly that it was the reason she was in prison. This acknowledgment, which seems absurdly trivial now, was a major censorship concession in 1950 and an



Eleanor Parker in *Caged*

indication that the PCA was beginning to give ground on some prohibitions.

Joe Breen cherry-picked individual lines of dialogue for excision, including an inmate remarking that she looked forward to “...helping a pro football team break training,” and another commenting that “...it don’t come wrapped in cellophane.” In a laughable missive, Breen warned Warner Bros. that “the showing of a toilet would be unacceptable.” After viewing the film’s final cut, Breen issued the PCA approval code stamp.

The battle wasn’t over. Individual states, provinces and municipalities all had their own censorship boards, which frequently demanded cuts before allowing movies to be shown. In some cases, films were simply banned outright. *Caged* stirred up a hornet’s nest of protest like no WB picture had since *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* in 1932.

Caged was rejected outright by the Kansas and Pennsylvania censorship boards, as well as being banned by specific cities. The Detroit censor—a policeman—refused to issue an exhibition permit because Jan Sterling stated she was a “C.P.—common prostitute.” Matters were even tougher in Canada, with the WB representative in Winnipeg complaining to the New York office:

“Basically my efforts to get this picture passed are being hindered somewhat by the fact that Universal’s *Brute Force* was turned down two years ago and they are still working on both censor boards to get it passed. Both Vaughan and Mrs. Young kept throwing this picture up to me and kept insisting that *Caged* was a female version of *Brute Force*.”

Ohio’s Division of Film Censorship became furious after viewing the film and discovering that Virginia Kellogg had been seen inside one of their prisons. Warner’s reminded the censor board that the picture did not specifically represent any of Ohio’s institutions. Nonetheless, Ohio’s chief censor branded *Caged*, “...definitely harmful to the rehabilitation programs of our prisons.”

The American Prison Association weighed in with a letter to Jack L. Warner stating that the film caused “considerable resentment among the wardens and superintendents in regard to the production of *Caged* with its sweeping condemnation of correctional policy and administration.”

Censor boards in Montreal and Worcester, Massachusetts specifically rejected the movie due to prison scandals that were being covered up. Warner’s branch manager in Montreal wrote that, “The particular reason is ... what is actually brought out in the picture. The Fullum Street jail which houses women inmates has been a thorn in the side of the Provisional Government for some time. Not too far back this whole thing was aired in the local press...”

Clearly, Jerry Wald and Virginia Kellogg had touched a nerve—precisely as they had intended.

Warner Bros. gradually tamped down the uproar and eventually got

the film exhibited in most locales ... but it wasn’t easy. *Caged* was approved for exhibition in Canada only “after a terrific struggle,” with a special preamble spliced in before the credits stating that the movie was fictional and “intended to emphasize the problem of administration in penal institutions.” Included was a reminder that “... every effort was made to rehabilitate inmates so that upon release they can be restored to society.” Cuts were extensive: the suicide of an inmate seen only in shadow, the hair-cutting scene with Parker, Hope Emerson drinking whiskey and being stabbed, Ellen Corby philosophizing about murdering her husband, and the oft-quoted opening line of “Pile out, you tramps!” were all excised in Canada and several U.S. states.

Despite all this, *Caged* reaped mostly positive reviews, and by July 1950, it was grossing as much as any movie in release other than *Father of the Bride*. It was included on most of the year’s best film lists, along with such well-received titles as *All About Eve*, *Sunset Boulevard*, *No Way Out*, *Cyrano De Bergerac*, *Broken Arrow*, and *The Asphalt Jungle*. Jack Warner was



pleased that Wald had produced a prestige picture that made money for the studio, even if it did not win any of the three Oscars for which it was nominated.

Eleanor Parker would leave Warner Bros. after *Caged*, inking a new contract with Paramount. Her new deal specified one picture per year, and allowed her to make movies at other studios; a freedom never experienced by the actress during her seven years at Warner Bros.

Jerry Wald would win the Irving Thalberg Memorial Award the same year he made *Caged*. He soon left Warners the following year and signed an exclusive production deal with RKO. Working for Jack L. Warner, he learned, was heaven compared to working for Howard Hughes; he left RKO and worked as an independent producer, garnering two more Best Picture nominations, until he died of a heart attack in 1963 at only 52 years of age.

Virginia Kellogg continued working, but most of the stories she sold to studios never made it onto the screen. She never had another project like *Caged*. Kellogg married Frank Lloyd, the director of *Mutiny on the Bounty* (1935) in 1955. She passed away in 1981.

Caged was mostly forgotten until it resurfaced on television, where a new generation could enjoy its heartrending performances and memorably pithy dialogue. During my formative years, it was a staple on WOR-TV’s “Million Dollar Movie” in New York.

As Marie Allen would say, “Kindly omit flowers”—and ignore the packaging of the film’s latest incarnation on DVD. *Caged* was, and remains, classic film noir—not camp cinema. ■