

“L.A Confidential”

The classic film “Chinatown” focused on corruption in Los Angeles in the 1930’s when city officials reaped huge profits from insider knowledge of a water project which would fuel the city’s growth. Fast forward to the Los Angeles of the 1950’s when gangsters like Bugsy Siegel and Mickey Cohen protected their lucrative trade by lining the pockets of the city fathers and the police. This tumultuous era is the setting for “L.A. Confidential”.

The film opens with a colorful postcard panorama of the L.A. of the 50’s. But beneath the glittering surface “The City of Angels” was anything but angelic. The moral rot started at the top of the political class and payoffs were a standard perk for the “men in blue”. Constitutional rights were a distant mirage for those who ended up in police custody and jail house beatings were a standard form of interrogation. Enter two very different kinds of police officers. Bud Wendell (Russell Crowe) isn’t on the take but dishes out justice in the “Dirty Harry” mold. By contrast, Edmund Exely (Guy Pearce) is a by the book cop which makes him a pariah among his fellow officers. Wendell and Exely’s paths will ultimately cross when a mass killing at the "Night Owl Diner" leads to a series of unexpected discoveries.

Other characters who crop up in “LA. Confidential” are “Hollywood Jack” (Kevin Spacey) a sleek celebrity cop for whom corruption is second nature; the irrepressible Danny DeVito as the publisher of the scandal mag “Hush, Hush”; James Cromwell as the autocratic Captain Smith; and a barely recognizable David Strathairn as Pierce Morehouse, a man whose criminal enterprises include a collection of high priced call girls cosmetically altered to look like movie stars (Kim Basinger has been turned into a Veronica Lake look alike). All of them will interact with each other in unexpected ways.

“L.A. Confidential” with its multiple twists and turns; crisp dialogue (especially when Danny DeVito is on screen); and evocation of time and place joins the ranks of crime classics. My only nit to pick is a gunfight scene towards the end of the film which is too over the top for my taste and the ultimate ending, which, unlike the gold standard for unexpected endings (“The Sixth Sense” and

“The Usual Suspects”), ties everything up a little too conveniently. All that aside, you cannot go wrong watching this engrossing film.

(Amazon Prime)

If you want to delve more deeply into the checkered past of Los Angeles pick up the book "L.A. Noir: The Struggle for the Soul of America's Most Seductive City".