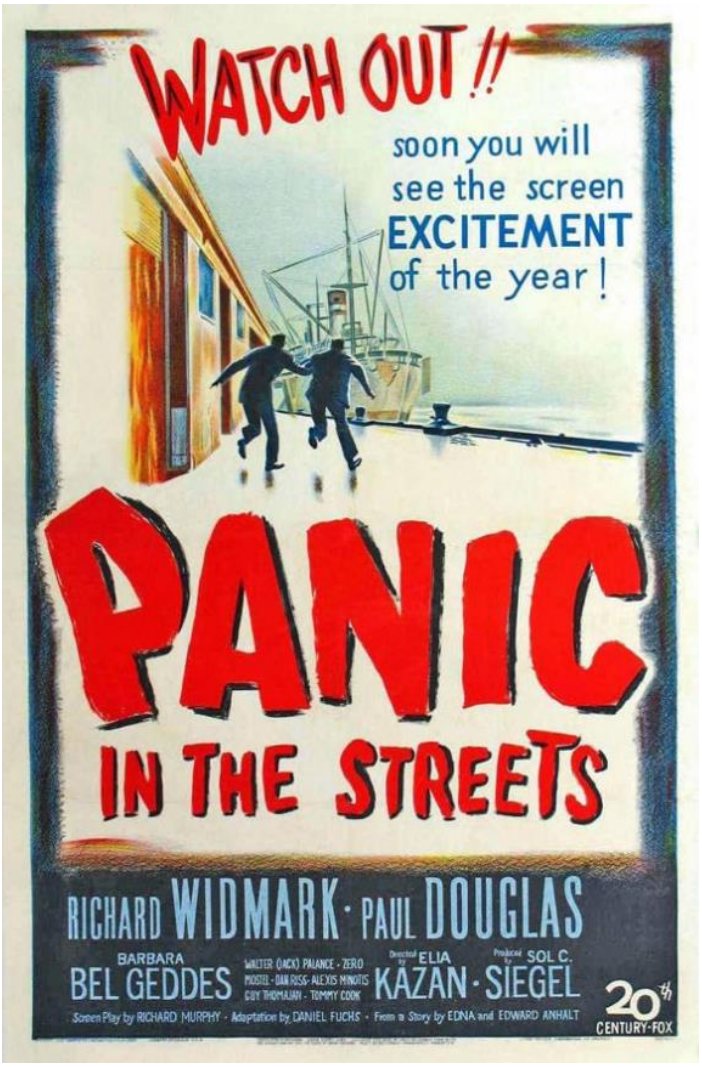

Panic in the Streets

Epidemics and One Health in Black and White.

Director: **Elia Kazan, (1950).**

Writers: **Richard Murphy and Daniel Fuchs,** based on a story by **Edna Anhalt and Edward Anhalt**.

Stars: **Richard Widmark, Paul Douglas, Barbara Bel Geddes, Jack Palance, Zero Mostel.**

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This film, directed by Elia Kazan, follows the efforts of New Orleans health authorities to contain an outbreak of pneumonic plague in the city. The protagonists are Richard Widmark and Paul Douglas, joined by a young Jack Palance in his debut role as the villain. I say "villain" because *Panic in the Streets* is shot very much in the style of film noir. From the title, one might expect a typical 1950s disaster or horror film, but what we find instead is a gripping thriller that likely inspired several later productions.

The film is an adaptation of a story by Edna and Edward Anhalt about an outbreak of pneumonic plague in New Orleans, itself inspired by a 1924 epidemic in Los Angeles that affected a community of Mexican immigrants. The screenplay, written by Richard Murphy and Daniel Fuchs, had to pass strict censorship under the "Hays Code," which prohibited the depiction of violence, sexual themes, or morally questionable characters such as prostitutes. Because of this, the famous staircase scene was nearly cut for being considered too shocking. Despite these constraints, the film was a success and earned an Academy Award for Best Screenplay.

The story opens with a late-night poker game involving an immigrant who has just arrived in North America. He coughs persistently and sweats profusely with fever. In poor condition, he decides to leave the game—unfortunately while winning against a thug named Blackie (Jack Palance), who takes it badly. As expected, Blackie and his cronies end up murdering the unlucky immigrant.

The next day, the body is discovered, and during the autopsy the coroner notes a series of unusual symptoms. Laboratory tests reveal the blood is teeming with bacilli. He immediately alerts Public Health Service officer Clint Reed (Richard Widmark), who, after further tests, identifies the bacteria as *Yersinia pestis*. Reed instantly recognizes the gravity of the situation: the pneumonic form of plague is extremely contagious, with a mortality rate approaching 100% if untreated within 24 hours.

What follows is a race against time to contain the outbreak. Reed orders immediate vaccination and antibiotic treatment with streptomycin (the more effective tetracycline was patented in 1950) for all personnel who came into contact with the corpse. He then meets with city and police officials to decide on urgent measures. With only 48 hours to trace everyone exposed to the infected immigrant, Reed convinces them to suppress the news in order to prevent mass panic and flight from the city. If containment fails, New Orleans will have to be quarantined to stop the disease from spreading nationwide.

Reed is joined in his epidemiological investigation by Detective Warren (Paul Douglas), the archetypal "tough cop." Together, they comb the dockside underworld, painstakingly reconstructing the immigrant's movements and identifying his contacts. They discover that he had arrived on a ship from Egypt—where other sailors are also infected—but they must still locate the remaining poker players before time runs out.

A key theme in the film is the tension between public health and civil liberties during emergencies. Both Reed and Warren are portrayed as men of conscience who push ethical boundaries in order to protect others. Reed suppresses information about the outbreak to prevent panic, effectively denying citizens their right to know. Later, Warren arrests a journalist to stop him from publishing the story, though the mayor is ultimately forced to release him and issue an apology. In one pivotal exchange, Reed tries to make the city council understand the stakes. When a councilman insists that it is merely a local problem that lies in "*our own community*" Reed replies:

"*Community? What community? Do you think you're living in the Middle Ages? ... Anybody that leaves here can be in any city in the country within 10 hours. I could leave here today, and I could be in Africa tomorrow. And whatever disease I had would go right with me. ... Then think of it when you're talking about communities! We're all in a community, the same one!*"

Remarkably, even in 1950, the film anticipated what we now call the *One Health* concept.

I won't spoil the ending, but this overlooked gem is well worth rediscovering. Set aside a quiet weekend afternoon, and enjoy a thriller that blends public health, ethics, and suspense with timeless relevance.

The first version of this text was published in Spanish language in the Nº63 of *NoticiaSEM*, the monthly bulletin of the Spanish Society of Microbiology. A more detailed analysis of this film can be found in Spanish language at Sánchez M. (2022) "*Pánico en las calles*: inmigración y enfermedades importadas" en A. Ortega and A.M. Castellanos (eds.) *Inmigración y cine, IV parte*. 257-264. Editorial Aranzadi. The translation to English language has been done using AI tools. This text is presented under "Fair Use" or "Fair Dealing" as described in the section 107 of the Copyright Act of 1976. Images are used for educative purposes.