



**EARL CAMERON**

# Pool of London

1951 was something of a vintage year for Ealing Studios: two of its best remembered comedies, Alexander Mackendrick's *The Man in the White Suit* and Charles Crichton's *The Lavender Hill Mob*, and the first of Harry Watt's African excursions, *Where No Vultures Fly*, were released that year. Which may be why the fourth Ealing movie of 1951, Basil Dearden's *Pool of London*, has been largely neglected. If it's mentioned at all, it's often as the seed from which *Lavender Hill Mob* unexpectedly germinated.

T.E.B. 'Tibby' Clarke, the studio's star screenwriter, had been assigned a serious slice-of-life drama with noir undertones, centred on the London docks; John Eldridge's outline included a Bank of England employee who uses his position to steal bullion. Working on it, Clarke began to see comic possibilities; and when studio boss Michael Balcon asked how *Pool of London* was getting on, Clarke admitted that the river had been dropped in favour of the heist comedy. According to George Perry's 1981 account of the studio *Forever Ealing* 'the chief erupted in rage'. Clarke retreated, leaving the outline on Balcon's desk – but then two hours later was summoned back to be calmly told to go ahead with his idea, with Crichton (who had directed Clarke's *Hue and Cry*) as director. *Pool* was reassigned to screenwriter Jack Whittingham, with Dearden slotted in to direct.

*Pool* deserves better than this marginal role, though. In his classic study of the studio's output *Ealing Studios* (1980), Charles Barr notes, 'If only one film could be preserved for posterity, to illustrate the essence of Ealing from the time before decadence set in, this would be a good choice, with its clear-cut embodiment of Ealing attitudes to women, violence, social responsibility and cinematic form.' Oddly enough, Barr doesn't mention the one element that makes *Pool* of exceptional interest to posterity: this was the first British film to feature a love interest between a black man and a white woman.

Following a favourite Ealing pattern, the film depicts a group: members of the crew of a merchant freighter that docks in London over a weekend. (The 'Pool of London' is the stretch of the Thames from London Bridge down to Limehouse where, prior to the advent of container ships, most merchant shipping would dock.) Some, like the chief officer (James Robertson Justice, ripe as ever), refuse to set foot on shore – he prefers to stay in his cabin reading poetry and knocking back brandy. Others, like Dan MacDonald (the film's lead, American-born actor Bonar Colleano), eagerly head ashore. Already given to a little minor smuggling, Danny this time gets involved in something much more dangerous.

His best friend on board is a Jamaican sailor, Johnny Lambert. Accompanying Danny to a Lambeth music-hall where his friend's linking up with a criminal contact, Johnny meets Pat, an English girl who works in the box office. They meet up several more times over the course of the weekend. This being 1951 England there's not the least hint of sex involved, but the attraction between them is palpable.

Johnny's played by the Bermudan-born actor Earl Cameron and this, remarkably enough, is his screen debut. 'Remarkably' since, after eight years

of stage-only experience, he gives a wholly relaxed, natural performance; you'd think he'd been acting for the camera for years. But Cameron recalls that it didn't come so naturally to him at first.

'No, it wasn't easy. I was very lucky, because I'd been eight years in the theatre, and I was invited to test for the film. It was the scene [with Susan Shaw in the film] where they're walking across London Bridge. It was a very quiet scene, because it's at midnight, and my character was a bit grieved because I'd had some insults thrown at me. So I was giving a typical stage performance, you know, and they said, 'Bring it down.' I tried several times, but for some reason I couldn't get it. So I left the studio feeling very depressed, thinking 'I could have done this.' Fortunately they phoned up again two or three days later, saying would I come back and test with another girl? But the second time I still didn't get it right. I was disgusted with myself. But Basil Dearden must have been certain I could do it, because he invited me back again, and he said, "Ok, nice and quiet – now action." So I said my line, "The first time I met Danny," and he said "Earl, that's it – you've got it!" And it's always come easy to me after that – I never had any problems.'

The anti-racism in *Pool of London* is understated but unmistakable. The only racist comments come from unsympathetic characters – the doorman at the music-hall, Maisie (Moira Lister), a brash young woman Dan's involved with. Otherwise, people are friendly enough towards Johnny. Was this too rosy a picture of English society at the time? Cameron thinks not: 'It was very true to life as I knew it in England. I didn't find much problem with racism as such – but every so often some guy would come out with a nasty remark.' He agrees, though, that Ealing would have wanted any overall social criticism downplayed: 'Michael Balcon didn't want to touch on any kind of racial problem. They had to treat it very delicately.'

The relationship between Johnny and Pat is handled with equal caution. The two never kiss and barely even touch. At most, Pat once rests her hand on Johnny's shoulder as she's getting into a boat. (Even so, the film hit censorship problems in the States.) At no point, as Cameron recalls it, was it ever suggested that they might be shown to go further. 'It shouldn't matter, but it does,' Johnny tells Pat wistfully. 'Maybe some day it won't.'

Nonetheless, Cameron enjoyed his scenes with Susan Shaw. 'She was a delight to work with – a very lovely girl.' In fact, it was between Shaw and her co-star, Colleano, that romance blossomed: the pair fell in love on the set, and were married in 1954. For a while they were a golden couple, but then tragedy hit: Colleano was killed in a car crash in 1958 and Shaw, devastated, took to drink. Her career fell apart; she made her last film in 1963 and died in poverty of cirrhosis, 15 years later, aged just 49. Knowledge of this casts a shadow over the sweetness of her scenes with Cameron.

Cameron, however, went on to a long and fruitful career – though, as he notes, despite excellent notices for his performances in *Pool*, it took a while for further offers to come in. 'For a white actor, that might have happened sooner.' Even so, he's appeared in some 90 films and TV dramas in a wide variety of roles; though often cast as a sensitive outsider, he's enjoyed playing less lovable types. He was a treacherous Mau Mau terrorist in Terence Young's overheated melodrama *Safari* (1955), co-starring with Victor Mature as a white hunter: 'I didn't take it too seriously. But I enjoyed the actual character, yes.'

Cameron played an even less admirable character in Sydney Pollack's political thriller *The Interpreter* (2005); the *Baltimore Sun* found him 'magnificent as the slimy old fraud of a dictator'. 'I wasn't very well when I was on that film,' he recalls. 'I think I had pneumonia. But I was only supposed to be on it for three weeks, and it turned out to be three months – the main reason for that was that Sydney Pollack, instead of building a replica of the United Nations building in the studio, wanted to shoot in the UN itself. We were allowed to shoot in the main hall, but only at weekends. So my part, instead of taking three weeks, lasted over three months. And I got paid a lot more!'

This came in the wake of a long hiatus in Cameron's acting career. 'I was away from acting for 15 years. I was in the Solomon Islands from 1978, and only came back in 1994. I became a member of the Baha'i faith in 1963 – and I know many people wouldn't understand this, and I wouldn't blame them for it – but being a Baha'i to me was much more important than being an actor. It's a very widespread faith, and the Solomon Islands really needed Baha'is.' He only left when his first wife, Audrey, died of breast cancer. 'When I came back I did mostly small parts for television, and then came *The Interpreter*. My [second] wife and I were down in the Scilly Isles when my agent phoned up and said I had an inquiry from Sydney Pollack. And I couldn't quite place who he was!'

Hollywood has never attracted him. 'It's a very decadent place,' he's been quoted as saying. 'There's drugs and sex and alcohol; I didn't need that kind of life.' Instead, he built his career as one of the most consistently cast black actors in Britain; but of all his screen roles, the one he's still proudest of is *Pool of London*. 'It's such a lovely part and a very good film, very well directed. So that gives me the greatest pleasure to watch now.' Recognition has gradually come his way: he was awarded the CBE in 2009, in 2012 a theatre was named in his honour in his native Bermuda, and in 2013 he was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Warwick. And in 2016 he gave an onstage interview at London's BFI Southbank before receiving the Screen Nation Hall of Fame award.

Cameron also holds the distinction of being the oldest surviving *Doctor Who* actor – he appeared alongside the Cybermen in *The Tenth Planet* in 1966. If the series offered him a cameo now, would he take it? He laughs. 'I'd love to – so long as there weren't too many heavy lines!'

**Philip Kemp, *Sight & Sound*, December 2016**

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## POOL OF LONDON

*Directed by:* Basil Dearden

©: Ealing Studios

*Production Company:* Ealing Studios

*Presented by:* The J. Arthur Rank Organisation

*Produced by:* Michael Balcon

*Associate Producer:* Michael Relph

*Unit Production Managers:* Ralph D. Hogg, L.C. Rudkin

*Production Supervisor:* Hal Mason

*Assistant Directors:* Harry Kratz, John Assig,

Jim O'Connell, Norman Priggen, John Meadows

*Continuity:* Jean Graham, Susan Carbutt

*Original Screenplay by:* Jack Whittingham, John Eldridge

*Director of Photography:* Gordon Dines

*Additional Photography:* Lionel Banes

*Camera Operators:* Chic Waterson, Jeff Seaholme

*Special Processes:* Geoffrey Dickinson

*Special Effects:* Sydney Pearson

*Editor:* Peter Tanner

*Art Director:* Jim Morahan

*Costume Designer:* Anthony Mendleson

*Make-up:* Ernest Taylor, Harry Frampton, Harry Wilton

*Hairdressing:* Barbara Barnard, Daphne Martin

*Music Composed by:* John Addison, Ernest Irving

*Played by:* The Philharmonia Orchestra

*Sound Supervisor:* Stephen Dalby

*Recordist:* Arthur Bradburn

*Sound System:* RCA Sound System

*Made at:* Ealing Studios

*uncredited*

*Focus Pullers:* Herbert Smith, Hugh Wilson

*Clapper Loaders:* Ken Westbury, Michael Shepherd

*Stills:* Jack Dooley, Bob Penn

*Assistant Editors:* Gordon Stone, Roy Baker

*Assistant Art Director:* Len Wills

*Set Dresser:* Andrew Low

*Wardrobe Masters:* Ernest Farrar, Lily Payne, Ron Beck

*Boom Operator:* Cyril Swern

## Cast

Bonar Colleano (*Dan MacDonald*)

Susan Shaw (*Pat*)

Renée Asherson (*Sally*)

Moira Lister (*Maisie*)

Earl Cameron (*Johnny*)

Max Adrian (*Vince Vernon/George Vernon*)

Joan Dowling (*Pamela*)

James Robertson Justice (*Trotter, chief engineer*)

Michael Golden (*Andrews, customs official*)

John Longden (*Inspector Williamson*)

Alfie Bass (*Alf*)

Christopher Hewett (*Mike*)

Leslie Phillips (*Harry*)

*uncredited*

George Benson (*George*)

Mai Bacon (*Ethel, barmaid*)

Mavis Villiers (*blonde in drinking club*)

Michael Corcoran (*Sam*)

Sam Kydd (*2nd engineer*)

George Merritt (*captain of 'Dunbar'*)

Rowena Gregory (*Mary*)

Victor Maddern (*bus conductor*)

Laurence Naismith (*theatre commissioner*)

Arthur Cortez (*Jock*)

Russell Waters (*police sergeant*)

Beckett Bould (*watchman*)

Campbell Singer (*station sergeant*)

John Warwick (*Inspector Jim Moss*)

Michael Ward (*pub pianist*)

Arthur Bentley (*Pamela's boyfriend*)

Josephine Sullivan (*barmaid*)

Ellis Irving (*superintendent*)

James Liggat

Sharon Raye

UK 1950©

85 mins

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## EARL CAMERON

### BRITAIN'S FIRST BLACK SCREEN STAR

#### Celebrating Britain's First Black Screen Star

Sun 1 Aug 14:00

#### African Odysseys present: A Warm December

Sun 1 Aug 17:30 (+ intro by actor Esther Anderson); Wed 18 Aug 20:40

#### Pool of London

Mon 2 Aug 14:00 (+intro); Wed 25 Aug 20:50

#### Two Gentlemen Sharing

Fri 6 Aug 17:10 (+ intro by season curator Burt Caesar);

Mon 23 Aug 20:30

#### Flame in the Streets

Sun 8 Aug 15:00; Sat 28 Aug 17:10

#### Sapphire

Tue 10 Aug 20:20 (+ discussion); Sat 28 Aug 13:00

#### The Fear of Strangers (+ intro) + The Chocolate Tree

Sat 14 July 14:10

#### Thunder on Sycamore Street + discussion with Actor Ashley Walters

(schedule permitting) and playwright Stephen S Thompson)

Sat 14 Aug 17:30

## Promotional partners



Season co-curated by actor-director Burt Caesar and the BFI's Marcus Prince and David Somerset.

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