



SENIORS' FREE MATINEE

The Fallen Idol

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

Alexander Korda had something of a genius for teaming up creative personnel. Having matched Michael Powell with Emeric Pressburger, he then introduced Graham Greene to Carol Reed. The director, who had just quit Rank after being subjected to penny-pinching quibbles over *Odd Man Out* (1947), was delighted by the idea; he and Greene had admired each other's work for years, though they'd never met. The rapport was immediate. Greene later described Reed as 'the only director, really, that I've enjoyed working with.' He particularly enjoyed their first collaboration, *The Fallen Idol* (1948), saying it was 'more a writer's film than a director's.'

Even so, Greene initially thought that the short story Korda had chosen for adaptation, 'The Basement Room', was unfilmable, since it included 'a murder committed by the most sympathetic character and an unhappy ending.' Reed persuaded him that the outcome could be changed and Greene happily went along with the alteration. Which is odd, since it's the ending of *The Fallen Idol* (a title, incidentally, chosen by the distributor and loathed by Greene) that rings most false.

The centrepiece of the great trio of films directed by Reed at the height of his career, *The Fallen Idol* has suffered neglect in recent years, its quiet murmur drowned out by the melodramatic reverberations of its predecessor and successor, *Odd Man Out* and *The Third Man* (1949). The other two are both public films, each played out in full view on the stage of a politically divided city, and photographed by Robert Krasker, master of skewed angles and dramatic shadows. By comparison, *The Fallen Idol*, shot by the cooler, more fluid Georges Perinal, is chamber-music filmmaking scaled to a domestic arena.

Exterior locations apart, almost all the film is set in the formal, comfortless expanses of a huge London embassy. Reed makes masterly use of this vertiginous space right from the opening: the ambassador's neglected eight-year-old son, Felipe, peers down from the uppermost landing at the servants as they are presided over by the boy's idol, Baines the butler, and move like chess pieces over the checkered hallway below. Staircases – the grandiose double curve of the interior, the jagged outside fire-escape, the intimate basement stairway leading down to Baines' pantry – define the film's emotional boundaries, offering vantage points for spying eyes but also unreliable perspectives. When Felipe, fleeing in panic from the confrontation between Baines and his shrewish wife, scrambles down the fire-escape, his intermittent glimpses from outside as he passes each window lead him crucially to misread the sequence of events.

This key scene encapsulates the film's themes of secrets and lies, perception, loyalty and betrayal. Alert to everything around him, Felipe lacks the emotional maturity to make sense of events; he sees what's going on, but misinterprets its meaning. And the lies he tells, intended to protect Baines, only serve to deepen the suspicions of the police. Greene said: 'The subject no longer concerned a small boy who unwittingly betrayed his best friend to the police, but dealt instead with a small boy who believed that his friend was a murderer and nearly procured his arrest by telling lies in his defence.'

It's interesting that Greene misremembers his own story. In 'The Basement Room' his young protagonist, tired of all the lies and secrets, deliberately betrays his friend. 'He was going to finish once and for all with everything, with Baines and Mrs Baines and the grown-up life beyond him.' By doing so, Greene implies, he blights his own life for ever, 'extricat[ing] himself from life, from love, from Baines with a merciless egotism.' Such a devastating conclusion might indeed have been too much for cinema audiences. But the alternative tragic irony towards which the film's narrative logic seems to be heading – Baines arrested for murder as a result of the boy's well-meant lies – would surely have worked better than the fudge we get. The police decide much too readily, on the basis of one ambiguous piece of evidence, that Baines is innocent and dismiss Felipe's testimony out of hand.

This let-down may explain why *The Fallen Idol* has never stood as high in critical esteem as *Odd Man Out* or *The Third Man*. But up to that point *Idol* is a supremely controlled piece of filmmaking that not even William Alwyn's heavy-handed score can disrupt. Above all, it shows Reed's consummate skill as a director of actors. Michael Redgrave described him as 'the gentlest of directors ... able, with infinite pains and care, to bestow on his actors the feeling that everything was up to them and that all he was doing was to make sure that they were seen to their best advantage.' His direction of Ralph Richardson and the young Bobby Henrey (who had never acted before) has been rightly praised, but his handling of Sonia Dresdel as Mrs Baines is almost more remarkable, bringing out the desperate loneliness beneath her spite, the frustration of a woman whose husband has long since abandoned her for his private fantasy world.

Carol Reed: 1906-1976

Born in Putney, the illegitimate son of actor-manager Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree, Carol Reed entered the acting profession in 1924. After working as assistant to crime novelist Edgar Wallace at British Lion, he moved in 1932 to Ealing Studios, where he directed his debut feature *Midshipman Easy* in 1935.

Versatile and unfailingly workmanlike, Reed went on to make a mixed bag of movies, which ranged from social drama (*Bank Holiday*, 1938) to screwball comedy (*Climbing High*, 1939). His first major film, *The Stars Look Down* (1939), adapted from a novel by A.J. Cronin, brought grim documentary authenticity to its pit-head scenes. Having established himself as a major figure in the British film industry, Reed then directed one of the best wartime propaganda films, *The Way Ahead* (1944).

After the war he hit his stride with a trio of films – *Odd Man Out* (1947), *The Fallen Idol* (1948) and *The Third Man* (1949) that earned him the status of Britain's finest director. But then he seemed to lose his way. A Conrad adaptation, *Outcast of the Islands* (1951), proved a disappointment, and *The Man Between* (1953) felt like a tired retread of *The Third Man*.

The rest of his career represented a sad decline, with sentimental whimsy (*A Kid for Two Farthings*, 1954) and routine thrillers (*The Running Man*, 1963) interspersed with overblown international tosh (*Trapeze*, 1956; *The Agony and the Ecstasy*, 1965). Only twice was there something of a return to form: *Our Man in Havana* (1959) reunited Reed with Graham Greene in a stylish, sardonic spy comedy; and a stack of Academy Awards, including a best-director Oscar, greeted *Oliver!* (1968).

Philip Kemp, *Sight & Sound*, August 2006

THE FALLEN IDOL

Directed by: Carol Reed
Production Company/Presented by: London Film Productions
Produced by: Carol Reed
Associate Producer: Phil Brandon
Production Manager: Hugh Perceval
Assistant Director: Guy Hamilton
Continuity: Peggy McClafferty
Screenplay by: Graham Greene
Additional Dialogue by: Lesley Storm, William Templeton
Based upon ‘The Basement Room’ by: Graham Greene
Photography by: Georges Périnal
Camera Operator: Denys Coop
Special Effects by: W. Percy Day
Editor: Oswald Hafenrichter
Assistant Art Director: John Hawkesworth
Sets Designed by: Vincent Korda
[Sets Designed] with: James Sawyer
Make-up: Dorrie Hamilton
Hairdressing: J. Shear
Music Composed by: William Alwyn
Played by: London Film Symphony Orchestra
Music Director: Dr Hubert Clifford
Sound Supervisor: John Cox
Sound Recording: Bert Ross, Red Law
Produced at: London Film Studios Shepperton
Studio: Worton Hall Studios *

Please note: this film contains racially offensive language.

Cast

Michèle Morgan (*Julie*)
Ralph Richardson (*Baines*)
Sonia Dresdel (*Mrs Baines*)
Denis O’Dea (*Detective Inspector Crowe*)
Jack Hawkins (*Detective Lake*)
Dora Bryan (*Rose*)
Walter Fitzgerald (*Doctor Fenton*)
Bernard Lee (*Detective Hart*)
Karel Stepanek (*first secretary*)
Joan Young (*Mrs Barrow*)
Dandy Nichols (*Mrs Patterson*)
Hay Petrie (*clockwinder*)
George Woodbridge (*police sergeant*)
John Ruddock (*Doctor Wilson*)
Torin Thatcher (*policeman ‘A’*)
Bobby Henrey (*Felipe*)
Geoffrey Keene (*Detective Davis*)
James Hayter (*Perry*)
Gerald Hinze (*ambassador*)
Nora Gordon (*waitress*)
Ethel Coleridge (*housekeeper*)
Ralph Norman (*first policeman*)
James Swan (*second policeman*)

UK 1948
95 mins

* Uncredited

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Gallivant + intro by Eden and Andrew Kötting
Sat 18 Sep 14:30
Short Films by Eden and Andrew Kötting + Andrew Kötting in Conversation with film curator Gareth Evans
Sat 18 Sep 18:00
Projecting the Archive: Flesh and Blood + intro by Jason Morell, actor and son of Joan Greenwood
Tue 21 Sep 18:10
Art in the Making: Cinema Architecture and Atmosphere + discussion
Thu 23 Sep 18:10
Member Picks: Moonstruck
Fri 24 Sep 18:05
Silent Cinema: Nasty Women: A Comic Tribute + intro by curator Bryony Dixon
Sun 26 Sep 12:40
Relaxed Screening: Seeing The Unseen (Að sjá hið ósýnilega)
Tue 28 Sep 18:00
Terror Vision: Altered States
Thu 30 Sep 21:00

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