



A CLASS OF HIS OWN: THE FILMS OF JACK CLAYTON

Room at the Top

+ intro by BFI Curator Josephine Botting (Thursday 2 December only).

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

John Braine was a librarian in the Yorkshire town of Bingley when his first novel *Room at the Top* was published in March 1957. The novel met with immediate critical acclaim, as well as becoming a best seller (its sexual candour no doubt helped) and, owing to its story of an ambitious working-class man's attempt to climb the social ladder, the author soon found himself bracketed as one of the angry young men. The book's success inevitably brought it to the attention of the film industry and the screen rights were bought for £5,000 by the brothers James and John Woolf, who founded Romulus Films in 1948.

Although *Room at the Top* would be director Jack Clayton's debut feature (after first choice Peter Glenville withdrew), Clayton had been working in the film industry for more than 20 years, beginning as a third assistant director (essentially a tea boy) at Denham Studios in the mid-1930s, before progressing, following wartime service in the RAF Film Unit, to production manager and associate producer. Joining Romulus in 1952 to work in the latter capacity, he was eventually given the opportunity to direct *The Bespoke Overcoat* (1955), which won an Academy Award for Best Short Subject, and was followed by his direction of both the second unit and some re-shoots on *The Story of Esther Costello* (1957).

The task of adapting the novel was handed to Neil Paterson, an ex-sports journalist and novelist who, although having never worked with the Woolfs before, had been writing screenplays since the early 1950s. Paterson made minor amendments to the story during its transfer from page to screen, including to the background of the Alice Aisgill character, to account for the casting of French actor Simone Signoret in the role. Those changes notwithstanding, when shooting started in summer 1958 in Bradford (the extensive use of northern locations would be an abiding influence on the New Wave), Clayton promised that the film would remain relatively faithful to Braine's novel.

Considering the novel's content, alarm bells may have already rung at the British Board of Film Censors (BBFC) but there was little it could do at this stage of the film's production. While it was not mandatory to submit scripts to the BBFC during pre-production, a lot of companies did in order to avoid costly re-shoots if the censor objected to any of the content; Romulus declined to do so.

The first time the BBFC became involved with *Room at the Top* was when it viewed a fine cut – a work near to its final form with regard to both film and sound editing – on 2 October 1958. The result was that it found itself in an awkward position. John Trevelyan, the recently appointed secretary of the Board and someone who genuinely admired the film, wanted to avoid any swingeing cuts to (or even having to reject outright) what was close to the final version. To do either would have caused a furore at a time when relations between the BBFC and the film industry were at a low ebb and some

filmmakers, critical of the Board's restrictions on what it would allow for public exhibition, saw it as out of touch with the changes underway in British society. But neither did Trevelyan simply want to wave the film through, as that would present the BBFC as being weak and ineffectual.

The solution was to pass it with the minimum of cuts or changes, focusing largely on the dialogue, where certain objectionable words could be easily over-dubbed without any recourse to cutting. While some previously impermissible words such as 'whore' and 'bastard' were retained, 'bitch' and 'lust' had to be over-dubbed with less offensive words, and the description of Alice Aisgill's injuries following her car accident also had to be toned down (the reference to her having been 'scalped' was deemed too strong). The biggest problem, however, concerned the scene towards the end of the film where Joe has a flirtation with a woman he picks up in a pub. Trevelyan was adamant that this scene had to be changed so that it was not obvious that the couple had just had sex in a wood yard, leading to not only the amendment of dialogue but also some cutting and possibly even a re-shoot. With such changes having been made, the film was finally passed with an X certificate on 21 October.

The X certificate was introduced by the BBFC in 1951 with the intention of allowing the passage of more 'adult' subject matter but it had instead become associated with what was perceived as more disreputable fare, such as the then critically reviled Hammer horrors. The release of *Room at the Top*, however, was greeted by critics as a laudable attempt to try to re-establish the certificate's respectability, for which the BBFC, by default, took some of the credit. 'Here for once is a film that wears an X certificate as it should be worn,' opined *The Guardian*. 'Not as a deliberate titillation but as a sign that it is not a film for the young – or, for that matter, for the stupid' *The Sunday Express* concurred: 'In this case at least, and at last, the X certificate looks like a badge of honour.'

While the film's 'adult' content may seem tame by today's standards, in 1959 this was racy stuff. 'By far the sexiest film to come out of a British – or almost any other – studio' is how Margaret Hinxman described the film in her review for *Picturegoer* magazine, and Joe Lampton's carnal appetite and sexual charisma is apparent from the very beginning of the film. Arriving at Warnley Town Hall to take up his new accountancy position, he lustfully appraises the women in the office (and they him) before, a few moments later – as he admires Susan Brown for the first time from an office window – his new colleague Charlie comments on the way he undresses women in public through the way he looks at them, a line of dialogue that apparently drew audible gasps from audiences at the time. And not only did the BBFC allow dialogue that indicated someone had actually enjoyed sex (which was a first), but the words were spoken by a woman, which in itself was a revelation when, in the post-coital scene between Joe and Susan in a boathouse, she talks about how 'super' it had been. The release of the film was a watershed moment in the relaxation of the British censor's strictures on what was considered acceptable for an adult audience.

Such adult content helped *Room at the Top* become a huge success at the British box office, finishing as the third most-successful film release of 1959. And, while some patrons were no doubt drawn by the prospect of 'forbidden fruit', the film was also arguably a success because it struck a timely chord with the public mood (discontent with the status quo), with many identifying with Joe Lampton's working-class hero – or anti-hero – and his desire to

acquire the luxuries of life (the age of affluence). While the film was noteworthy, as already discussed, for the breaking of new ground as regards sexual content, it was equally important for finally taking an aspirational working-class character seriously at a time when characters with such a background in British cinema were generally confined to being comic foils, sundry criminals or simply background colour. John Braine, in a 1981 interview, observed that ‘the new dimension of the film was in presenting a boy from the working classes not as a downtrodden victim, but as he really was... Most ambitious working-class boys want to get the hell out of the working class. That was a simple truth that had never been stated before.’

But social mobility is not a prize easily attained, or universally welcomed, and Joe has to travel a rocky road strewn with moral compromises in his attempt to escape his working-class background. He contends with either attempted dissuasion or outright opposition, not only from the snobbish upper classes represented by the nouveau riche Brown family and their circle, but also from his own class (‘That’s not for you, lad,’ says Charlie, as he sees Joe eyeing up both Susan and the flash sports car belonging to her male friend). Even his aunt and uncle tell him, on his visit home to Dufton, that he should stick to his own kind and not go after Susan simply because she has ‘brass’. But the most vociferous opposition comes from the classes above Joe and, while he may appear ruthless and predatory in his attempt to climb that ladder to the top, the contemptuous snobbery of Susan’s mother (‘A small town nobody,’ she says of him) and especially the odious Jack Wales, with his constant belittling of Joe for only ever having been a sergeant in the army, have the effect of rendering Joe a more sympathetic character. ‘That type, they make me mad. The boys with the big mouths and the silver spoons stuck in ’em,’ he says of Wales, and audiences would have whole heartedly agreed with him – and still do.

The critical and box-office success of *Room at the Top* was justifiably acknowledged at various awards ceremonies in 1959. At the Academy Awards, in the year that *Ben-Hur* largely swept all before it, *Room at the Top* was one of only two other films to win more than one award, with Simone Signoret winning Best Actress and the Best Screenplay (Adaptation) award going to Neil Paterson. The film was also nominated for Best Picture, Best Director, Best Actor, and Hermione Baddeley for Best Supporting Actress. Signoret also won the Best Actress award at the Cannes Film Festival, while the Woolf brothers collected the award for Best Film from the British Film Academy.

Dilys Powell, in her *Sunday Times* review of *Room at the Top*, said of the film that ‘it gives one faith all over again in a renaissance of the British cinema’. Whether or not the New Wave films that came in its wake can be classed as being that renaissance, the critical and popular approval of *Room at the Top* certainly helped to pave the way for their production, with the film’s examination of the lives and concerns of ‘real’ people, the foregrounding of a working-class hero figure and the extensive use of northern locations serving as a template for those films. Yet the film’s influence actually went far beyond the New Wave, its mature representation of relationships setting a precedent for the relaxed censorship of adult themes in British cinema. As John Trevelyan would later observe in his book *What the Censor Saw*, *Room at the Top* was, quite simply, ‘a milestone in the history of British films’.

John Oliver, extract from ‘Real People’, booklet essay for *Room at the Top*, Blu-ray (BFI, 2019)

ROOM AT THE TOP

Directed by: Jack Clayton
Production Company: Remus Films
Produced by: John Woolf, James Woolf
Associate Producer: Raymond Anzarut
Production Manager: James Ware
Assistant Director: Ronald Spencer
Continuity: Doreen Francis
Screenplay by: Neil Paterson
Adapted from the novel by: John Braine
Director of Photography: Freddie Francis
Camera Operator: Ronald Taylor
Camera Assistant: Derek Brown
Camera Grip: Ray Jones
Supervising Floor Electrician: Maurice Gillett
Editor: Ralph Kemplen
Art Director: Ralph Brinton
Heather Sears’ Dresses: Rahvis
Make-up: Tony Sforzini
Music Composed by: Mario Nascimbene
Conducted by: Lambert Williamson
Sound Supervisor: John Cox
Sound Recordist: Peter Handford
Sound Boom Operator: Ken Ritchie
Dubbing Editors: Stan Hawkes, Alastair McIntyre

Cast

Simone Signoret (Alice Aisgill)
Laurence Harvey (Joe Lampton)
Heather Sears (Susan Brown)
Donald Wolfit (Mr Brown)
Donald Houston (Charles Soames)
Hermione Baddeley (Elspeth)
Allan Cuthbertson (George Aisgill)
Raymond Huntley (Mr Hoylake)
John Westbrook (Jack Wales)
Ambrosine Phillpotts (Mrs Brown)
Richard Pasco (Teddy Merrick)
Beatrice Varley (aunt)
Delena Kidd (Eva Kent)
Ian Hendry (Cyril Kent)
April Olrich (Mavis)
Mary Peach (June Samson)
Anthony Newlands (Bernard)
Avril Elgar (Miss Gilchrist)

Thelma Ruby (Miss Breith)
Paul Whitsun-Jones (laughing man at bar)
Derren Nesbitt (Bert, Mavis’ boyfriend)

uncredited
Prunella Scales (Meg)
Katharine Page (Mary)
Anne Leon (Janet)
Wendy Craig (Joan)
Miriam Karlin (Gertrude, barlady)
Kenneth Waller (Reggie)
Andrew Irvine (Raymond)
Stephen Jack (Darnley)
John Welsh (mayor)
Everley Gregg (mayoress)
Basil Dignam (priest)
May Hallatt (Miss Tanfield)
Sheila Raynor (Ethel’s mother)
Gilda Emmanuelli (Ethel)
Jane Eccles (Mrs Thomson)
Dennis Linford (Harry)
Edward Palmer (porter)
Michael Atkinson (Grant)
Julian Somers (landlord, St. Clair)
Richard Caldicot (taxi driver)
Pat Lanski (girl guide leader)
Yvonne Buckingham (girl at tote window)
Doreen Dawn (high stepping girl)
Harry Moore (1st thespian)
Joan Leake (2nd thespian)
Honora Burke (plump woman)
Allan Bracewell (middle-aged woman)
Brian Worth (man in sports car)
Ann Gunning (girl in sports car)
Linda Leo, Mandy Priestly (children on bomb site)
Robert Palmer, Bill Morgan, Eric Louro (toughs)
Pamela Manson, Ruth Kettlewell, Isla Cameron (thespians members)
Derek Benfield, Kendrick Owen (men in bar)
Sandra Thompson, Bonita Bridgeman, Kathleen Fox, Angela Culbert (bridesmaids at wedding)
John Moulder-Brown (urchin)
Wilfred Lawson (Uncle Nat)

UK 1958©
117 mins

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Room at the Top

Thu 2 Dec 18:10 (+ intro by BFI Curator Josephine Botting); Sat 18 Dec 14:10; Wed 22 Dec 18:10; Wed 29 Dec 14:30

The Innocents

Sat 4 Dec 20:40; Thu 9 Dec 20:45; Mon 13 Dec 18:10; Thu 23 Dec 14:20; Mon 27 Dec 15:20; Thu 30 Dec 14:30

Our Mother’s House

Tue 7 Dec 20:40 (+ intro); Mon 20 Dec 18:15

The Passions of Jack Clayton

Wed 8 Dec 18:10

The Pumpkin Eater

Wed 8 Dec 20:40; Sat 18 Dec 12:50 (+ pre-recorded intro by critic Lucy Scholes); Tue 28 Dec 12:15; Thu 30 Dec 18:10

The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne

Fri 10 Dec 20:30; Tue 21 Dec 14:20; Wed 29 Dec 17:50

The Great Gatsby

Sat 11 Dec 20:20; Mon 27 Dec 12:45

Something Wicked This Way Comes

Sun 12 Dec 18:30; Tue 21 Dec 20:40

Memento Mori + The Bespoke Overcoat

Sun 19 Dec 18:00

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