



BOGARDE AT 100

The Servant

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

Adapted from a novel by Robin Maugham, *The Servant* was the first of three collaborations between Joseph Losey and Harold Pinter. It was followed by two further quintessentially English films: *Accident* (1967) and *The Go-Between* (1971).

The Servant is a savage indictment of the English class system, and its waning hold over all aspects of the working and cultural life of Britain. Set almost entirely within the smart new townhouse of foppish aristocrat Tony (James Fox), the film plays out the struggle for power and dominance ignited by his duplicitous manservant Barrett – an energetic and genuinely ominous Dirk Bogarde.

The opening sequence of stark, leafless trees outlined against a cold English sky suggests the clinical austerity of 1960s Britain and hints at the cold manipulations that follow. The first shot of Barrett, leaving Thomas Crapper Sanitary Engineers (presumably his previous workplace), slyly insinuates the theme of the film as the ‘flushing away’ of the old order. His clipped appearance and punctuality tells us he means business, while the first shot of Tony (a ‘businessman’) finds him vulnerable, asleep in a chair.

The drama revolves around issues of both class and gender, and the relationship between the two. While Barrett slowly insinuates himself in the house and manipulates his master by slyly rearranging the decor, it is through sex (in the shape of his alluring and sexually permissive ‘sister’, Vera (Sarah Miles)) that he finally brings about Tony’s downfall. The calculating allure of Vera, in contrast to the stuffy, over-bred Susan (Wendy Craig), cuts through the class barriers and brings Tony down to the same level as his servant. Soon the boundaries between master and servant break down, as Tony succumbs to the will of his stronger adversary.

Belonging to an era of filmmaking which for the first time dealt explicitly with issues never before seen on screen, *The Servant* (in common with much of the contemporary British New Wave) is also artistically ambitious. Several scenes (particularly those between Tony, Barrett and Susan) are seen through the distortion of the big, round, convex mirror which sits on the living room wall, reflecting the unnatural, misformed relationships between the people in the room. Each shot is directed with precision, often framing Susan or Vera between Tony and Barrett, or positioning one of the two men close to the camera while his rival lingers in the background.

Caroline Millar, BFI Screenonline, screenonline.org.uk

The hallway of a house in Chelsea’s Royal Avenue; the unlocked front door opens at the push of a finger. In comes a neat man wearing a porkpie hat and a dark raincoat. This is Barrett. The camera backtracks away, around a corner into a room from which we can see a side-on view of the bottom of the stairs. Barrett comes back into view. He goes to the stairs, puts his hand on the banister and peers upwards, seemingly about to ascend.

The Servant is about the obsequious Barrett's slow takeover of his upper-class master, Tony, and his well-appointed home. Barrett's tactics are simple but effective: undermining Tony's girlfriend by bringing in housemaid Vera, a seductive young slut, and making his indolent master increasingly dependent on his ministrations, eventually including booze and drugs. Pinter's claustrophobic scenario enabled Losey to employ all his European art-cinema riffs at the service of a very English interior made sinister – the London house as a kind of nightclub cum prison – and a very English problem: the class system.

In their creative relationship, neither Losey nor Harold Pinter was master or servant. 'I'm not accustomed to writing from notes and I don't like this,' Losey reported Pinter saying at their drink-fuelled first script meeting. Pinter's version was as follows: 'I went to see [Losey] at his house in Chelsea. "I like the script," he said. "Thanks," I said. "But there are a number of things I don't like." "What things?" I asked. He told me, "Well why don't you make another movie?" I said, and left the house.' Two days later they patched it up and, as Pinter says, 'over the next 25 years we worked on three more screenplays and never had another cross word.'

Insomniac Losey could be prickly, a burly man whose emotions often ran to tears. Harold Pinter was the self-contained truth tester, a precise and correct writer at the top of his game; an actor too, who knew what actors could do with cadence and diction. It was another actor who brought them together, Dirk Bogarde, instrumental in so many ways in *The Servant's* production – standing in for Losey when he had pneumonia (only to see most of his scenes reshot) and bringing James Fox in as Tony. Bogarde used *The Servant* to trade in his matinee idol image – already made questionable by his brave turn as the homosexual barrister in *Victim*. Following his scheming turn as Barrett, he instead became the weather-changeable face in semi-decadent art films such as *Darling* (1965), *Accident* (1967), *Justine* (1969), Visconti's *The Damned* (1969), *Death in Venice* (1971), *The Serpent* (1973), *The Night Porter* (1974), *Providence* (1977) and *Despair* (1978).

The Servant's fusion of Losey's sensitivity to spaces and objects with Pinter's stark approach to image and language – seen through cinematographer Douglas Slocombe's magnificent black and white photography – initiated a new kind of cinema in the UK, one distinctly more ambitious than the social realism of the Woodfall films. *The Servant* transformed Bogarde's image, cemented Losey's fruitful partnership with Pinter and launched the cinema careers of James Fox and Sarah Miles.

Nick James, *Sight & Sound*, June 2009

THE SERVANT

Directed by: Joseph Losey
©: Springbok Films Ltd
Presented by: Elstree Distributors
A Springbok Films Ltd production
Produced by: Joseph Losey, Norman Priggen
Production Manager: Teresa Bolland
Assistant Director: Roy Stevens
Continuity: Pamela Davies
Screenplay by: Harold Pinter
Based on the novel The Servant by: Robin Maugham
Director of Photography: Douglas Slocombe
Camera Operator: Chic Waterson
Camera Grip: Frank Howard
Editor: Reginald Mills
Production Designer: Richard Macdonald
Art Director: Ted Clements
Costume Designer: Beatrice Dawson
Make-up: Bob Lawrence
Hairdresser: Joyce James
Music Composed and Conducted by: John Dankworth
Music Recording by: CTS Studios (Wembley)
Sound Supervisor: John Cox
Sound Recordist: Buster Ambler
Sound System: Westrex Recording System
Sound Editor: Gerry Hambling
Made at: Shepperton Studios

Cast

Dirk Bogarde (*Hugo Barrett*)
Sarah Miles (*Vera*)
Wendy Craig (*Susan*)
James Fox (*Tony*)
Catherine Lacey (*Lady Mounset*)
Richard Vernon (*Lord Mounset*)
Brian Phelan (*man in pub*)
Hazel Terry (*woman in bedroom*)
Alison Seebohm (*girl in pub*)
Philippa Hare (*girl in bedroom*)
Dorothy Bromiley (*girl in phone box*)

people in restaurants
Ann Firbank (*society woman*)
Doris Knox (*older woman*)
Patrick Magee (*bishop*)
Jill Melford (*younger woman*)
Alun Owen (*curate*)
Harold Pinter (*society man*)
Derek Tansley (*head waiter*)

additional cast members
Chris Williams (*cashier in coffee bar*)
Gerry Duggan (*waiter*)

uncredited
Colette Martin, Joanna Wake, Harriet Devine (*phone box girl's friends*)
Bruce Wells (*painter*)
John Dankworth (*band leader*)
Davey Graham (*guitarist*)

UK 1963©

115 mins

IN PERSON & PREVIEWS

tick, tick... BOOM! + pre-recorded Q&A with director Lin-Manuel Miranda, producer Julie Yoh, executive producer Julie Larson, writer Steven Levenson and actors Andrew Garfield, Vanessa Hudgens, Alexandra Shipp, Robin de Jesus and Judith Light
Thu 9 Dec 20:30
Patti Boulaye
Sun 12 Dec 15:30
Woman with a Movie Camera: Bridget Jones's Diary at 20 + Q&A with director Sharon Maguire
Thu 16 Dec 18:00
Preview: Wheel of Fortune and Fantasy (Guzen to sozo)
Wed 29 Dec 18:00

REGULAR PROGRAMME

Bogarde at 100: The Servant
Thu 9 Dec 18:15; Thu 16 Dec 20:45; Mon 20 Dec 14:00 (Seniors' matinee + Q&A TBC); Tue 28 Dec 18:30; Wed 29 Dec 17:55
African Odysseys: Billy Bang Lucky Man + intro by author Kevin Le Gendre, and Q&A with co-director Markus Hansen
Sat 11 Dec 17:30
Silent Cinema: The Virginian + intro by BFI Curator Bryony Dixon
Sun 12 Dec 13:00
Seniors' Free Archive Matinee: So Long at the Fair + Q&A (TBC)
Mon 13 Dec 14:00
Relaxed Screening: The Black Balloon
Tue 14 Dec 18:10
Projecting the Archive: I Could Go On Singing + intro by BFI Curator Josephine Botting
Thu 16 Dec 18:15
Terror Vision: The Shout
Thu 30 Dec 20:50

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