



A CLASS OF HIS OWN: THE FILMS OF JACK CLAYTON

Memento Mori

This was Jack Clayton's last film, his first comedy, and his most critically acclaimed work since his sensational 1959 feature-film debut, *Room at the Top*. That same year, Muriel Spark had published *Memento Mori*, which Clayton had read and resolved someday to film. Finally encouraged by the success of *Driving Miss Daisy* (1989), which proved that the theme of old age need not be box-office poison, Clayton offered the project to the BBC. In turn encouraged by the theatrical success of its own television films such as *Truly Madly Deeply* (1990) and *Enchanted April* (1991), the Corporation accepted. *Memento Mori* was shown at festivals worldwide, and won several prestigious awards, including the screenplay award from the Writers Guild of Great Britain.

The film's assurance comes from Clayton's empathy with the theme. Having lost friends during his RAF experience in the war, he genuinely felt that people should remember the inevitability of death, for it would stimulate an appetite for life. Although given a schedule and budget more restricted than he was used to, he seems in his element, and there is an abundance of cinematic expertise on display: for example, the moment when Mrs Pettigrew enters the room to interrupt a conversation between Charmian and Mortimer, and the subtle framing signals a shift in the balance of power; or the battle of wills over Charmian's medication between her and Mrs Pettigrew, where the camera focuses on the latter's painted nails as she does a sinister finger-ballet over the pills like a spider enticing a victim into its web.

Producer Louis Marks calculated that the cast had about a thousand years' worth of acting experience between them, and the performances of, for example, Michael Hordern, Maggie Smith, John Wood, Renée Asherson, Thora Hird and Stephanie Cole are outstanding. Georges Delerue's score (sadly, his last before his death) is perfectly attuned to the film's contrasting moods. Indeed, while respecting the novel's macabre tone, Clayton brings an additional perspective that, without sentimentality, understands and accepts human foible and folly. There is snobbery, greed, even violence here, but also a humorous and humane observation of disappointed lives, and the way the ravages of time can reduce crotchety adults to behaving like spiteful children. *Memento Mori* has something of the mellow maturity that distinguished another great film about ageing, *The Dead* (1987), by Clayton's mentor, John Huston.

Neil Sinyard, BFI Screenonline, screenonline.org.uk

A contemporary review

Jack Clayton has wanted to film Muriel Spark's novel since it was first published in 1959, and had Maggie Smith in mind for the project since she first worked with him in 1964. The intervening delay has been unusual even for a director with a reputation for pausing between films, but according to Clayton it was not until *Driving Miss Daisy* established a compatibility between old age and the box office that he was at last able to make some headway. First offers came from Hollywood, but he wanted to preserve the unequivocally English spirit of the piece; the BBC was finally the answer, resulting in Clayton's first film for television. Ironically, he made *Memento Mori* after turning 70, the age at which, according to one of the elders of the story, 'you become one of us.'

The unexpected pleasure of the film is that Clayton has made it as an affectionate comedy. The established Clayton theme, not exactly a laughing matter, offers a baleful collusion between women on the verge of nervous

breakdown and children on the verge of excessive enlightenment, and extends across the years from *The Innocents* to *The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne*. But aside from its lightness of touch, *Memento Mori* is remarkably consistent with those dark carnivals, another reflection on a bright age overtaken by autumn, another outcry on behalf of lives that have achieved too little and must now exhaust their strength in the losing battle against decay.

Amid the many one-liners transferred intact from the novel and delivered with relish by the cast, Clayton has interestingly added (along with some more outrageous interpolations of his own) several careful references that set his toddling pensioners, clumsy and querulous as children, apart from the 'present' (a lightly sketched London of the 1950s). They have, comments one observer, 'a sort of stubborn gallantry, with echoes of a romantic and glamorous past'. There is also, in Clayton's emphasis, a gulf between the plight of the servant class, the stoical grannies brightly making the best of their regimented public ward, and that of their former employers, increasingly vulnerable and ridiculous in their attempt to keep up appearances.

The real Joke, as they comment to each other, is that their youth was anything but gallant or glamorous, but consisted of unmeasured adventure, indulgence and betrayal. Prompted by the anonymous phone calls to reassess the span of their lives, they look for past achievements and find little reward in what they were and what they have become. While avoiding the banality of measuring the years in degrees of friendship, *Memento Mori* suggests that a primary defence against endless reminders of mortality is the savouring of continuity: the life-affirming feud, for example, between the poet Mannering and his mild critic Guy Leet (é-lite?), the secret affair between the petulantly haunted Godfrey and the departed Lisa Brooke (resurrected, perhaps, as the compliant Olive), the unswerving loyalty between Charmian and Jean Taylor, her companion of many summers.

With its central thread of rather spurious mystery, its gently faded furnishings and its subtle anachronisms of costume, the story could be an Agatha Christie pastiche were it not that the participants each have secrets of their own and constantly spring surprises on each other. 'Your most endearing quality,' Charmian tells Godfrey at the end, when by rights all cards should be on the table, 'is that you don't know me at all.' Filmed with a spectacular economy of effect and movement, *Memento Mori* keeps visual comment to a minimum. Clayton heralds the entire drama with a neat dissolve from the stopped pendulum of the opening credits to a telephone dial, and there is a tiny episode with a nurse, a rose and white curtains around a hospital bed that eloquently paraphrases several pages of the original text. Otherwise, the director lets his cast carry the load, supported by one of Georges Delerue's last compositions, a charming and delicate memorial.

A wonderful band of pseudo-ancients, disdainfully steered by Maggie Smith with a scathing repertoire of sniffs, groans and glances, these gleeful veterans exploit an array of familiar eccentricities to ruthless advantage. Stephanie Cole, in ferocious hats, again waits chin first for God, and the superb Thora Hird seems always on the point of introducing a favourite hymn, while Michael Hordern, Maurice Denham and Cyril Cusack bluster, grumble and argue in the accustomed manner of the past half century. That the culprit of the piece turns out to be Death itself is a little hard to take, particularly in that the voices on the phone are heard by all of us. But after the riotous tea party has crashed to a close, it is no problem to agree with Clayton that the insistent calls from the dark can be ignored for a good while yet.

Philip Strick, *Sight and Sound*, June 1992

The Bespoke Overcoat

Clayton's award-winning first fiction outing is a poignant two-hander about friendship and the passage of time.

THE BESPOKE OVERCOAT

Directed by: Jack Clayton

©: Remus Films

a Remus production

Presented by: Romulus Films

Distribution Controlled by: Independent Film Distributors Ltd.

Produced by: Jack Clayton

Production Manager: Robert Sterne

Assistant Director: Buddy Booth

Continuity: Maisie Kelly

Screenplay by: Wolf Mankowitz

Suggested by a story of: Gogol

Lighting Cameraman: W. Suschitzky

Camera Operator: Ron Robson

Editor: Stan Hawkes

Art Director: Tony Masters

Costumes: Bermans

Make-up: George Frost

Music by: Georges Auric

Music Director: Lambert Williamson

Sound: Peter Birch

Assistant Dubbing Mixer: Peter T. Davies

Sound System: Western Electric

Filmed at: Marylebone Studios

Cast

David Kossoff (*Morry*)

Alfie Bass (*Fender*)

Alan Tilvern (*Ranting*)

Alf Dean (*gravedigger*)

UK 1955

33 mins

SCREEN TWO: MEMENTO MORI

Director: Jack Clayton

Production Companies: BBC Films, WGBH (Boston)

Executive Producer: Mark Shivas

Producer: Louis Marks

Associate Producers: Carolyn Montagu, Derek Nelson

Production Manager: Michael Jackley

Finance Assistant: Jackie Wright

Location Manager: Susannah Maclean

Assistant Directors: Theresa MacInnes, Emma Bridgeman-Williams,

Andy Jackson

Continuity: Thelma Helsby

CASTING CONSULTANT: Irene Lamb

Screenplay: Alan Kelley, Jeanie Sims, Jack Clayton

Based on the novel by: Muriel Spark

Script Consultant: Jeanie Sims

Director of Photography: Remi Adefarasin

Focus Puller: Sean Savage

Clapper Loader: Simon Finney

Lighting Gaffer: Mike Chitty

Grip: Mick Ellis

Graphic Design: Jane Walker

Editor: Mark Day

Designer: Oliver Bayldon

Design Assistant: Laurence Williams

Props Supervisor: Alex Crichton

Props Buyer: Laura Richardson

Construction Manager: Barry Moll

Costume Designer: Les Lansdown

Costume Assistant: Jill Taylor

Make-up Designer: Lisa Westcott

Music: Georges Delerue

Solo Piano: Peter Katin

Music Conductor: Harry Rabinowitz

Sound Recording: John Pritchard

Sound Assistant: Alun Banks

Dubbing Mixer: Aad Wirtz

Dubbing Editors: Julie Buckland, Bronwen Jenkins

Cast

Maggie Smith (*Mrs Mabel Pettigrew*)

Michael Hordern (*Godfrey Colston*)

Renée Asherson (*Charmian Colston*)

Stephanie Cole (*Dame Lettie Colston*)

Thora Hird (*Jean Taylor*)

Maurice Denham (*Guy Leet*)

John Wood (*Ex-Inspector Henry Mortimer*)

Zoë Wanamaker (*Olive Mannering*)

Peter Eyre (*Eric Colston*)

Cyril Cusack (*Percy Mannering*)

Jacqueline Leonard (*Gwen, the maid*)

Elizabeth Bradley (*Mrs Anthony*)

Margery Withers (*Granny Barnacle*)

Robert Flemyng (*Ronald Sidebottom*)

Barbara Hicks (*Tempest Sidebottom*)

Muriel Pavlow (*Granny Valvona*)

Damaris Hayman (*Miss Lottinville*)

Anna Cropper (*Mrs Mortimer*)

Paul Opacic (*Jeff*)

Mary Healey (*ward sister*)

Preston Lockwood (*deaf old man*)

Arthur Hewlett (*ancient man*)

John Baskcomb (*fat old man*)

Jan Carey (*tea shop manageress*)

Leonard Maguire (*Mr Willoughby*)

Martina Stanley (*Nurse Lucy*)

Richard Lawry (*photographer*)

Dominic Taylor (*young journalist*)

Terence Soall (*publisher*)

Walter Sparrow (*stallholder*)

Andrew Charleson (*policeman*)

Frank Shelley (*the stranger*)

Aimée Delamain (*ambulatory grannie*)

Emma Richler (*young nurse*)

Alan Leith (*detective*)

Hilda Sachs, Brenda Cullity, Brigitte Loesser (*tea room trio*)

BBC2 tx 19.4.1992

UK 1992

98 mins

A CLASS OF HIS OWN: THE FILMS OF JACK CLAYTON**Memento Mori + The Bespoke Overcoat**

Sun 19 Dec 18:00

Our Mother's House

Mon 20 Dec 18:15

The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne

Tue 21 Dec 14:20; Wed 29 Dec 17:50

Something Wicked This Way Comes

Tue 21 Dec 20:40

Room at the Top

Wed 22 Dec 18:10; Wed 29 Dec 14:30

The Innocents

Thu 23 Dec 14:20; Mon 27 Dec 15:20; Thu 30 Dec 14:30

The Great Gatsby

Mon 27 Dec 12:45

The Pumpkin Eater

Tue 28 Dec 12:15; Thu 30 Dec 18:10

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