



SENIORS FREE MATINEE

Dead of Night

+ intro

Horror films or stories of the supernatural were little attempted in British cinema prior to the days of Hammer in the 1950s. There are the exceptions of course, such as *The Ghoul* (1933) and *Dark Eyes of London* (1939), but the field was, by and large, left open to Hollywood, and Universal Studios in particular. The fact that 'H' (for horror) films were banned by the British censor during the war years did not help matters. In 1944, Ealing encountered some success with the film *The Halfway House*, not a horror film per se, but a story with supernatural elements in which a group of disparate people gathered at a remote inn gradually realise that the innkeeper and his daughter are ghosts. The success of this film served as an encouragement to Michael Balcon to produce something along similar lines. Thus was *Dead of Night* born.

Instead of focusing on the one story, as with *The Halfway House*, *Dead of Night* comprises five, with an overall story linking them all together. Initially however there were only the five main stories. The decision to produce a portmanteau film had been taken from the outset of production but, although the wish to link them together was always present, the means by which to do so was proving elusive. The writer Angus MacPhail provided the answer. MacPhail had already co-written the screenplay for *The Halfway House* and the ingenious linking story he adapted for *Dead of Night* bears some similarities to that film, dealing as it does with another group of people gathered at a remote farmhouse recounting the five tales. The fact that Basil Dearden, director of *The Halfway House*, also directed this linking story only serves to emphasise the similarities.

In addition to the linking story, Dearden also directed 'The Hearse Driver', the first of the stories recounted within the film. Charles Crichton directed 'The Golfing Story' from a H.G. Wells tale, and Cavalcanti directed 'The Christmas Story', another of Angus MacPhail's contributions. But the film is remembered above all for two of the stories, 'The Haunted Mirror' and, most famously, 'The Ventriloquist's Dummy', both from the pen of John Baines, with Cavalcanti directing the latter in which Michael Redgrave gives one of his strongest performances as the ventriloquist slowly going mad, adopting both the personality and voice of 'Hugo', the dummy he uses in his stage act, the fixed smile of Hugo becoming increasingly menacing as the tale unfolds.

'The Haunted Mirror' directed by Robert Hamer, relates the story of the said mirror's malevolent influence on the husband of a newly married couple, eventually driving him to the point of attempted murder. Notable for excellent performances from both Ralph Michael and Googie Withers (the latter being singled out by the *Monthly Film Bulletin* from the film's entire cast as deserving of special mention) the episode was the first film for which Hamer received a director credit (after some uncredited co-directorial work at Ealing) and amply demonstrates the talent he was soon to bring to bear on other films for the studio, including two further films with Withers, *Pink String and Sealing Wax* (1945) and *It Always Rains on Sunday* (1947). The story is also of note for one of the first presentations on film, along with Lewis Allen's *The Uninvited* (1944), of an evil, malevolent ghost, as opposed to the comic or ethereal

presences that predominated in the cinema prior to this, such as the Topper series, or the Boulting's *Thunder Rock* (1942).

The problem with any portmanteau film, especially those with different writers and directors working on the various episodes, is that the quality of those episodes can vary alarmingly, with at least one letting the film down.

Unfortunately *Dead of Night* is no exception, with 'The Golfing Story' proving to be the guilty party. This comedic story with Radford and Wayne, inserted as light relief, may have looked promising on paper, but its inclusion was a dire misjudgement, only serving to slow the pace of the film as a whole and dilute the tension.

Dead of Night was hailed on its release as 'the smoothest film yet to come from an English studio' by the *Monthly Film Bulletin*, while *The Spectator* declared that the film 'succeeds so well because it has avoided all the mumbo-jumbo traditionally associated with such subjects'. Only Richard Winnington, writing in the *News Chronicle*, cast a dispiriting note when he called the linking story 'confused and illogical'. *The Daily Sketch* reviewer singled out 'The Haunted Mirror' and 'The Ventriloquist's Dummy' as the better episodes, while most of the other reviews cited 'The Ventriloquist's Dummy' as the best episode, but, mind-bogglingly, 'The Golfing Story' as the other highpoint. It was viewed as 'very pleasant relief from so much eerie tension' by the *Daily Mail*. What is generally seen as a misjudgement today was obviously not so in 1945.

Despite the box office and critical success of *Dead of Night*, the following years did not see any eagerness from Balcon to follow this up with films in a similar vein. There were to be no 'Ealing horrors' as there were 'Ealing comedies'. David Pirie has argued, albeit contentiously, that the Victorian gothic setting seen within the mirror in 'The Haunted Mirror' episode was an influence on the gothic settings of Hammer's films. It is arguably not until the 1960s however that the influence of *Dead of Night* actually began to be felt in British horror cinema (by way of 1950s US comics), when Hammer's horror rival, Amicus Productions, instituted a series of portmanteau horror films, beginning with *Dr Terror's House of Horrors* (1964), and culminating in the early 1970s with such offerings as *Asylum* (1972), *Tales from the Crypt* (1972) and *The Vault of Horror* (1973).

Of the film's episodes 'The Ventriloquist's Dummy' has enjoyed the most lasting influence. The same story has been used in at least two films since 1945, *Devil Doll* (1963) with William Sylvester, and Richard Attenborough's *Magic* (1978) with Anthony Hopkins. It also resurfaced yet again in an episode of the American TV series *Tales from the Crypt* (no relation to the Amicus film) with Don Rickles this time being the unfortunate ventriloquist. And what is Chucky in the unjustly reviled *Child's Play* series of films if not an extension of 'Hugo'? The episode may have even been an influence on Hitchcock. The conclusion of *Psycho*, with Norman Bates in custody and finally dominated by the mother personality, bears striking similarities to the conclusion of 'The Ventriloquist's Dummy' when Michael Redgrave is in custody and has succumbed totally to the 'Hugo' character, voice and all.

The popularity and influence of this film lives on, and as a portmanteau film it remains unsurpassed. As Charles Barr stated in his history of Ealing, *Dead of Night* is 'after the comedies, the Ealing film most frequently revived and remembered, remaining one of the key films of the whole output'.

John Oliver, BFI National Archive

DEAD OF NIGHT

Directed by [2/4]: [Alberto] Cavalcanti

Directed by [5]: Charles Crichton

Directed by [1/6]: Basil Dearden

Directed by [3]: Robert Hamer

©: Ealing Studios

Presented by: Ealing Studios

Made and Recorded at: Ealing Studios

Produced by: Michael Balcon

Associate Producers: Sidney Cole, John Croydon

Unit Manager: Ronald Brantford

Production Supervisor: Hal Mason

Screen Play: John Baines, Angus MacPhail

Additional Dialogue by: T.E.B. Clarke

Based on original stories by [5]: H.G. Wells

Based on original stories by [3/4]: John Baines

Based on original stories by [1/6]: E.F. Benson

Based original stories by [2]: Angus MacPhail

Lighting: Stan Pavey, Douglas Slocombe

Camera Operators: Jack Parker, H. Julius

Special Effects: C. Richardson, L. Banes

Editor: Charles Hasse

Art Director: Michael Relph

Dresses: Bianca Mosca, Marion Horn

Make-up: Tom Shenton

Music Composed by: Georges Auric

Played by: The London Philharmonic Orchestra

Conducted by: Ernest Irving

Sound Supervisor: Eric Williams

Recordists: Len Page, A.E. Rudolph

uncredited

Assistant Directors: Billy Russell, Rowland Douglas

2nd Assistant Director: Norman Hipwell

3rd Assistant Directors: Claude Hudson, P. Potter

Continuity: Elaine Schreyeck, Gwen Bartle

Assistant Continuity: M. Hamilton

Focus Pullers: Michael Shepherd, Gerry Turpin

Clapper Loaders: Gerry Levy, John Winbolt

Stills: Roy Gough

Assembly Cutter: Leslie Allen

Assistant Editor: Daphne Heathcote

2nd Assistant Editors: F. Thomson, E. Leverett, Seth Holt

Assistant Art Director: Jim Morahan

Draughtsmen: Heather Armitage, Len Wills

Boom Operators: N. Boulatoff, Tom Otter

Dubbing Editor: Mary Habberfield

Cast

The Hearse Driver

Mervyn Johns (*Walter Craig*)

Anthony Baird (*Hugh Grainger*)

Robert Wyndham (*Dr Albury*)

Judy Kelly (*Joyce Grainger*)

Miles Malleon (*hearse driver*)

The Christmas Story

Sally Ann Howes (*Sally O'Hara*)

Michael Allan (*Jimmy Watson*)

The Haunted Mirror

Googie Withers (*Joan Cortland*)

Ralph Michael (*Peter Cortland*)

Esmé Percy (*Mr Rutherford, antique dealer*)

The Ventriloquist's Dummy

Frederick Valk (*Dr Van Straaten*)

Allan Jeayes (*Maurice Olcott*)

Michael Redgrave (*Maxwell Frere*)

Elisabeth Welch (*Beulah*)

Hartley Power (*Sylvester Kee*)

Magda Kun (*Mitzi*)

Garry Marsh (*Harry Parker*)

The Golfing Story

Basil Radford (*George Parratt*)

Naunton Wayne (*Larry Potter*)

Peggy Bryan (*Mary Lee*)

The Linking Story

Roland Culver (*Eliot Foley*)

Mary Merrall (*Mrs Foley*)

Barbara Leake (*Mrs O'Hara*)

Renée Gadd (*Mrs Craig*)

uncredited

Peter Jones (*Fred the barman*)

Barry Ford

UK 1945©

102 mins

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Curator

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