



## MURIEL BOX: A WOMAN'S TAKE

# Muriel Box: The Odd Woman Out

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#### **The Seventh Veil + The English Inn**

Mon 1 May 13:00; Thu 11 May 18:10 (+ intro by Lucy Bolton, Reader in Film Studies at Queen Mary)

#### **Good-Time Girl**

Mon 1 May 15:40; Fri 12 May 18:10 (+ intro by Television Producer and Director, Rebecca Towers)

#### **Muriel Box: The Odd Woman Out**

Tue 2 May 18:15

#### **The Passionate Stranger (aka A Novel Affair)**

Tue 2 May 20:30 (+ intro by filmmaker Carol Morley); Thu 18 May 18:20; Tue 30 May 20:30

#### **Easy Money**

Wed 3 May 18:20; Mon 8 May 16:00

#### **Holiday Camp**

Sat 6 May 15:30; Wed 17 May 20:30

#### **The Lost People (aka Cockpit)**

Sat 6 May 18:30; Sun 21 May 13:40

#### **The Happy Family (aka Mr Lord Says No/Live and Let Live)**

Sun 7 May 18:10; Sat 20 May 15:15

#### **Street Corner (aka Both Sides of the Law/Gentle Arm/The Policewoman)**

Mon 8 May 13:30; Tue 30 May 18:20 (+ intro by season curator Josephine Botting)

#### **Simon and Laura**

Mon 8 May 18:10; Sun 28 May 16:00

#### **Philosophical Screens: The Seventh Veil**

Thu 11 May 20:15 Blue Room

#### **Rattle of a Simple Man**

Wed 17 May 18:10; Tue 23 May 20:30

#### **The Truth about Women**

Thu 18 May 20:40; Sun 28 May 18:10

#### **Eyewitness (aka Point of Crisis) + A Ride with Uncle Joe**

Sun 21 May 18:20; Fri 26 May 18:10

#### **This Other Eden**

Thu 25 May 18:20; Sat 27 May 13:45

#### **With thanks to**

StudioCanal for their new 4K restorations from the best available original materials, scanned and restored to produce three brand new HD masters



Three restored Muriel Box titles (*The Passionate Stranger*, *The Truth about Women* and *Rattle of a Simple Man*) are being released on Blu-ray and DVD by StudioCanal in May and will be available from the BFI Shop.

Despite being an accomplished screenwriter and Britain's most prolific female director, Muriel Box is little remembered today. Join us for this season introduction event as filmmaker Carol Morley, journalist Rachel Cooke and academic Melanie Williams join season curator Josephine Botting to discuss Box's trailblazing career and reflect on the difficulties women still face in making their mark on the industry.

[bfi.org.uk](http://bfi.org.uk)

Muriel Violette Baker was born in New Malden on the outskirts of London in September 1905, the third child of a family she described as Respectable Poor. Influenced by her mother's progressive, left-wing ideas, Muriel developed a passion for writing, theatre and cinema, attempting unsuccessfully to become a professional actress and ballet dancer. She gained low-level employment in the film industry, including work as a continuity girl for British International Pictures, but the key event was her marriage to Sydney Box in 1935, which nurtured a mutual talent for playwriting. They completed nearly forty short plays before the outbreak of war in 1939. During the war, Muriel assisted her husband in running Verity Films, gaining her first experience of directing with *The English Inn* (1941), a typical Verity propaganda short produced for the British Council. The Boxes moved into features, achieving a spectacular hit with *The Seventh Veil*, the highest grossing British film of 1945, which won them an Oscar for Best Original Screenplay.

On the strength of this success, Sydney was invited by the Rank Organisation to take over Gainsborough Pictures, where Muriel ran the scenario department. The emphasis was on volume production, but many of the Boxes' screenplays – such as *The Years Between* (Compton Bennett, 1946) or *Good-Time Girl* (David Macdonald, 1948) – emphasise the problems women face in their struggle to gain recognition or independence. Muriel occasionally assisted as dialogue director, or re-shot scenes that needed attention in post-production. On *The Lost People* (1949), about the plight of European refugees, she was credited as co-director for the very substantial reworking she deemed necessary.

When Sydney left Rank to set up London Independent Producers in 1951, Muriel was allowed more opportunity to direct. The majority of her films were stage adaptations: *The Happy Family* (1952), *To Dorothy a Son* (1954), *Simon and Laura* (1955), *This Other Eden* (1959), *Subway in the Sky* (1959), *Too Young to Love* (1960) and *Rattle of a Simple Man* (1964). Her directorial energies were channelled into eliciting strong performances from the actors; visually the films are competent and unfussy, with a preference for medium shots, allowing the audience to concentrate on dialogue and the telling glance or gesture. The films have a stage-bound feel, and rarely venture out on to location. The most successful, precisely because it thrives on such artifice, is *Simon and Laura*, Alan Melville's acerbic satire of early television 'soaps', where Kay Kendall and Peter Finch play an idealised couple who are actually the reverse of their real selves.

Box's films are notable for their strong, often topical and controversial themes. *This Other Eden* raises a number of complex issues about Irish politics, commemoration, hypocrisy and illegitimacy. *Too Young to Love*, which addressed the problem of teenage sex, abortion and syphilis, was sufficiently contentious to be banned by several local authorities. The semi-documentary *Street Corner* (1953), based on Muriel and Sydney's original screenplay, was a complement to *The Blue Lamp* (Basil Dearden, 1950), emphasising the courage and capabilities of women police officers. It formed part of Box's repeated attempts to foreground women's experiences, her most important subject.

In her version of the famous Somerset Maugham tale *The Beachcomber* (1954), it is the pluck and tenacity of the missionary Martha (Glynis Johns) that dominates the

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film. *Simon and Laura*, *The Passionate Stranger* (1957), *The Truth about Women* (1958) and *Rattle of a Simple Man* were all comedies about the gulf that exists between the sexes whose needs and aspirations are quite different, and between fantasy and reality. Box described *The Truth about Women* as 'the film personally significant to me above all others', a 'comedy with serious undertones concerning the status of women in various societies from the turn of the century until today'. She was dismayed when the distributors, British Lion, refused it a West End premiere, an indication that its subject was uncomfortable for a patriarchal industry.

Box experienced other forms of prejudice. Michael Balcon doubted her competence to direct a large-scale feature film, a modern Romeo and Juliet story that she had written in 1950, and the project was aborted. In 1952 the Boxes pretended that the direction of *The Happy Family* was a joint affair, but when word leaked out that Muriel was directing on her own, one of the principal financial backers, John Woolf, withdrew. She was particularly hurt when other women, Jean Simmons in *So Long at the Fair* (1950), and Kay Kendall in *Simon and Laura*, wished to have her replaced as a director. Simmons was powerful enough to get her way and Terence Fisher was given the director's slot. In the press her position as one of the very few women directors in the British film industry was frequently noted, but usually condescendingly.

However, she was a role model for young women. Her chequered career illustrates the difficulties for a woman working in the film industry, and also its volatility, particularly in the 1950s and 60s when she and her husband struggled to retain a measure of independence and integrity. She left film-making after the tepid reception of *Rattle of a Simple Man*, but continued to write novels and she set up a successful publishing house, Femina, which offered a more rewarding outlet for her feminism. She died in London on 18 May 1991. If Muriel Box never directed a masterpiece, her oeuvre remains the most significant achievement of a women director in the British film industry.

Andrew Spicer, *Directors in British and Irish Cinema* quoted on [screenonline.org.uk](http://screenonline.org.uk)

**Carol Morley** is a writer and director. Her feature films include the upcoming road movie *Typist Artist Pirate King* about artist Audrey Amiss, starring Monica Dolan, Kelly Macdonald and Gina McKee; New Orleans set noir *Out of Blue*, starring Patricia Clarkson, James Caan, Jacki Weaver and Toby Jones; *The Falling*, an exploration of a mysterious outbreak of fainting in a 1969 girls' school, starring Florence Pugh and Morfydd Clark in their first film roles alongside Maisie Williams, Maxine Peake and Greta Scacchi; *Dreams of a Life*, which stars Zawe Ashton and goes behind the anonymous newspaper headline about Joyce Vincent who lay dead in her flat for three years; and the Grierson Award winning *The Alcohol Years*, revisiting the people that populated Morley's teenage life on the Manchester music scene. She also writes and broadcasts on films and directors, including an essay for a book accompanying the Criterion Essential Fellini box set release, and a Radio 3 documentary *Carol and Muriel*, about Muriel Box.

**Rachel Cooke** is an award-winning journalist. A writer and columnist at *The Observer*, she is also the television critic of the *New Statesman*. Her essays are regularly broadcast on BBC Radio 3, most recently the series *The Odd Woman*. Her book, *Her Brilliant Career: Ten Extraordinary Women of the Fifties*, is published by Virago. She is currently editing a new literary anthology for Virago.

**Melanie Williams** is Professor of Film and Television Studies at the University of East Anglia. A specialist in British film history, she is the author of numerous books on the topic, including *Female Stars of British Cinema*, *David Lean*, *Transformation and Tradition in 1960s British Cinema*, and a BFI Film Classic book on *A Taste of Honey*. She is currently working towards a book on Muriel Box.

**Dr Josephine Botting** is a Curator at the BFI National Archive and author of *Adrian Brunel and British Cinema of the 1920s*.