



Oh, Mr Porter!

Directed by: Marcel Varnel

A Gainsborough picture

Presented by:

Gaumont-British Picture Corporation Ltd.

Controlled throughout the world excluding U.S.A.

by: General Film Distributors

Producer: Edward Black

2nd Assistant Director: Roy Ward Baker*

Screen Play: J.O.C. Orton, Val Guest

Screenplay: Marriot Edgar

Original Story by: Frank Launder

Photography: Arthur Crabtree

Editing: R.E. Dearing

Cutting: Alfred Moore

Settings: Vetchinsky

Music: Jack Beaver*

Musical Director: Louis Levy

Recording: W. Salter

Studio: Gainsborough Studios*

Cast:

Will Hay (*William Porter*)

Moore Marriott (*Jeremiah Harbottle*)

Graham Moffatt (*Albert Brown*)

Sebastian Smith (*Charles Trimbletow*)

Agnes Laughlan (*Mrs Trimbletow*)

Percy Walsh (*superintendent*)

Dennis Wyndham (*Grogan*)

Dave O'Toole (*postman*)

Betty Jardine (*girl*)*

Frederick Piper*

UK 1937

85 mins

35mm

A BFI National Archive Print

* Uncredited

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MEMBER PICKS

Oh, Mr Porter!

This British comedy was a vehicle for the talents of Will Hay, Moore Marriott and Graham Moffatt, who had first performed together in *Windbag The Sailor* (1936) in which Hay played an inept sea captain.

Here, their characters are placed in a rural railway setting with Hay attempting to assert his authority as a new stationmaster, taking the name of Porter from a popular song ('Oh, Mr Porter, whatever can I do?/I want to go Birmingham and/They've taken me on to Crewe').

The scene of Porter's arrival by coach parodies that of *Dracula* (1931): in both films, the locals warn a new arrival of fearful danger. In broader terms, this picture lightly reworks the idea of Arnold Ridley's famous comedy-thriller *The Ghost Train*, (already filmed twice, in 1927 and 1931) in which a phantom train is used to carry firearms.

However, it is not the plot but the richly humorous characterisations and dialogue, together with the charming atmosphere and sharp pacing of the film, that make *Oh, Mr Porter!* such a success. The station exterior was a real one about to be demolished and it is skilfully dressed by art director Vetchinsky, whose interior sets are also completely convincing.

Director Marcel Varnel kindles a rich interplay between Porter and his two insubordinate assistants that makes each believable and distinctive as characters. Their misdemeanours are petty and sympathetic, and Porter's refusal to give in to adverse circumstances becomes heroic.

Oh, Mr Porter! is full of moments to cherish – from Harbottle's first line, 'Next train's gone!', to Porter's explanation of why wheeltappers tap wheels – but it also has many extended scenes of comic brilliance such as that in which the trio, having blocked the line in a shunting exercise, try to calculate how much time they have before the express is due.

Allen Eyles, BFI Screenonline, screenonline.org.uk

The star of *Oh, Mr Porter!*, Will Hay, was born in 1888 in Aberdeen, before cinema was invented. He went to school in south London, then became apprenticed to an engineer in Manchester, but soon gave that up in favour of working as a comedian in Edwardian music halls. In those early years his most successful comic turn was as an incompetent schoolmaster trying to disguise his ignorance. During the twenties and early thirties Hay successfully adapted his music hall style to the requirements of radio, then in 1934 turned to filmmaking.

In the next ten years he starred in 18 films, the best of which were those directed by Marcel Varnel. Varnel also directed films featuring the Crazy Gang, another popular act in the thirties and forties, but Hay's style of comedy was totally different. Whereas the Crazy Gang just played themselves on screen regardless of the storyline, Hays played a particular character in a particular situation. He thought of himself not as a 'clown', but as a 'reaction comedian'.

MEMBER EXCLUSIVES

Member Picks: *Oh, Mr. Porter!*

Sun 7 Jan 15:15

Member Salon: *SCALA!!! Or, the Incredibly Strange Rise and Fall of the World's Wildest Cinema and How It Influenced a Mixed-up Generation of Weirdos and Misfits*

Mon 8 Jan 20:15

Behind the Scenes: *BFI National Archive*

Thu 25 Jan BFI National Archive, Berkhamstead

REGULAR PROGRAMME

Seniors' Free Matinee: *Sunset Boulevard* + intro

Mon 8 Jan 14:00

Art in the Making: *Fields of the Senses* + intro by Steven Foxon, Curator of Non-Fiction, BFI National Archive

Tue 9 Jan 18:30

Projecting the Archive: *The Street Singer aka Interval for Romance* + intro by writer Ming Ho

Tue 16 Jan 18:20

African Odyssey: *West Indies* + intro by archivist Annabelle Aventurin + Q&A with film programmer Abiba Coulibaly, Jonathan Ali of The Twelve30 Collective and filmmaker, curator and DJ, Rabz Lansiquot

Sat 20 Jan 16:30

Experimenta: *Do It Yourself: Women Artist*

Filmmakers and Punk + Christine Binnie, Anne Robinson and Jill Westwood in conversation with Rachel Garfield

Wed 24 Jan 18:15

Silent Cinema: *Lady Windermere's Fan* + intro by Bryony Dixon, BFI National Archive curator

Sun 28 Jan 15:20

Relaxed Screening: *The Enigma of Kaspar*

Hauser Jeder für sich und Gott gegen alle + intro & discussion

Mon 29 Jan 18:20

Restored: *Spellbound*

Tue 30 Jan 18:00

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In a Hay film it's other people who do and say outrageous things. To them Hay reacts with a sniff, or a screwing up of the eyes, or the words 'Uh... yes', or an attempt at logical argument.

Such a comedy style requires sidekicks, and Will Hay had two of the best. In most of his films, the people to whose idiocy he reacts are played by Moore Marriott and Graham Moffatt. Marriott plays a fairly old man, extremely cunning and devious; Moffatt is a fat boy, cheeky and uncooperative. In *Oh, Mr Porter!*, all three are seen in top form, doing what they did best.

Though the story takes place in 'Buggleskelly', the film was not actually shot in Northern Ireland. Instead, the production based itself at a disused railway station near Basingstoke. All through the making of the film, the track was actually being demolished, just out of camera range.

If the film has a hero, it is not Will Hay – it is Gladstone, a genuine Victorian locomotive. To make it look even older and more Victorian, Gladstone was fitted with a taller chimney and a spiked top.

For Hay, Moffatt and Marriott, because of Gladstone, this could have been their last film. There is a scene in which they jump clear from danger just in time. A man with a flag on a nearby hillock was supposed to give them a warning of Gladstone's approach, but for one of the takes he was not in position. Hay, Moffatt and Marriott waited for the flag signal until their eyes and ears told them they could wait no longer. At the last possible second, they dived out of the way. The feeling of real danger in this take was judged by Varnel to sharpen the comedy, so he used it in the final film, where it can be seen today.

Terry Staples

IN PERSON & PREVIEWS

The Red Shoes: *Beyond the Mirror*

From Fri 10 Nov to Sun 7 Jan Blue Room

Mark Kermode Live in 3D at the BFI

Mon 15 Jan 18:20

Preview: *The End We Start From* + Q&A with guests tbc

Mon 15 Jan 20:30

Preview: *All of Us Strangers* + Q&A with Andrew Haigh

Wed 17 Jan 18:10

Rock 'n' Roll Cinema

Thu 18 Jan 18:15

In Conversation: *Cartoon Saloon's Tomm Moore, Nora Twomey and Paul Young*

Sun 21 Jan 15:15

Woman with a Movie Camera Preview: *Your Fat Friend* + Q&A with director Jeanie Finlay and Aubrey Gordon

Sat 27 Jan 17:50

Shooting the Past 25th Anniversary + Q&A with writer-director Stephen Poliakoff and actors Lindsay Duncan and Timothy Spall

Sun 28 Jan 15:00

CARTOON SALOON AT 25

The Secret of Kells

Sat 6 Jan 12:10

Song of the Sea

Sat 13 Jan 12:00

The Short Films of Cartoon Saloon + Q&A with Cartoon Saloon's Nora Twomey, Tomm Moore and Paul Young

Sat 20 Jan 11:30

The Breadwinner + Q&A with Nora Twomey

Sat 20 Jan 14:10

Wolfwalkers + Q&A with director Tomm Moore

Sat 21 Jan 12:15

My Father's Dragon

Sat 27 Jan 12:00

Funday Workshop: *Puffin Rock and the New Friends*

Sun 28 Jan 10:30

Funday: *Puffin Rock and the New Friends*

Sun 28 Jan 11:45