



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

The Picture of Dorian Gray

The Picture of Dorian Gray

Director: Albert Lewin

©: Loew's Incorporated

Production Company: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer

Producer: Pandro S. Berman

Special Assistant to Mr Lewin: Gordon Wiles

Screenplay: Albert Lewin

Based on the novel by: Oscar Wilde

Director of Photography: Harry Stradling

Editor: Ferris Webster

Art Directors: Cedric Gibbons, Hans Peters

Set Decorator: Edwin B. Willis

Associates: Hugh Hunt, John Bonar

Paintings of Dorian Gray: Ivan Le Lorraine Albright

Paintings of Dorian Gray as a young man:

Henrique Medina

Costume Supervisor: Irene

Men's Costumes: Vallès

Make-up Created by: Jack Dawn

Music: Herbert Stothart

Recording Director: Douglas Shearer

uncredited

Assistant Director: Earl McEvoy

Process Photography:

Carroll L. Shepphird

Camera Operator: Sam Leavitt

Camera Assistant: Frank Phillips

2nd Camera Assistant: Edward Davis

Special Effects: Warren Newcombe,

A. Arnold Gillespie

Associate Costume Supervisor:

Marion Herwood Keyes

Sound Technician: William R. Edmondson

Narrator: Cedric Hardwicke

Cast:

George Sanders (*Lord Henry Wotton*)

Hurd Hatfield (*Dorian Gray*)

Donna Reed (*Gladys Hallward*)

Angela Lansbury (*Sibyl Vane*)

Peter Lawford (*David Stone*)

Lowell Gilmore (*Basil Hallward*)

Richard Fraser (*James Vane*)

Douglas Walton (*Allen Campbell*)

Morton Lowry (*Adrian Singleton*)

Miles Mander (*Sir Robert Bentley*)

Lydia Bilbrook (*Mrs Vane*)

Mary Forbes (*Lady Agatha*)

Robert Greig (*Sir Thomas*)

Moyna McGill (*Duchess*)

Billy Bevan (*Malvolio Jones, the chairman*)

Renie Carson (*young French Woman*)

Lillian Bond (*Kate*)

Devi Dja and Her Balisene Dancers (*specialty*)

uncredited

Lisa Carpenter (*Lady Henry Wotton*)

William Stack (*Mr Erskine*)

Natalie Draper (*Mrs Vandeleur*)

Anita Sharp-Bolster (*Lady Marlborough*)

Sidney Lawford (*Davenant*)

Dorothy Ford (*a woman*)

Guy Bates Post (*Victor, the butler*)

Crauford Kent (*friend*)

Jimmy Conlin (*stage pianist*)

Carol Diane Kappler (*Gladys as a child*)

Rex Evans (*Lord Gerald Goodbody*)

Lee Powell (*station master*)

Edward Cooper (*Ernest Harrowden*)

Frederic Worlock (*Francis, the butler*)

Tom Pilkington (*ant man*)

John George (*hunchback bordello attendant*)

Arthur Shields (*street evangelist*)

Charles Coleman (*butler*)

The most ready defence of director Albert Lewin is that he was ahead of his time. In the 50s and 60s, the question of what he had to do with cinema or cinema to do with him created a sense of inassimilable peculiarity. Now the lurid atmospheres of *Pandora and the Flying Dutchman*, its Spanish sea-shore high jinks, look right at home next to Raúl Ruiz's *City of Pirates*, and surrealism à la the 20s or the 80s lives in the beach party sequence where be-boppers and musicians mingle with cast-off bits of statuary ('Ozymandias' – the perfect Lewin text). But more than this, Lewin anticipates a cinema that has incorporated what is alien to it, that has effaced itself in order to become the vessel of what is alien to it. Does *The Picture of Dorian Gray* anticipate Fassbinder's *Effi Briest*, Rohmer's *Die Marquise von O...*, something of Straub-Huillet? Is the cross-hatching of emotion in *The Private Affairs of Bel Ami*, the objective tracing of a subjective multiplicity of romances, kin to another kind of modernism, Alan Rudolph's *Welcome to L.A.*?

But to look for the seed of modernism in Lewin is to find it also in the most old-fashioned qualities of his cinema, in the strong trace of silent cinema where he (most loquacious of writer-directors) began after all. *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* might be an interesting reference point for *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Dorian, who never really comes to 'life' in the film, is never in charge of his own soul, could be the somnambulist, set in motion by two mad masters: the painter Basil Hallward who provides the canvas that gives him the illusory freedom of eternal youth, and blasé aristocrat Lord Henry Wotton who supplies the cynical moral code that gives him the illusory strength to exploit it. But one thinks also of Griffith, in the Manichean struggle of good and evil in Dorian, glossed by a text from Omar Khayyam ('...And by and by my Soul return'd to me, And answer'd, "I, Myself am Heaven and Hell".'), and in the film's corresponding division of its London locale into an urbane 'real' and a debauched 'half world', roughly corresponding to Mayfair and Whitechapel (recalling the 'infernal' Limehouse of *Broken Blossoms*).

Lewin's vision of Blue Gate Fields, where Dorian goes to steep himself in his nightmarish but unspecified pleasures, is distinctly Griffithian, not least in the way that a pure cinematic expressionism, the cinema of horror, is struggling out of Victorian notions of wickedness. Griffith and *Caligari* do eventually meet, in the 1921 *Dream Street*, a frenzied morality play in which Griffith's Victorian abstractions merge with extreme visual stylisation and some equally far-out (before their time) experiments with sound. It's a conjunction that strangely anticipates *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, not least in the sense that Griffith, who was so intent on dignifying and raising the cultural stock of the movies (which is what Lewin has been accused of trying to do with his constant quoting and literary referencing), also happened, consequently or coincidentally, to extend their expressive range. So *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, with its literary flim-flammy, its straight-from-the-pulpit Griffithian moralising, and its almost expressionist conjuring of the nether-world of the soul, extends the range further, to the objectively filmed texts and dense sound/vision interplay of the moderns.

What *Dorian Gray* seems to be dealing in at first is a superfluity of sound: the Wildean witticisms of Lord Henry Wotton ('I adore simple pleasures, they're the last refuge of the complex'; 'I like persons better than principles and persons with no principles better than anything else in the world') and the constant indexing of Dorian's plight, by which his basic, if inadvertent, Faustian pact is not made more meaningful just more exquisite, heaped with sensibility, by the

Pedro De Cordoba (*pianist at Blue Gate Field*)
Lumsden Hare (*gamekeeper*)
Herbert Evans (*lord*)
Joe Yule (*stage manager*)
Wilson Bengé (*Bentley*)
Frank O' Connor (*policeman*)
Skelton Knaggs (*Cockney*)
George Rigas (*barman*)
Harry Allen (*servant*)
Al Ferguson (*customer*)
USA 1945©
110 mins
Digital

BECOME A BFI MEMBER

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at bfi.org.uk/join

SIGHT AND SOUND

Never miss an issue with **Sight and Sound**, the BFI's internationally renowned film magazine. Subscribe from just £25*
* Price based on a 6-month print subscription (UK only). More info: sightandsoundsubs.bfi.org.uk

**SIGHT
AND
SOUND**

BFI PLAYER

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on player.bfi.org.uk

BFI SOUTHBANK

Welcome to the home of great film and TV, with three cinemas and a studio, a world-class library, regular exhibitions and a pioneering Mediatheque with 1000s of free titles for you to explore. Browse special-edition merchandise in the BFI Shop. We're also pleased to offer you a unique new space, the BFI Riverfront – with unrivalled riverside views of Waterloo Bridge and beyond, a delicious seasonal menu, plus a stylish balcony bar for cocktails or special events. Come and enjoy a pre-cinema dinner or a drink on the balcony as the sun goes down.

Join the **BFI mailing list** for regular programme updates. Not yet registered? Create a new account at www.bfi.org.uk/signup

cultural and literary references. But then the pile-up of dialogue itself begins to suggest another dimension, perhaps even to redefine the film altogether. Is it naive craftsmanship, for instance, or a radical move that Dorian is presented to us by not just one but two narrators – the voice-over commentator apparently representing Oscar Wilde and his spokesman within the film, Lord Henry Wotton. He poisons Dorian with his cynical creed, effectively makes him what he is with the collaboration of Basil Hallward, another (visual) commentator, all the while maintaining a pose of complete non-involvement, the detachment of the true narrator. 'His greatest pleasure was to observe the emotions of his friends, while experiencing none of his own', it is said of Lord Henry at the beginning. The irony of the film, in a way, is to reveal just how self-deceiving this creed is. 'One has a right to judge a man by the effect he has on his friends', someone else says, by which precept the portrait of Dorian is also a portrait of Lord Henry.

Put another way, however, Lord Henry's creed – 'All influence is immoral because the aim of life is self-development, to make one's nature perfect' – is amply borne out by the film. Dorian is incapable of development; he is the sum of his influences, the figment of his creator(s). After all, Basil confesses himself unable to give up the painting because 'I've put too much of myself into it', which explains why he feels haunted by it, and why the perfection of Dorian's youth and beauty seems not merely bland (Hurd Hatfield is continually posed just this side of the simpering) but eerily insubstantial. Which leads the film's irony in another direction, away from the poignancy of innocence seeking its own corruption, away from the Faustian tale with its decadent trimmings (Wilde-Beardsley) and poetic touches (Khayyam), and towards a formal puzzle of appearances and reality, form and essence, body and soul. These are figured, as it were, in the interplay of vision and sound – or not so much an interplay, more an inconclusive confrontation.

What the ceaseless epigrammatic wit of the dialogue seeks to describe, the visuals frame (like the portrait of Dorian Gray) mysteriously, 'perfectly', impenetrably. *Dorian Gray* may be one of the few films that has actually weighed the value of a thousand words against that of a picture, and found the former infinitely distortable and the latter infinitely inscrutable. Starting from the plot premise of a man whose face reveals nothing of his true nature, the film spirals off into an extraordinary series of metaphors about what is involved (denying, controlling and deceiving, as well as declaring, portraying and revealing) in the act of picture-making. 'You must learn to see it in its proper perspective', says Lord Henry to Dorian about Sibyl's death (while fiddling with a slide in a stereopticon), and moments later, 'You should look upon this tragedy as an episode in the wonderful spectacle of life'. There is the spectacle of the music hall itself where Dorian meets Sibyl, where she sings a song about a hungry sparrow declining to join a canary in the 'perfect' prison of its gilded cage; and there are two scenes (one with Dorian studying coins through a magnifying glass, the other with a police commissioner studying evidence with a magnifying machine) in which the conversation turns on the theme of 'how little we really know of what goes on inside a man'. The 'picture' of Albert Lewin that emerges finally from *Dorian Gray* is not of a director who was a prisoner of his high-culture pretensions, but of one with a remarkable visual sensibility that has little to do with conventional notions of style. *Dorian Gray* is an intellectual and abstract adaptation; a 'record' not only of Oscar Wilde's original but of a range of ideas both within and about its spectacle.

Richard Combs, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, November 1985