



MARTIN SCORSESE SELECTS HIDDEN GEMS OF BRITISH CINEMA

Station Six Sahara

Station Six Sahara

Directed by: Seth Holt

©: CCC Films (London)

A CCC Films - Artur Brauner production

Executive Producer: Gene Gutowski

Produced by: Victor Lyndon

Production Manager: Clifton Brandon

Assistant Director: David Bracknell

Continuity: Pamela Carlton

Screenplay by: Bryan Forbes, Brian Clemens

Based on a play 'Men without a Past' by:

Jacques Maret

Photographed by: Gerald Gibbs

Camera Operator: Ray Sturgess

Film Editor: Alastair McIntyre

Art Director: Jack Stephens

Wardrobe: Bridget Sellers

Miss Carroll Baker's Wardrobe by:

Paris Pierre Balmain

Make-up: Gerry Fletcher

Hair Stylist: Joan Smallwood

Music Composed and Conducted by: Ron Grainer

Sound Mixer: Norman Bolland

Sound Editor: Jonathan Bates

Made at: England Shepperton Studios

Cast:

Carroll Baker (*Catherine Star*)

Ian Bannen (*Tom Fletcher*)

Denholm Elliott (*Major Macey*)

Jorg Felmy (*Martin Donetz*)

Mario Adorf (*Santos*)

Biff McGuire (*Jimmy Flemyng*)

Harry Baird (*Sailor*)

Peter van Eyck (*Peter Kramer*)

UK-West Germany 1962©

102 mins

35mm

Station Six Sahara is a big revelation. It's minimal: they're in the desert and these men are stuck together. I always found it to be very close to *The King of Comedy*, because it's the comedy of management. The sense of cabin fever and the way each character plays off each other in what they would today call microaggressions – especially the wonderful Ian Bannen, and what he does to poor Denholm Elliott with his letter. Then in the midst of this, an American Cadillac and a blonde, Carol Baker, crashes into the film in a highly unlikely, outrageous manner that is pure pulp. But it really has to do with character. The weaknesses of character, the strengths of character. Seth Holt was amazing in how he perceived them and how he chose to show them. It's very disturbing, because of that.

Martin Scorsese interviewed by James Bell, *Sight and Sound*, October 2024

We probably all remember movies from our childhood that marked us in some way. One shot from one film has never left me: a near-naked Carroll Baker sitting in a chair in the middle of a desert, watched by a group of heavily perspiring men. The all-important detail was that her bra straps were hanging down her arms. I must have been about 11 or 12 when I saw it. Need I say more?

I'm certain I saw this particular film on television. Somehow I eventually discovered that it was none other than *Station Six Sahara*, a British-German co-production first released in 1963. I remembered little of the film except for this one provocative image (though that almost seemed enough). But when would I be able to see it again?

Cut to 1986, when I had the opportunity to programme my first season at the National Film Theatre, a complete Martin Scorsese retrospective. To spice it up, I added films that had influenced him, as well as throwing in a few titles he had included in that entertaining 'Guilty Pleasures' column in *Film Comment* magazine. Happily for me, among them was *Station Six Sahara*. As Scorsese wrote: 'Here you get that palpable sense of being in a place – stuck in a place. And you learn what it's like in a society of people who live on the outside. *Way on the outside.*'

The film all takes place on an oil station somewhere in the Sahara (it was actually shot close to Tripoli), where the pumps are manned by a motley crew. We're introduced to them as a newcomer arrives – a taciturn, self-disciplined German (Hansjörg Felmy). Ominously, he's driven to the station in a truck that also carries the coffin in which his predecessor will be taken away. Once there, he encounters a raucous, ribald Scot (Ian Bannen), an uptight, snobbish English former army major (Denholm Elliott) and a shy, uncommunicative Spaniard (Mario Adorf). All are under the thumb of their boss (Peter van Eyck), a proud, isolated figure who prefers to keep himself apart from the others in order to maintain his authority.

So far, so sweaty, with the Scot tormenting the major at every opportunity, and a tense night-time poker game threatening to usher in the film's first real burst of violence. But just at that moment, a bizarre event disrupts this uneasy community. An open-top Cadillac bolts through the station and hits a wall. Its occupants are a man and his blonde female companion (in fact his ex-wife), who is miraculously unscathed by the crash. As he makes a slow recovery from his injuries, she – in the form of Carroll Baker, star of Kazan's *Baby*

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MARTIN SCORSESE SELECTS HIDDEN GEMS OF BRITISH CINEMA

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Sun 1 Sep 11:30; Mon 9 Sep 20:40

Brief Ecstasy

Tue 3 Sep 18:30; Wed 11 Sep 20:35

The Man in Grey

Fri 6 Sep 18:10; Tue 17 Sep 20:40

This Happy Breed

Fri 6 Sep 20:40; Tue 24 Sep 18:00

The Seventh Veil

Sat 7 Sep 15:10; Wed 25 Sep 20:40

Green for Danger

Sun 8 Sep 15:40; Thu 26 Sep 20:55

It Always Rains on Sunday

Sun 8 Sep 18:10; Fri 27 Sep 20:50

Hue and Cry

Sat 14 Sep 20:30; Mon 30 Sep 18:15 (+ intro by Josephine Botting, Curator, BFI National Archive)

Uncle Silas

Sat 14 Sep 18:20

Terence Fisher Double Bill:

To the Public Danger + Stolen Face

Sun 15 Sep 18:10; Tue 1 Oct 20:30

Mandy

Mon 16 Sep 18:35; Sat 28 Sep 12:20

Yield to the Night

Fri 20 Sep 18:00; Sat 28 Sep 15:10

The Flesh and the Fiends

Sat 21 Sep 14:50; Wed 2 Oct 20:40

The Damned

Sat 21 Sep 20:40; Fri 4 Oct 18:30

Station Six Sahara

Sun 22 Sep 12:30; Sat 5 Oct 16:00

The Mind Benders

Sun 22 Sep 18:00; Wed 2 Oct 18:20

Went the Day Well? + intro by James Bell,

Senior Curator, BFI National Archive

The Pumpkin Eater

Fri 27 Sep 18:00; Sun 6 Oct 15:00

Dr. Jekyll and Sister Hyde

Sat 28 Sep 18:10; Thu 3 Oct 18:15 + intro by

Sam Clemens, son of Brian Clemens

The Legend of Hell House

Sat 28 Sep 20:40; Mon 7 Oct 18:20

Guns at Batasi

Sun 29 Sep 18:20; Sat 5 Oct 18:20

With thanks to

Martin Scorsese and Edgar Wright

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Doll (1956) – stalks around the station with a catlike grace, while the resident toms become highly agitated by her presence. It's then simply a matter of who among them will make the first advances, and who she will pick for her pleasure. I won't reveal more except to say it all ends unhappily... sort of.

Station Six Sahara was based on a stage play, and scripted by Bryan Forbes and Brian Clemens. Among the credits are two names familiar from Roman Polanski's British productions, producer Gene Gutowski and editor Alastair McIntyre, and in many ways it's akin to the Polish master's early tales of perversion and imposition. But the significant figure is the film's director, Seth Holt. Look up Holt in any film dictionary and you will find the same story: one of great promise unfulfilled, and of a significant loss to the burgeoning British film industry of the 1960s.

Born in 1924, Holt began his adult life as an actor before being drawn into documentaries as an assistant editor. He was introduced to Ealing Studios by his brother-in-law Robert Hamer, graduating to editor on 1951's *The Lavender Hill Mob* (among other titles) and producer on *The Ladykillers* (1955). He made the leap to director on one of Ealing's last films, the prophetically titled *Nowhere to Go* (1958). Co-scripted by Kenneth Tynan, and featuring the film debut of Maggie Smith, it's a cool, supremely visual thriller that in terms of its minimal dialogue and daring narrative playfulness is closer to the world of Jean-Pierre Melville than to any British precedents.

After serving a period as an editing doctor, in which capacity he was by some accounts responsible for saving *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960) and *The Entertainer* (1960), Holt re-emerged as a director for Hammer with the excellent *Les Diaboliques* rip-off *Taste of Fear* (1961) and the creepy Bette Davis vehicle *The Nanny* (1965). But barren years were to follow, as Holt's alcoholism resulted in his death in 1971 while shooting his final film: another Hammer production, *Blood from the Mummy's Tomb*.

Was that sense of what might have been – and *Movie* magazine's championing of Holt as one of the finest British talents around – justified? Certainly, most of his films were genre pieces, as opposed to self-generated works, and none could be regarded as a masterpiece. But as *Station Six Sahara* demonstrates, he had a remarkable gift for conjuring atmosphere, combined with an astute direction of actors (all are excellent) and a masterly use of montage. Sound alone is brilliantly used throughout, from the monotonous throb of the pumps to the whining crescendo of the Cadillac's horn before the crash.

Contemporary reviewers acknowledged all of this: *The Times* commented that 'for once in a British film some real erotic tension is palpable on the screen', while Dilys Powell described the film as 'true cinema'. However, all the critics were troubled by the total lack of explanation of the car's sudden appearance in such a remote spot. Holt's response: 'I refuse to countenance any justification. It was a little coincidence. If people think of these things, then they don't like the picture.'

As it happens, Holt's favourite director was Buñuel, and personally I like to see this conceit as one of those surrealistic coups so beloved by the wily Spaniard. The coffin on the truck is another highly Buñuelian detail. Frustratingly, right now you'd be hard pressed to find a copy of *Station Six Sahara* to check whether or not you agree with me.

David Thompson, *Sight and Sound*, September 2011