



## MARTIN SCORSESE SELECTS HIDDEN GEMS OF BRITISH CINEMA

# Guns at Batasi

### Guns at Batasi

Directed by: John Guillermin

©: Twentieth Century-Fox Productions Ltd

Presented by:

Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corporation

Produced by: George H. Brown

Production Manager: David W. Orton

Assistant Director: Jan Darnley Smith

Continuity: Betty Harley

Casting Director: Stuart Lyons

Screenplay by: Robert Holles

Original Adaptation: Leo Marks, Marshall Pugh

Additional Material: C.M. Pennington-Richards

Based on the novel The Siege of Battersea by:

Robert Holles

Director of Photography: Douglas Slocombe

Camera Operator: Gerry Fisher

Editor: Max Benedict

Art Director: Maurice Carter

Wardrobe: John McCorry

Make-up: Stuart Freeborn

Hairdressing: Barbara Ritchie

Music Composed and Conducted by: John Addison

Played by: Sinfonia of London

Sound Recordists: Bill Daniels, Robert T. McPhee

Sound System: Westrex Recording System

Sound Editor: Don Deacon

Made at: Pinewood Studios

Cast:

Richard Attenborough

(Regimental Sergeant Major Lauderdale)

Flora Robson (Miss Barker-Wise)

John Leyton (Private Wilkes)

Mia Farrow (Karen Eriksson)

Cecil Parker (Sir William Fletcher)

Errol John (Lieutenant Boniface)

Graham Stark (Sergeant 'Dodger' Brown)

Earl Cameron (Captain Abraham)

John Meillon (Sergeant 'Digger' Drake)

Percy Herbert (Colour Sergeant Ben Smith)

David Lodge (Sergeant 'Muscles' Dunn)

Bernard Horsfall (Sergeant 'Schoolie' Prideaux)

Jack Hawkins (Colonel John Deal)

Horace James (Corporal Abou)

Patrick Holt (captain)

Alan Browning (Tony, the adjutant)

Richard Bidlake (lieutenant)

Joseph Layode (Archibong Shaw)

Ric Hutton (Russell)

uncredited

Thomas Baptiste

Bloke Modisane

UK-USA 1964©

98 mins

35mm

A BFI National Archive print

**Edgar Wright:** A good companion to *Station Six Sahara* in this season is John Guillermin's *Guns at Batasi*. It's also a single location film, a film of simmering tensions boiling over.

**Martin Scorsese:** That's it. That black-and-white widescreen CinemaScope, tracking past the guns, rifles lined up, placed in position... You could feel the cuts in that movie. You could feel the sound effect cuts, too. Let alone the great Richard Attenborough, and his performance, with that voice of his, playing that sergeant major. *Guns at Batasi* is a wonderful display of extraordinary craftsmanship in terms of editing and sound effects editing and camera movement.

**EW:** And composition.

**MS:** Composition, in that 2.39:1 aspect.

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

The poster copy for this quintessential exercise in post-colonial hand-wringing sounds suspiciously like they're trying to sell another *Zulu*: 'Outnumbered but never outfought!' runs the hyperbole. 'Besieged in a jungle powder keg half way between heaven and hell.' All of which makes it sound like those restless natives are in for another pasting from Her Majesty's armed forces, when the film's actually an anguished accounting of much-changed political realities eight decades on from the derring-do at Rorke's Drift. Set in a fictional African republic in the aftermath of a British handover, it sees the UK military reduced to the status of bystanders when regime change puts a rather fiercer independence movement in charge, many of whom have previously received political mentorship and army training from the Brits. Standing his ground at a rural outpost, however, is Richard Attenborough's by-the-book sergeant-major, who's not about to take orders from anyone who isn't his commanding officer, precipitating a tense stand-off.

Credited to novelist Robert Holles and various other hands (including *Peeping Tom* writer Leo Marks), the screenplay's pretty sceptical about the rebels' idealistic credentials, makes no bones about Britain's utterly diminished authority, and reserves most sympathy for Dickie's old warrior, a near-caricature of punctiliousness, but no racist even if his paternalist attitudes are shaped by years of sterling service. A superb showcase for a great character actor, and Guillermin's composed widescreen filming gets the most out of it, while understandably struggling to convince us the Pinewood backlot is a convincing ringer for more exotic climes.

Trevor Johnston, *Sight and Sound*, February 2018

**SPOILER WARNING** The following notes give away some of the plot.

*Guns at Batasi* is distinguished from other films of the period by its explicit concern with loss of imperial power and its setting in an unspecified ex-colony where the British no longer rule. The early 1960s saw increasing criticism and repudiation of the Commonwealth in Britain. Although the ex-colony is a member of the Commonwealth and the British Army still plays a role there, the perspective of the film is very far removed from newsreel versions of a Commonwealth that enjoyed continued influence. An early sign of British impotence is the British policy of non-involvement when Africans stage a coup.

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### Shooting Stars

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

Mon 23 Sep 18:20

### 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

## SIGHT AND SOUND

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**SIGHT AND SOUND**

In line with this policy, the British Colonel (Jack Hawkins) orders his men to stay in barracks and hands over command to the African Captain Abraham (Earl Cameron) until what he calls 'this little spot of bother' blows over.

British impotence and the diminishment of British territory and action are prominent themes. All the action is African as supporters of the coup, led by Lieutenant Boniface (Errol John), take Abraham prisoner and raid an ammunition store to arm themselves. The British, oblivious to these events, are shown indoors in their mess, drinking, chatting and playing billiards. Their passivity is emphasised by the comments of one soldier: 'Bloody marvellous! Two hot chocolate mechanics chuck bricks at each other and the whole British army is immobilised.' Powerlessness is also evoked: when Lauderdale (Richard Attenborough), the Regimental Sergeant Major, gives shelter to Abraham, who has been seriously wounded while escaping capture, Boniface taunts Lauderdale with his power to train guns on the mess, threatening to blow it and all its occupants up if they do not hand over Abraham within an hour: 'For the first time in the history of my country, it is we... who give the order to fire.' Boniface never gives that order – the British are not entirely powerless, taking action against this threat and successfully blowing up the guns. But even though the British break out of confinement, this action involves a movement of a few yards only, still within sight of the mess.

The perspective of the film resembles the views of white-settler communities in African colonies like Kenya and Rhodesia that found some support in Britain: black Africans are getting the upper hand, and British politicians do nothing to stop them. The politician in the film is Miss Barker-Wise (Flora Robson), an MP on a visit to Africa, who champions Boniface. She knew him in England where she taught him as a student, and describes him on various occasions as 'a very humane man' whose 'principles are very sound' and 'a civilised and cultured man'. When Lauderdale describes her idea of Africa as 'smarmy, silly, bloody half-baked' and reminds her that 'You're not in Parliament now, this isn't England and I know more about these people than you do', he draws on an analysis familiar in white-settler communities: metropolitan administrators and politicians are ignorant of Africa and Africans, knowing nothing at firsthand.

If Miss Barker-Wise champions the new Africa of decolonisation, Lauderdale's values belong to an imperial tradition. He regards Boniface as a mutineer. The film gives his values considerable endorsement in his conflicts with Miss Barker-Wise. Her misjudgment of Boniface is heavily underlined: unlike other educated Africans in British film, Boniface is cruel, untrustworthy and unprincipled. In the final sequences of the film, Miss Barker-Wise admits her error, but also tells Lauderdale that Boniface has been made a Colonel. The coup succeeds and Boniface, not Lauderdale, has the last word, demanding that Lauderdale leave the country. The British Colonel confesses his own impotence as he orders Lauderdale to return to England by the next available plane, at the same time admitting that in Lauderdale's place he would have done exactly the same 'step for step'. The action of the soldier hero in the aftermath of loss of empire is thus shown as more likely to earn punishment than medals. *Guns at Batasi* is imbued with sadness for a lost world, and shows the British Army profoundly affected by decolonisation – its capacity for action eroded to the point of immobility, its authority diminished and its soldiers unhonoured.

Wendy Webster in Lee Grieveson and Colin MacCabe (eds), *Film and the End of Empire* (BFI/Palgrave Macmillan, 2011)