



## PROJECTING THE ARCHIVE

# Nightbeat

+ intro by Josephine Botting, BFI Curator

### Nightbeat (aka Night Beat)

Directed by: Harold Huth  
Production Companies: British Lion Film Corporation, Harold Huth Productions  
Produced by: Harold Huth  
Production Manager: Hugh Perceval  
2nd Unit Director: Tom D. Connochie \*  
1st Assistant (location): Guy Hamilton \*  
Assistant Director: John Bremer  
Continuity: Betty Forster  
Assistant Continuity: Angela Allen \*  
Screenplay: T.J Morrison, Guy Morgan  
New scenes and story editing: Roland Pertwee  
Original screen story: Guy Morgan  
Director of Photography: Vacklav Vich  
Camera Operator: Frederick Francis  
Special Effects: Ned Mann, W. Percy Day  
Editor: Grace Garland  
Assembly Cutter: Maurice Rootes  
Art Director: Ferdinand Bellan  
Make-up: Dorrie Hamilton  
Hairdresser: Doris Cummings  
Music Composed by: Ben Frankel  
Lyrics: Harold Purcell  
[Music] Played by: London Films Studio Orchestra  
Music Director: Hubert Clifford  
Sound Supervisor: William Sweeney  
Sound Recording: Alan Allen  
Sound System: Western Electric  
Stunt Double: John Gillanders \*  
Technical Advisor: Percy Hoskins  
Studio: Worton Hall Studios \*  
Cast:  
Anne Crawford (*Julie Kendall*)  
Maxwell Reed (*Felix*)  
Ronald Howard (*Andy Kendall*)  
Hector Ross (*Don Brady*)  
Christine Norden (*Jackie*)  
Fred Groves (*PC Kendall*)  
Sidney James (*Nixon*)  
Nicholas Stuart (*Rocky*)  
Frederick Leister (*magistrate*)  
Philip Stainton (*Sergeant Slack*)  
Michael Medwin (*Spider*)  
UK 1948  
96 mins  
35mm

A BFI National Archive print

\* Uncredited

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### Britain's first blonde bombshell: celebrating the centenary of Christine Norden

The story of Christine Norden's road to fame is a publicist's dream. While queuing to see a Ray Milland film in the Edgware Road in August 1945, this glamorous daughter of a Sunderland bus driver was spotted by a trio of Hungarian film figures. They brought her to the attention of movie mogul Alexander Korda, who gave her a screen test and signed her immediately to his company London Guy Film.

Yet Norden, then known as Molly (actually Mary Lydia Thornton), was no stranger to show business and had been performing since the age of 14. At the time, she was fresh from ENSA revues; legend has it she was the first performer to arrive on a Normandy beach to entertain the troops post D-Day – beating George Formby by three days, she later boasted.

Trained in dancing and with singing experience, Norden was an all-round entertainer. Alexander Korda was convinced of her star quality and concocted a more suitable name: Christine (for her cool as crystal demeanour) and Norden to reflect her Nordic looks. Korda was on the rebound after his split from Merle Oberon and pursued Norden romantically, while introducing her to the cinemagoing public in 1947, in demob drama *Nightbeat* (Harold Huth).

This film really showed her potential; as scheming nightclub singer Jackie she steals her every scene, her porcelain delicacy concealing a steely ruthlessness. Only 22 when the film was made, she exuded a relaxed self-confidence on screen that belied her age. Not only did she show off her acting skills but she also did her own singing, a rare versatility among stars at the time, and even recorded the two songs for release on 78rpm record.

Korda kept her busy. His lavish Technicolor screen version of Oscar Wilde's *An Ideal Husband* (1947) saw her cast as Mrs Marchmont and robed in fabulous Cecil Beaton designs. The film flopped, and she was loaned out for a very different costume affair – *Idol of Paris* (1948). A spin-off of the kind of films being made by Gainsborough Pictures at the time, the film pushed the period melodrama to its limits with a tale of an innocent young woman who finds herself caught up in a world of depravity. Norden was cast as Cora Pearl, 'Queen of the Half World', who shocked the critics by engaging the heroine in a duel with whips. With her screen persona firmly established as 'bad girl' her subsequent roles reinforced this image.

Perhaps her best film is the psychological drama *Mine Own Executioner* (1947) in which she was again cast as a temptress, seducing Burgess Meredith's psychiatrist into betraying his wife. In her next London Films assignment, Irish-set comedy *Saints and Sinners* (1949), she was definitely cast on the latter side, as a returning local celebrity who can't resist leading the hero astray. Her last major film was the same year's *The Interrupted Journey*, in which her affair with leading man Richard Todd unleashes a maelstrom of disaster.

Her marriage to Jack Clayton had ended her affair with Alexander Korda and, along with it, her work for London Films. Her A-picture career over, Norden

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Thu 16 Jan 18:15

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+ intro by writer Paul Joyce

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was snapped up by Hammer who appreciated her talents and cast her in two of their crime thrillers in 1951: *A Case for P.C. 49* (Francis Searle) and *Black Widow* (Vernon Sewell). The latter offered a particularly juicy role as a murderous wife, but its second feature status meant it didn't boost her film career, and her final big screen appearance was alongside Brian Rix and Ronald Shiner in military comedy *Reluctant Heroes* in 1952.

Clayton was the second of five husbands, her first marriage to band leader Norman Cole beginning when she was only 19. Her first four marriages were over by the time she was 36, and she didn't commit to the final one until 1980.

Moving to the US with husband number three, a US Airforce Sergeant, she sought other outlets for her talent and took to the stage with great success. A natural performer, she had already had considerable acclaim as Prince Charming in *Cinderella* at the Prince's Theatre on Shaftesbury Avenue in 1951. In America, she pursued a hugely rewarding career in stage musicals which, along with some television work, kept her busy for nearly three decades.

Returning to the UK in 1979, she settled down in Teddington with husband number five, a mathematician. Her memoirs, written around this time, were eagerly anticipated by the British press for their promised revelations about her many conquests, including Richard Burton and Jerry Lewis, but, sadly, the book never made it to print, perhaps too scandalous to publish.

Her final screen credits were a cameo in *Little Shop of Horrors* (Frank Oz, 1986) and two small screen appearances, in an episode of sitcom *Chance in a Million* and Inspector Morse investigation *The Wolvercote Tongue*, as an American tourist who expires in a London hotel room.

After surviving heart bypass surgery at the age of 63, Christine Norden succumbed to a chest infection and died on 21 September 1988.

In 1983, Norden had attended a screening of *Idol of Paris* at the National Film Theatre, delighting fans of the golden age of British cinema, who came out to catch a glimpse of the still-glamorous star. At the height of her fame she claimed to have received 12000 fan letters a week, but while her star may have shone brightly, it shone only briefly. Had the British film industry managed to create the kind of nuanced femme fatale roles that Hollywood did so well, Norden could have sustained a longer, healthier cinema career.

Josephine Botting, [bfi.org.uk](http://bfi.org.uk), 20 December 2024

**Author's note:** I am indebted to Michael Thornton, whose personal knowledge of and research into Norden was generously shared for this article.