



Great Expectations: British Postwar Cinema 1945-1960

The Flying Scot

The Stranger Left No Card

Director: Wendy Toye
Production Company: Meteor Films
Producer: George K. Arthur
Script: Sidney Carroll
Devised by: Wendy Toye
Photography: Jonah Jones
Editor: Jean Barker
Stranger's costume designed by: Alix Stone
Make-up: Dick Bonnor-Moris
Music Director: Muir Mathieson
Orchestrations: Doreen Carwithen
Orchestrated from a suite by: Hugo Alfvén
Cast:
Alan Badel (*The Stranger*)
Cameron Hall (*Mr Latham*)
Geoffrey Bayldon (*clerk*)
Eileen Way (*secretary*)
Jacquie Wallis
UK 1952
23 mins
Digital 4K (restoration)

The Flying Scot

Director: Compton Bennett
©/Production Company: Insignia Films
Executive Producer: Peter Rogers
Producer: Compton Bennett
Production Manager: 'Freddie' Pearson
Production Secretary: Pauline Chessell *
Assistant Director: René Dupont
2nd Assistant Director: Bob Jones *
Continuity: Rita Davison
Screenplay: Norman Hudis
Original story: Jan Read, Ralph Smart
Director of Photography: Peter Hennessy
Camera Operator: Paddy Ahearne
Focus Puller: Tommy Fletcher *
Clapper Loader: Michael Rutter *
Stills: Tom Belsham *
Editor: John Trumper
Assistant Editor: Alan Bell *
2nd Assistant Editor: John Simester *
Art Director: Jack Stevens
Draughtsman: Eric Saw *
Wardrobe: Vi Murray
Make-up: Eleanor Jones
Hairdresser: Eileen Warwick
Music Director: Stanley Black
Sound Recording: Len Page
Sound Camera Operator: George Rice *
Boom Operator: Don Roberts *
Sound Maintenance: Frank Sloggett *
Publicity Director: Philip Ridgeway *
Studio: Beaconsfield Studios
Cast:
Lee Patterson (*Ronnie*)
Kay Callard (*Jackie*)
Alan Gifford (*Phil*)
Margaret Withers (*middle-aged lady, former nurse*)
Mark Baker (*Gibbs*)
Jeremy Bodkin (*Charlie, the boy*)
Gerald Case (*guard*)
Margaret Gordon (*drinker's wife*)
John Lee (*young man*)
Kerry Jordan (*drunk*)
John Dearth (*father*)
Patsy Smart (*mother*) *
Geoffrey Bodkin (*neat boy*) *
UK 1957
71 mins
Digital 4K (restoration)
* Uncredited

An unusually unsympathetic pair of protagonists is only one of the distinguishing marks of this tense thriller set largely on an overnight train from Edinburgh to London. A tantalising opening sequence, involving 13 minutes without any dialogue is another. Throughout, there are signs of an expertise well above the routine 'B' movie level, and an attention to detail that one would appreciate at any level.

Perhaps modestly recalling the famous silent heist episode in *Rififi* (1955), Compton Bennett's trim thriller opens with an assured overhead shot of a large railway station where the London-bound train is soon to depart. A young man and woman settle into a compartment, pasting up 'Just married' and 'Reserved' signs on the windows and have obviously tipped the guard to ensure they are not disturbed. After changing their clothes and, in his case, removing his moustache, they are joined by the second man. The robbery is effected by dismantling the back of the compartment's seat to give access to the van where mailbags stacked with banknotes are secured; the bags are then thrown out of the train window where they are caught by a waiting accomplice at an appointed bridge. The young couple then leave the train separately and the film cuts to a bar at a resort in the south of France. The 13-minute sequence (one fifth of the film's running time) has been the acting out of a proposed mailbag-robbery, while the audience has been tricked into thinking it has been watching the real thing. The film's original narrative hook is then to see how far the actual robbery will follow the proleptic images of the sequence without dialogue.

The actual train journey is introduced by the same overhead shot. The cocky Ronnie (Lee Patterson) and blonde waitress Jackie (Kay Callard) talk to and tip the guard (Gerald Case), who promises to be very discreet, while Phil (Alan Gifford) is joined in his compartment by a middle-aged woman reading a journal called *Crime*. When the time comes, Phil joins the other two in their compartment and the robbery plans are set in motion. This central section of the film is executed with considerable tension, as the trio run into various obstacles such as the unyielding nature of the back of the compartment's seat, but especially because of the increasing pain Phil is suffering from a possibly perforated ulcer. The sheer arduousness of the enterprise is registered with persuasive realism. The understanding guard finally tumbles to what is going on and alerts the police who appear on the train before the robbers can disembark.

The matter of Phil's health is worked neatly into the plot via a discussion with the woman in his compartment (played with quiet realism by Margaret Withers): she has been a nurse, recognises and is solicitous about his ulcerous condition. This detail, with no actual bearing on the narrative, is typical of the individuating touches which Bennett and his scriptwriter, Norman Hudis (soon to be enmeshed in the *Carry On* series), have brought to bear on both character and plot. Among the other characters are a man with a drink problem heading to London for treatment, with a wife who is quietly observant but not a caricature of disapproval, and a small boy Charlie (Jeremy Bodkin), who is a nuisance but not outrageously so, and whose parents hold divergent views on corporal punishment. Both the drunk (Kerry Jordan) and Charlie add to the film's tensions but are also intrinsically endowed with just enough personal detail to catch our attention.

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Hunted

Sat 2 May 14:45; Mon 11 May 17:55 (+ intro by season curator Ehsan Khoshbakt)

The Fallen Idol

Mon 4 May 15:20; Mon 11 May 20:45

The Three Weird Sisters

Wed 6 May 20:40; Tue 12 May 18:10

Train of Events

Thu 7 May 20:40; Fri 15 May 18:15

Hell Is a City

Fri 8 May 18:10 (+ discussion with season curator Ehsan Khoshbakt, and James Bell and Josephine Botting, Curators, BFI National Archive);
Tue 12 May 20:45

The Happiest Days of Your Life

Sat 9 May 15:20; Wed 13 May 18:15 (+ intro by script supervisor Angela Allen)

Mandy

Sat 9 May 18:10; Tue 19 May 18:15 (+ intro by Josephine Botting, Curator, BFI National Archive)

The Yellow Balloon

Sun 10 May 12:40; Sat 23 May 18:10

Turn the Key Softly

Thu 14 May 20:50; Wed 27 May 18:15 (+ intro by professor Melanie Williams)

The Flying Scot

Sat 16 May 15:10; Thu 28 May 20:40

Never Let Go

Sun 17 May 12:20; Fri 29 May 18:20 (+ intro by season curator Ehsan Khoshbakt)

Time without Pity

Mon 25 May 12:30; Sat 30 May 15:00

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It is easy to exaggerate the merits of a 'B' movie that rises above our usual – and usually well-founded – expectations. It is nevertheless important to acknowledge that such merits are to be found. Here, the overall contours of the plot are more sturdily and freshly conceived than is often the case. Further, the film doesn't lose its nerve to try to involve us with Ronnie and Jackie as a couple, and Patterson and Callard, stalwarts of the British 'B' movie, respond with a crispness and opportunism that is as convincing as it is unendearing. With some subtlety, the film allows her a modicum of sympathy with Phil's condition, whereas Ronnie is only concerned with his capacity to do the job. When the contributions of the director and the convincing cast are duly acknowledged, much of the credit for this must go to Hudis's taut, twisting and ingenious screenplay. *The Daily Cinema* got pretty close to this film's appeal when it wrote: 'We are fascinated as we watch the unforeseen difficulties and unimagined contingencies arise.' This, indeed, is a film not just of suspense, but of real fascination.

Compton Bennett had a major hit with *The Seventh Veil* (1945) over a decade earlier. He subsequently made the gloomy but holding melodrama *Daybreak* (1948), had some modest success in Hollywood (*King Solomon's Mines*, 1950) and returned to Britain in the early 1950s, when he made some largely unremarkable 'A' features (e.g., *The Gift Horse*, 1952) before drifting into Bs. It is at least arguable that *The Flying Scot*, shot in just three weeks on a budget of £18,000, contains his most proficient work since *The Seventh Veil*: he seems to respond admirably to the challenges of relating a tense story in an unexpected way and to finding rewarding moments of humanly telling interaction.

Steve Chibnall and Brian McFarlane, *The British 'B' Film* (BFI/Palgrave, 2009)

The Stranger Left No Card

This was Wendy Toye's first venture into filmmaking as a director, made for £3,500 over a period of three weeks. It caused a minor sensation at the 1953 Cannes Film Festival, where it won the prize for the best short fiction film (indeed it was the only British film to win a prize there that year) and was greeted by no less than Jean Cocteau as a masterpiece. It almost failed to see the light of day in Britain, however, because producer George K. Arthur had failed to register a British company for the making of the film, and the distributors, British Lion, found that no one wanted to book a non-quota short. It was finally bought for £6,000 to accompany John Huston's *Moulin Rouge*.

Toye makes especially good use of the dramatic contrasts between the weirdly dressed stranger and his familiarly regal surroundings. But, like all good fantasy, *The Stranger* works best as a series of variations on the theme of Nothing Is What It Seems, be it the stranger's identity, his baffling conjuring tricks or, finally, his own belief that he has committed the perfect crime. It is only the children, of course, with their still fresh and untrammelled perceptions, who are able to grasp the truth, and who at the end begin to 'see through', as it were, the now undisguised, seemingly insignificant man on the train. For a first work, *The Stranger* is a remarkably assured achievement and a splendid companion-piece to the slightly better known *In the Picture*. Like that film, it amply demonstrates the value of the short film as a trying ground for new talent, a tradition that is now all but dead in contemporary British cinema.

Julian Petley, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, August 1986