



Station to Station: Kazuo Ishiguro's Top Ten Train Films

Rome Express

Rome Express

Directed by: Walter Forde
Presented by: Gaumont-British Picture Corporation
Distributed by: Gaumont Company
Assistant Direction: W.J. Dodds
Assistant Directors: Pat Morton, Rod Baxter, Frank Cohen
Scenario: Sidney Gilliat
Dialogue: Frank Vosper, Ralph Stock
Additional Dialogue: Sidney Gilliat
Original Story by: Clifford Grey
Director of Photography: Günther Krampf
Editor: Fredrick Y. Smith
Art Director: A. Mazzei
Costumes: Gordon Conway
Sound Supervision: George Gunn
Recorded by: British Acoustic Film

uncredited

Producer: Michael Balcon
Associate Producer: Phil C. Samuel
Unit Production Manager: Victor A. Peers
Continuity: Nellie Peacock, 'Clippie' Cutts, Joan Boswell
Dialogue: Clifford Grey
Back Projection Photography: Bernard Knowles
Camera Operator: S.R. Bonnett
2nd Camera: Stephen Dade
Camera Assistants: George Stevens, Hector Stewart, Gordon Dines
Floor Electrician: Charlie Hillyer
Trick Camera: Percival Strong
Special Effects: Jack Whitehead
Editor: Ian Dalrymple
Assistant Art Director: Albert Jullion
Floor Props: Bill Rolfe
Sound Recording: T.S. Lyndon-Haynes
Sound Crew: William Salter, Reg Margaritis, Nick Jay, Cyril Price
Sound Editor: Stan Jolly
Technical Consultant: M. Amblard
Recorded at: Shepherd's Bush Studios

Cast:

Muriel Aked (*spinster*)
Joan Barry (*Mrs Maxted*)
Donald Calthrop (*Poole*)
Finlay Currie (*Marville's publicist*)
Cedric Hardwicke (*Alastair McBain*)
Gordon Harker (*Tom Bishop*)
Harold Huth (*George Grant*)
Eliot Makeham (*Mills*)
Esther Ralston (*Asta Marville*)
Conrad Veidt (*Zurta*)
Frank Vosper (*Inspector Jolif*)
Hugh Williams (*Tony*)

uncredited

R.K. Neilson Baxter (*waiter*)

UK 1932
94 mins
35mm

The screening on Tue 21 Jul will include an introduction with writer Jonathan Coe, hosted by writer and season curator Kazuo Ishiguro

German star Conrad Veidt and ace Austrian cameraman Günther Krampf bring a near-expressionist Weimar sensibility to this riveting British thriller, set aboard a train filled with enjoyably stiff-upper-lipped stereotypes. Deplorably neglected today, this deserves to be remembered both as a classic and as a strangely serendipitous blending of two normally opposed cinematic styles.

Kazuo Ishiguro

The studios at Lime Grove in Shepherd's Bush had been closed down for a year from 1931, a year that had seen major changes for Gaumont-British. The company had finally gained outright control of Gainsborough Studios (having had shares in the company since 1927) and Michael Balcon had been promoted to production head of both companies, having previously been in control of Gainsborough alone. When the new studios, now one of the largest in Europe, opened in June 1932, the two studios between them had the capacity, according to historian Rachael Low, for producing between 30 and 40 films a year. With an expansion on this scale, and the inevitable expense incurred, Gaumont-British needed to produce a string of box-office winners. As a result, Balcon initiated a policy, contrary to his later beliefs while at Ealing, of producing films aimed at an international audience. *Rome Express*, being the first of these, had to make an impact on the international box office.

To direct this important film, Balcon chose Walter Forde, the ex-comedian turned director, who had earlier produced a number of box-office hits for Balcon at Gainsborough, such as the Edgar Wallace thriller *The Ringer* (1931) and the Jack Hulbert comedy *The Ghost Train* (1931). Balcon's chosen cast was suitably cosmopolitan for a film holding such international ambitions, with the German Conrad Veidt and the American Esther Ralston leading a roster of stalwart British players. The cinematography of Günther Krampf would hopefully give the film a European look, while the editing of Fredrick Y. Smith, an American editor brought in especially by Balcon, would help to give the film some American pace. The story itself, chosen by Forde, was also cosmopolitan, eschewing any British background, dealing as it did with a train journey across Europe.

Fortunately for Gaumont-British, the end result was rapturously received on both sides of the Atlantic, and appeared to herald a new glorious period in British filmmaking, as so many other films have done since. Here was a British-made film that was the equal of anything that Hollywood could send to these shores. C.A. Lejeune was particularly enthusiastic in *The Observer*: 'For the first time in the history of British films we have a production that can be judged by international standards, and can present its case in a form as efficient and persuasive as Hollywood's own'. The British-based reviewer for the American trade journal *Variety* was equally enthusiastic: 'It is one of the best pictures made in this country, and, all things considered, one of the best feature pictures ever made anywhere'. In America, the film went on to win the National Board of Review Award as one of the best films of its year.

One of the film's most notable aspects that received critical attention was the high technical quality on display. Although the opening scenes were shot at Waterloo Station, standing in for the Gare de Lyon in Paris, the majority of the film was studio shot. An exact replica of the Rome Express was constructed at

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Rome Express

Wed 1 Jul 20:50; Tue 21 Jul 18:15 (+ intro with writer Jonathan Coe, hosted by writer and season curator Kazuo Ishiguro)

Shanghai Express

Thu 2 Jul 20:40 (+ intro by writer and season curator Kazuo Ishiguro); Sat 11 Jul 12:00; Thu 16 Jul 18:30

Compartment No. 6

Hytti nro 6
Sat 4 Jul 20:40; Mon 20 Jul 18:20; Wed 29 Jul 20:45

The Lady Vanishes

Sun 5 Jul 12:00; Fri 17 Jul 20:30

Murder on the Orient Express

Mon 6 Jul 20:25; Sun 26 Jul 14:20 (+ intro with writer Sophie Hannah, hosted by writer and season curator Kazuo Ishiguro)

Night Train

Pociąg
Tue 7 Jul 18:10 (+ intro with Professor Philip Horne, hosted by Kazuo Ishiguro); Wed 15 Jul 17:50

Snowpiercer

Fri 10 Jul 20:30; Fri 24 Jul 18:10; Mon 27 Jul 20:30

Runaway Train

Sat 11 Jul 18:20; Sat 18 Jul 20:40

TransSiberian

Sat 18 Jul 12:15; Wed 22 Jul 18:20; Fri 31 Jul 20:40

Tickets

Thu 23 Jul 18:10; Thu 30 Jul 20:40

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Lime Grove, but a replica in itself was not sufficient for Forde. There had to be the constant illusion of movement. According to a later interview with the director, the relatively new process of back projection, having been mainly developed in America, was the chief ingredient here. 'That's when back projection came out, and I was so keen on the movement of the train and all that that I used back projection even better than the Americans were using it at that time. Even if there wasn't a scene through the window, I'd still have back projection going, because it would throw shadows on the wall'. The sets were also constructed so as to be able to be moved, thus promoting the illusion of constant motion yet further. To quote Forde again: 'There was always a tag hanging from a piece of luggage, there were always beads on the little table lamps, so that you got movement all the time'.

Such techniques all sound rather obvious today, but at the time the sets and the accompanying technical aspects were one of the most distinctive features of the film. 'Walter Forde's direction is masterly and imaginative, the station and train settings are some of the most impressive, yet at the same time naturalistic, that I have seen', proclaimed *Picturegoer*, while for Basil Wright in *Cinema Quarterly* 'the real heroes of *Rome Express* are the studio technicians'. Krampf's photography received its well-deserved attention among this praise: 'The lighting of *Rome Express* is brilliant, the photography first-rate' (*Observer*); 'The camerawork by Günther Krampf is superb throughout – the more so since 90% of the action takes place in the crowded confines of a railroad train. His compositions and lightings are excellent. He achieves a fine combination of visual mood and excellent personal lightings' (*American Cinematographer*). On the issue of personal lighting, Esther Ralston, in her autobiography, remembered the film from a very personal perspective indeed: 'It was a real joy filming *Rome Express* and, owing to the magnificent English photography, I never looked better'. Although the film was seen as a step up the ladder for British film production, there were a few notes of caution to be found among the superlatives. *The New York Times* commented that 'it has to be remembered that for one picture of this technical merit issuing from a British studio there are at least half a dozen of equal quality, if not even a little bit superior, turned out from Hollywood'. Similarly, in this country, *Picturegoer* warned that 'just because this is an outstanding picture, do not run away with the idea, which some publicists seem to be indicating, that Hollywood is finished, that way lies danger. A sustained effort must be maintained to keep the majority of our pictures to the level of *Rome Express*'.

The influence of *Rome Express* itself was to live on for many years to come, as indeed it still does. The train-set film was to prove perennially popular; one immediately thinks of Hitchcock's *The Lady Vanishes* (1938) in this context, as was the gathering together of a disparate group of characters in a closed setting who have to contend with a dangerous situation, such as Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939) and any number of interchangeably-plotted 'disaster' films. *Rome Express* is the antecedent of them all.

John Oliver