

## Vision of great Ealing power

Alexander Mackendrick

*The Guardian* (1959-2003); Dec 27, 1993;

ProQuest Historical Newspapers *The Guardian* and *The Observer* (1791-2003)

pg. A13

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## Obituary

### Alexander Mackendrick

**B**OCCHERINI, who died in 1805, never intended his minuet for a movie, but it is forever associated with Alec Guinness and Peter Sellers — not to mention Katie Johnson, the little old lady who rented them a room for spurious music practice in *The Ladykillers*. Not the finest work of director Alexander Mackendrick, who has died aged 81, it remains his best known. He fell into comedy by chance, had 18 years of directing and one can only regret that, unlike Charles Crichton, he never returned to lens and storyboard after his wayward *Don't Make Waves* (1967).

He was born in Boston, Massachusetts, which made him American and Scots. His parents had eloped there, and were followed by his father's parents. This was fortunate, as Mackendrick's father was killed by flu, his mother left to design dresses, and the child was brought back to Glasgow. An intelligent, well-read household was shot through with the conflicting claims of Calvinism and atheism. Such moral concerns lie behind his work, but more tangible would be his youthful talent as an artist.

From Glasgow School of Art, he moved to London where an aunt netted him a job at J Walter Thompson. Although he became pre-eminent in advertising during the 1930s, he scorned an industry he knew to contain more talent than many others and which would have an invaluable influence on his movie-making. No auteur theory could find a precursor of *Ealing* in a pivotal, animated Horlicks campaign which sprang from his original "night starvation" series. He had always

relished movies and, in that age when moguls had the confidence to make a burgeoning industry open to all-comers, he sold Associated British Pathé a script. Rewritten, this was *Midnight Menace* — lively, forgotten stuff featuring Danny Green (a heavy in *The Ladykillers*).

War landed him in the Ministry of Information, where a short on VD prompted Richard Crossman to dispatch him to Algiers for the Psychological Warfare Branch. Straddling English and American nationalities, he reached Italy and, on the strength of Horlicks and *Midnight Menace*, was put in charge of the country's requisitioned movie industry. He approved the making of Roberto Rossellini's *Rome Open City*, while he himself was obliged to film the shooting of a Fascist — rerunning the film was more shocking to him than the event itself.

This has vanished, and could hardly be shown as freely as *Whisky Galore!*. Having joined *Ealing* as scriptwriter and storyboard artist, he put himself forward as director of the movie to be made from Compton Mackenzie's novel. Location work, salvaged back in *Ealing*, could have made a movie in itself (not least the Scots' attempt to cash in further). Personalities clashed, the budget doubled, and all was nearly relegated to a second feature when, with Crichton's help, it was rescued, to meet with particular success in Europe and America.

Far from smooth, it surmounts any inaptitude and, for all the humour, Basil Radford's *Waggett* heralds a Mackendrick preoccupation with authority and the individual.

Although he worked on *Dance Hall* and *The Blue Lamp*, it was two years before an obscure play became *The Man in the White Suit*. The starkly-lit, deep-focus interiors are almost Wellesian, matching the drive of Alec Guinness's obsession. Both realistic and something more, the dual effect is of a piece with a perfectly-paced narrative which is



Alec Guinness and Danny Green in Mackendrick's classic black comedy, *The Ladykillers*

never reduced to a single issue but shows sympathy for most of the disputants. Guinness is too skilful to steal the show, and one of Mackendrick's best touches was his chilling use of Ernest Thesiger.

This merits repeated viewing, rather more so than its immediate successors, the story of a deaf girl in *Mandy* and the amiable *The Maggie*, that steam "puffer" in similar territory to *Whisky Galore!*.

The notion of five criminals and an innocent old lady came to script-writer William Rose in a dream. This quality, as so often in Mackendrick's work, haunts *The Ladykillers*. The house was built to odd dimensions — an effect lost on the screen. Mackendrick was always attentive to soundtracks, and relished crooks plotting while classical music plays. The colour is gaudy, the movie is too long for its plot (curiously, more apparent in the cut, American version) but the playing carries it. Notable is a bitter Herbert Lom. Guinness's hair and elegantly dishevelled clothing were an exaggerated Kenneth Tynan: peerless are his scenes with Katie Johnson (after a life of minor parts, she even offered to pay her own insurance to get this plum).

But with the end of the Ealing era, Hollywood was worth a try. The independent production company Hecht-Hill-Lancaster secured him, and a masterpiece. *Sweet Smell of Success* did not live up to its name commercially but the stature of these 10 sweaty hours in New York continues to grow. Tony Curtis's performance as a hustling press-agent is matched by Burt Lancaster, a corrupt columnist near-perversely protective of his sister (Susan Harrison). Ernest Lehman's novella is transformed by Clifford Odets, James Wong Howe's cinematography makes night-time Broadway credibly mythical: the two-hour traffic of this movie, revitalising such clichés as jazz and cigarette smoke, has the force of classical tragedy. The pace never lets up, encapsulated in Lancaster's famous order, "match me, Sidney". The ending finds Lancaster, Curtis and Harrison warring in an apartment, but it could almost be Kane's *Xanadu*.

Mackendrick never matched this and cherished projects came to nothing, yet his three other films cannot be dismissed. ("Hidden" work includes scenes — Olivier's — in *The Devil's Disciple* and a return to Horlicks commercials.) Sammy Going

*South and A High Wind* in Jamaica continue Mandy's astute direction of children. *Sammy* lacks drama and *High Wind* was cut by the studio, but the latter still has more than the curiosity value of a young Martin Amis and is closer to childhood complexities than ever appear in those real-life tales from Disney.

His controlling spirit was less to the fore in *Don't Make Waves*. Even with Tony Curtis and Sharon Tate, West Coast wackiness defies filming. Like *The Byrds'* title-song, it is a pleasant jangle which could have been more. That stock encounter of romantic comedy, an automobile smash, is as uninvolved as the technically-adept climax of a house tottering on a cliff.

Whatever the faults of a studio system, it allows directors to work continually. Mackendrick realised that he was better behind the camera than in raising the cash to do so. His opting out to teach was never bitter. He relished it and, despite asthma, kept up the good humour which informs his blackest work.

Christopher Hawtree

Alexander Mackendrick, born September 8, 1912; died December 23, 1993.