



Ealing's classic 'The Ladykillers' has been re-set in Mississippi by the Coen brothers to broad comic effect, as J. Todd Anderson's storyboards show here. But there's more of a political edge to Alexander Mackendrick's original, argues Philip Kemp

Satire with tweezers



Alexander Mackendrick's *The Ladykillers* (1955) marked the end of an era in more ways than one. It wasn't only the last of the great Ealing comedies, but was the last film to be released by Ealing before the studios were sold to the BBC and Michael Balcon led his depleted team away to live out a sad, ghostly afterlife in a corner of the MGM lot at Borehamwood. Like so many worthwhile films, *The Ladykillers* is at least partly about the circumstances of its own making. The rickety, dilapidated little house in St Pancras with its air of faded gentility can be seen as standing as much for Ealing – that most English of studios – as for England, two once-proud institutions in a state of what then appeared to be (and in Ealing's case, actually was) terminal decline.

Both Mackendrick and his screenwriter William Rose were semi-outsiders, able to adopt a detached view of the country they lived in. Mackendrick was born in the US and brought up in Scotland; Rose was a native of Missouri who had moved to Britain in his early twenties. The two shared a common attitude to England: a mixture of affection and exasperation, of amusement and infuriation at the seemingly incurable national attachment to picturesque inefficiency. In *Genevieve* (1953), also scripted by Rose, a young couple stuck in a nightmare Brighton hotel explode with fury on discovering that hot water is only available, at prior request, for some 30 minutes a day. The manageress (Joyce



New gangs for old: Ealing's thieves, Peter Sellers, Herbert Lom, Cecil Parker, Alec Guinness and Danny Green, opposite left to right, are echoed by the Coens' Marlon Wayans, Tzi Ma, Tom Hanks, Ryan Hurst and J.K. Simmons, above left to right, with Hanks, right, a smooth-talking southern gent

Grenfell) is astounded at their reaction. "Nobody's ever complained before," she gasps, while a little old lady (Eddie Martin, later to play one of Mrs Wilberforce's teatime guests in *The Ladykillers*) totters up to enquire: "Are they Americans?"

As Mackendrick acknowledged years later, *The Ladykillers* is "obviously a parody of Britain in its subsidence. That we were all aware of at a certain level. But it was never openly discussed, and it would have been fatal to discuss it." All the film's imagery – its lovingly detailed paraphernalia of lopsided cottages (situated in a dead-end street), steam trains, chintzy parlours and little old ladies in pastel dresses and floral hats – conjures up a post-imperial Britain hopelessly resistant to change, inextricably mired in the faded detritus of the Victorian era. (The link is made explicit in a key speech from Katie Johnson's Mrs Wilberforce, recalling her twenty-

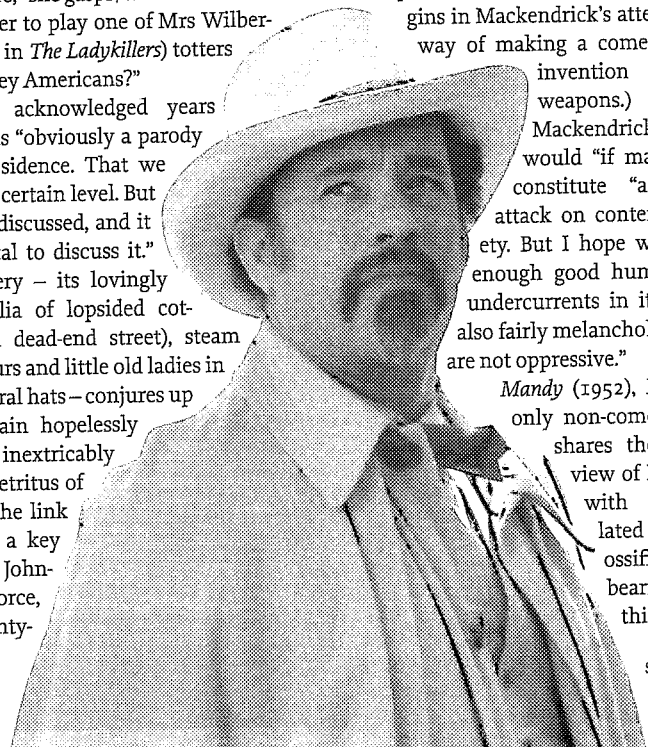
first birthday party, "When someone came in and said the old Queen had passed away.") But this super-annuated Britain embodied by Mrs W, outwardly enfeebled and moribund, proves unexpectedly tenacious. The speech by Alec Guinness' Professor Marcus, as he descends into babbling lunacy, seems to carry a hint of the film-makers' own delighted, appalled reaction to the indestructible figure they'd conjured up. "We'll never be able to kill her, Louis. She'll always be with us, for ever and ever and ever, and there's nothing we can do about it."

Mackendrick was always the most politically aware of the Ealing directors, and in the films he made there it's possible to trace the growing disillusionment, from a non-conformist left-wing viewpoint, of someone who voted for change in the crucial general election of 1945 hoping to see a new social dispensation, only to watch all the old class-ridden, tradition-encrusted barriers against change come creaking back into place. *Whisky Galore!* (1949), the most light-hearted of his films, merely pokes fun at the dour bureaucratic excesses of the post-war Labour government with its regime of austerity and ration-books. But in his second feature *The Man in the White Suit* (released in 1951, the year in which Labour was ousted from power by Churchill's Tories) Mackendrick created Ealing's only true political satire.

Satire, Mackendrick once observed, is "the snarl behind the grin". Most other Ealing films (1949's *Kind Hearts and Coronets* excepted) are too essentially good-natured to snarl; but there's real anger underpinning the comedy of *The Man in the White Suit*. It depicts a world where virtually everyone operates within rigid, predetermined patterns of thought; where bosses and workers have taken up entrenched positions of mutual suspicion and contempt; where the supposedly progressive cadres of the left reveal themselves, when it comes to it, as no less hostile to change than the moneyed interests of the right. The forces of enlightened liberalism, represented by mill-owner Alan Birnley (and played by Cecil Parker, with Mackendrick's encouragement, as a sly portrait of Ealing studio boss Michael Balcon), are exposed as bumbling and ineffectual, and disinterested science (represented by Guinness' naïve young chemist) as recklessly indifferent to the consequences of its work. (The film had its ori-

gins in Mackendrick's attempt to find a way of making a comedy about the invention of nuclear weapons.) All this, as Mackendrick remarked, would "if made seriously" constitute "a horrendous attack on contemporary society. But I hope we did it with enough good humour that the undercurrents in it – which are also fairly melancholy, if you like – are not oppressive."

Mandy (1952), Mackendrick's only non-comedy at Ealing, shares the same bleak view of British society, with the accumulated weight of ossified convention bearing down, in this case, on a ▶



Storyboard artist

J. Todd Anderson

Stealing the scene

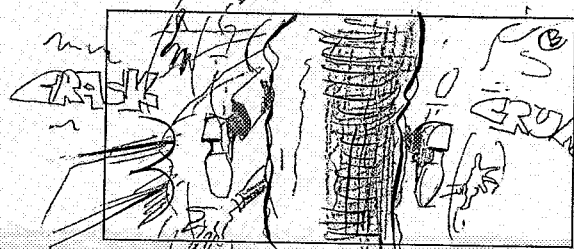
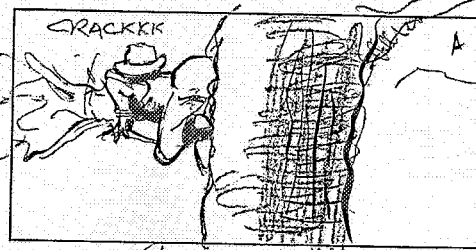
Joel and Ethan Coen's version of *The Ladykillers* gives the Ealing comedy a Mississippian twist, changing the nice little English lady of Mackendrick's film into a formidable black woman and Alec Guinness' gang of Cockney n're-do-wells into Tom Hanks' gallery of fools. In the storyboards featured here we see Hanks trying to retrieve Mrs Munson's cat, his 'muscle' Lump proving his lack of skill on the football field, Hanks shutting the cellar door on an explosion and his henchman the General hiding a cigarette in his mouth before trying to strangle Mrs Munson.

Storyboard artist J. Todd Anderson has worked on all the Coens' pictures since *Raising Arizona* (1987). "Their screenplays are not as scripted as they used to be," he says, "but I learned a long time ago just to wait for them to fill in the blanks." Once the script is complete, Joel and Ethan collaborate with Anderson in translating the pages into shot-by-shot storyboards, which mark "the first time this movie is seen, the first time it goes from being just an intellectual image in your mind." With the boards completed weeks before the shoot, Anderson's work is over, though the finished picture seldom differs substantially from his account. *Ben Walters*
'The Ladykillers' opens on 25 June and is reviewed on page 54



Scene 11

These are standard coverage shots. If you look at set-ups 8 (above) and 9 (top right) they pretty much match what we're after and you can see the effect of the shot - you know he's going out there and, surprise, surprise, what do you think is going to happen? Joel and Ethan were specific in set-up 10 (centre and bottom right) that they didn't want to see his face at all, just his feet. I throw in the sound effects and if they don't like them they get rid of them, but it helps to get the idea across. You've got to cut out of that shot and the big loud "crunch" will probably be on the cut. I don't hang around the set much but director of photography Roger Deakins is usually close to me when we're drawing and it helps tighten what we're doing.



◀ young deaf girl. Mandy's physical handicap shows up the mental handicaps of the adults who surround her; she can't hear, but they can't or rather won't see, and her mother has to fight to rescue the girl from the rigid family structure that oppresses them both. In *The "Maggie"* (1954) the underlying tensions in the story all but sink the comedy, with the crew of an ancient puffer-boat, supposed representatives of freedom and independence, shown up as mercenary, irresponsible, incompetent and - again - hopelessly mired in a stagnant way of life.

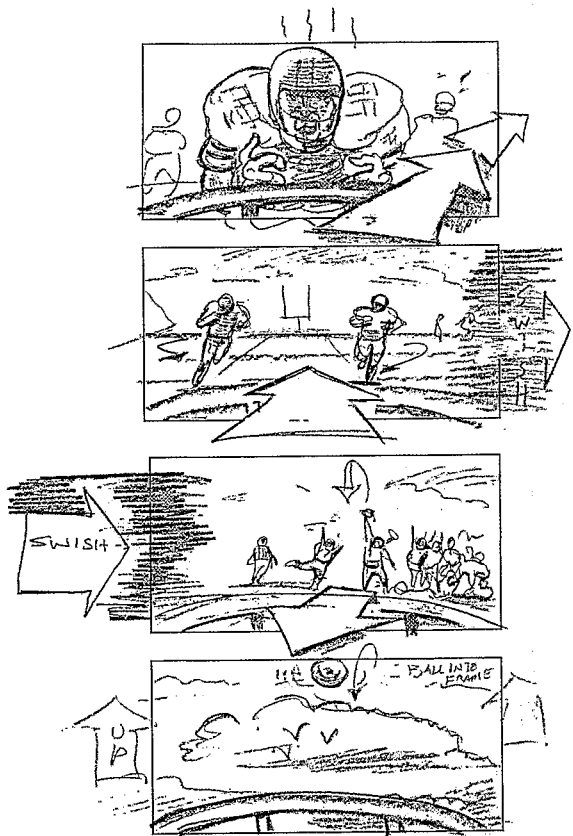
So it's easy enough to see *The Ladykillers* as Mackendrick's sardonic, shrugging farewell to 1950s Ealing and 1950s England - having completed it, he left for Hollywood and the *noir* acridities of *Sweet Smell of Success* (1957). Some commentators, indeed, have floated it as a very specific political parable. In his definitive study *Ealing Studios* Charles Barr suggests an ingenious (if partly tongue-in-cheek) reading: "The gang are the postwar Labour government. Taking over 'the House' they gratify the Conservative incumbent by their civilised behaviour (that nice music) and decide to use at least the façade of respectability for their radical programme of redis-

tributing wealth... Their success is undermined by two factors, interacting: their own internecine quarrels, and the startling, paralysing charisma of the 'natural' governing class, which effortlessly takes over from them again in time to exploit their gains (like the Conservatives taking over power in 1951, just as the austerity years come to an end). The gang are a social mix, like Labour's: a mix of academic (Alec Guinness), ex-officer (Cecil Parker), manual worker (Danny Green), naïve youth (Peter Sellers) and hard-liner (Herbert Lom)."



Barr's reading, elegant and diverting though it is, doesn't quite mesh with the imagery of the film, since here the gang, no less than Mrs Wilberforce, seem essentially figures from the past. Professor Marcus, with his mincing, swooping gestures and vampiric teeth, appears a 19th-century construct by Bram Stoker out of Wilkie Collins; his confederates hail from the never-never London underworld of the Pabst/Brecht *The Threepenny Opera*. The whole gang, in fact, look remarkably like something that Mrs Wilberforce, dozing off in her cluttered front parlour with her knick-knacks and parrots, might have conjured in a dream, drawing on confused memories of penny-dreadfuls and gaslit melodramas. Which would be appropriate enough, since *The Ladykillers* had its origins in a dream: William Rose always maintained that he had dreamed the story one night, "whole and complete".

The story's provenance delighted Mackendrick. "The fact that it was something Bill had quite literally dreamed up really entranced me. Dreams are a wonderful source of imagery for movies." Even better, it allowed him to cut loose from Ealing's cherished tradition of documentary-based realism and



Scene 21

I really liked this scene because I learned how to draw using football. When I was four or five years old it seemed to have the right movement for me: they run around and stop for a while, then run around and get clobbered. It challenges

your eye to keep ahead. I have friends who are production illustrators but I've never had the patience for that. For me it's 'What's going to happen next? How is that shot going to get into this shot? Where does the pie come into the face?'

Scene 59

I don't know how I developed the habit of drawing outside the frame. Barry Sonnenfeld didn't like it when I did it on the 'Addams Family' movies and 'Men in Black', which

meant I had to stop. But it slows me down to try to keep it in the frame, it's like looking at it through a window. So in 59/2 (below) it's out of the frame. I just kept drawing the feet.



STORYBOARD BY TODD ANDERSON © COPYRIGHT 2003



Cash ain't nuthin' but trash: Hanks and his gang see their swag scattered by a tunnel-collapsing explosion, opposite; Guinness' gang circle their too-righteous landlady Katie Johnson, left

treat the story as a fable, full of cartoon characters. "The characters are all caricatures, fable figures; none of them is real for a moment. Indeed, one of the stylistic problems is that it's very dangerous when you let a single note of reality creep into something that's as inflated, in terms of near-fantasy, as this. You have to keep within the enclosed, fabulous world."

There's certainly a strong cartoon element to *The Ladykillers*, where each of the characters arrives ready-labelled in the visual equivalent of capital letters: The Little Old Lady, The Mad Professor, The Genteel Con-Man, The Dumb Bruiser and so on. Even the violence, which shocked many contemporary critics, has a comic-strip quality about it. People are pushed off buildings, or banged over the head, and die instantly, with no blood or mangled limbs to disturb the joke. And as in the cartoon world, certain characters are set up to be immune to harm. No matter what the forces ranged against her, Mrs Wilberforce is as invulnerable as the Road Runner.

Mackendrick liked to describe himself as "a political cartoonist manqué". A gifted artist, trained at Glasgow School of Art, with an exceptional ▶



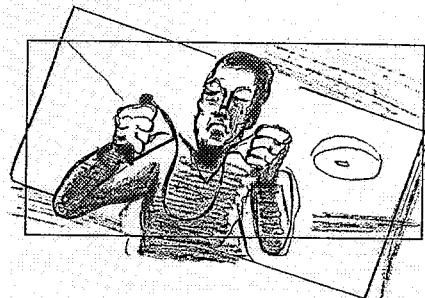
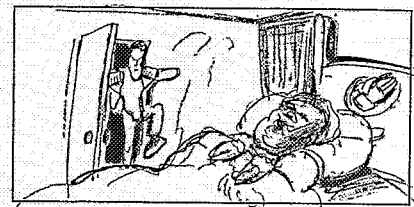
Scene 132

The roles haven't been cast when I'm drawing so usually I just make up the characters. There was an Asian man I knew with the most handsome, lean face and I was looking for an excuse to draw him, though the guy they cast looks nothing like that. I asked Joel and Ethan, "Will the smoke come out of his ears?" And they said,

"Well, if it does you'll barely see it." So we didn't really have to put a B-frame on - I just thought it would be funny. That's about as far as it goes with me using any creative licence. On other movies you'd never catch me doing extra drawings but every time they described this scene it just made me laugh.

Scene 133

This scene uses Dutch tilts, when the camera has an exaggerated 20 or 30 degree tilt, from a low angle. See the light up there in the corner in set-up 4 (right, second from top)? I throw in things like that to help people orient themselves, so you can more easily detect a low or high angle. And I think I asked where the bed would be, though that's about as far as I get with production design. With set-up 7 (bottom right) we start with a loose close-up and then go into a choker close-up. It was a pretty fast move in and the B-frame is tightened up around him. A drawing like that is a lot of fun because they usually act it out. "He's going like this!" You'll notice I put the cigarette in his throat - I do get to have a little fun.



◀ talent for lightning sketches, he did in fact work as a political cartoonist for a while, drawing propaganda pieces to undermine German military morale during his war service in Italy. Then just after the war he collaborated briefly with Halas-Batchelor on an abortive scheme to distribute a weekly animated political cartoon. This frustrated talent was redirected into his films, most obviously into *The Man in the White Suit* and more obliquely into *The Ladykillers*. In the case of the latter, the obliqueness was probably a deliberate tactic since he suspected a more direct approach would run him into trouble. Michael Balcon had been alarmed by *White Suit's* cutting edge and Mackendrick related how, while *The Ladykillers* was in preparation, "Mick had me into his office and said, 'I want to tell you that I've given a promise on your behalf that there's no satire in this one.'"

The promise had almost certainly been made to John Davis, the much feared MD of the Rank Organisation, which distributed all Ealing's films. Casting his eye over Rose's script, Davis had detected elements that disturbed him. "It is, of course," he wrote to Balcon, "a very satirical document. I suppose the

success or failure of filming this subject will depend upon how it is played, as broad comedy or strong satire—as the latter I do not think it would be a great success." (Since Davis' personal ideal of broad comedy was the films of Norman Wisdom, it's probably as well that his views, for once, didn't prevail.) Fastidiously holding the word 'comedy' between inverted commas as if with tweezers, Davis continued: "I would also assume that you will ensure that the ending of the 'comedy' is materially altered, because at the present time it shows Scotland Yard and its officials in a very bad light." Balcon replied soothingly that "our relations with Scotland Yard as a result of *The Blue Lamp* are quite satisfactory and... they will have no objection to our having good-humoured fun at their expense."

The main satirical thrust of *The Ladykillers*, though, seems to have escaped Davis' notice: there's no hint in his correspondence with Balcon that he saw the film as mocking not just the forces of law and order but the country as a whole. Nor did the critics of the period. Opinions differed widely over whether the film's shift into black comedy and multiple murder worked: for some reviewers like Paul

Dehn in the *News Chronicle*, "the mood falters and... the comedy has collapsed like a house of cards"; Virginia Graham in the *Spectator* found the climax "in thoroughly bad taste". In *Sight & Sound*, though, Penelope Houston hailed "a comic idea of splendid, savage absurdity", reckoning the film "the most consistently ruthless comic fantasy produced by a British studio since *Kind Hearts and Coronets*"; Dilys Powell in the *Sunday Times* even wished for "a shade more of the macabre; it would be a better film if it were blacker."

But no reviewer seemed to sense the film's allegorical level, or to see it as what it now inescapably appears: an ironic portrait of a country slipping into post-imperial desuetude, clinging to outworn conventions and dreaming of past glories. Perhaps it needed the distancing effect of time for Mackendrick's political subtext to show through as clearly as it does now, near on 50 years later. Yet it's this satirical element - still not without relevance in Britain of the 21st century - and the dark tinge of the comedy that have kept *The Ladykillers* fresh when so many of its Ealing stablemates have faded into a faintly musty period charm.

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