Journal of American Studies of Turkey
2 (1995): 21-26.

Hollywood UK: UK's Hollywood

Laurence Raw

Laurence.Raw@bc-ankara.sprint.com

This paper examines first what 'Hollywood UK' meant--particularly during the first four decades of this century. It looks at the British community of actors, the kinds of roles they played in Hollywood, both on and off screen, and how they conformed to traditional stereotypes of the British, to satisfy the demands of both the studios and the film publicity magazines. The paper subsequently examines how America (and the Americans) have been represented in British films. It is worthwhile saying at the outset that more attention is paid to the image of Britain in American films than vice versa--chiefly because there are far more films to choose from, but also because many films which are described as 'British' in reference-books have been made by major American studios in Britain with American money. Thus it is often very difficult to identify an authentically 'British' film.

In the 1920s, 30s and 40s, during the "Golden Age" of Hollywood (i.e., the pre-television period), the four major studios--Metro-Goldwyn Mayer, Twentieth-Century Fox, Universal, Paramount and Columbia--churned out film after film, using actors and directors who were for the most part under contract to each individual studio. This was a time when Hollywood was perceived as the ultimate dream factory, providing entertainment which would enable audiences to forget their troubles in the cinema for a few hours. (The 1930s constituted the period of the Great Depression in America and Europe.) Studio publicity departments reinforced this notion of escapism by feeding a stream of 'happy family' stories to newspapers and magazines, while doing their best to suppress any possibilities of scandal. Living in Hollywood at that time was like living in a dream-world, in which everyone acted a part, whether they were a major star or the most insignificant bit-part actor.

One of the first British actors to become involved in the Hollywood dream-world was Charlie Chaplin. Originally from a humble middle-class family in London, he made his reputation as a comedian with Fred Karno's touring theatrical company, before joining Mack Sennett's Keystone Company to make silent films in 1913.

Within four years he was signing a million-dollar-a-year contract with First National Pictures, to become the richest and most independent star in Hollywood. A year later he formed United Artists, in collaboration with the director D.W. Griffith and two actors, Douglas Fairbanks Sr. and Mary Pickford. Sexually attractive and athletic, a brilliant mimic and generous host, Chaplin became part of a Hollywood set whose pretensions to cultural sophistication matched his own, though outsiders found his acting absurd. The Hungarian actress Pola Negri, briefly his fiancée, quickly penetrated the façade when she arrived in America. She wrote:

One evening when he [Chaplin] came to pick me up for a party, I entered the living room to find him buried in a dictionary. I asked him what he was looking up and he replied: "Nothing in particular, I make it a practice to learn a few new words every day." After dinner, I was startled to observe him turning the conversation to a topic that permitted him to use the words I had heard him committing to memory. I decided to have a little fun by jumping in with some of the words before he could get to them ... On the way home he was absolutely furious with me for having stolen the scene. He shouted: "How dare you use terms you don't understand!" I laughed and responded: "How dare you be such a fraud!" (56)

For Chaplin, survival in Hollywood meant suppressing his English background and creating a new image for himself, in keeping with its dreamlike atmosphere.

Another actor who became a Hollywood star was Ronald Colman, who successfully made the transition from silent films to talkies, and carved out a reputation for himself as a true 'Son of Empire'--a calm, restrained, honourable gentleman, with an impeccable sense of fair play. As one of the few actors under personal contract to the mogul Sam Goldwyn (of Metro-Goldwyn Mayer fame), Colman maintained a curious position, neither studio star nor free agent, which was emphasized by his private life. An early marriage to actress Thelma Raye broke up violently in Italy while on location for his first big American film*The White Sister*; and for years after Colman remained Hollywood's most eligible bachelor, heterosexual but preferring, in a long-standing British tradition, to share his life with a few male intimates. The fan magazines struggled to find glamour in his apparently mundane existence. "He lives quietly and unostentatiously,"*Motion Picture* observed in November 1935:

For years he had a little tucked-away house at the upper end of Vine Street. Recently he has moved to Beverly Hills ... There his friends ... come to dinner, usually on Friday evenings. Sometimes they run a picture, sometimes they play poker, though never for high stakes ... (qtd. in Baxter 141)

Only the British community saw Colman's lifestyle for the pose it was, a façade demanded by his standing and popularity in roles such as that of Bulldog Drummond, detective and gentleman adventurer. Equally transparent was Colman's studied dislike of the movie business which had made his fortune as an actor. His friend Cedric Hardwicke, another actor, recalled that Colman was given to exclaim at least once a week, "'God, how I love the theatre ... Oh, for the good old days'" (66). However, Colman later confessed to his agent, with rare candour for any star:

"Before God, I'm probably worth 35 dollars a week. Before the motion picture industry I was worth anything you can get" (qtd. in Baxter 142).

Success, for Colman, unlike for Chaplin, meant playing the role required of him by the Hollywood dream-factory--the professional Englishman--both on and off the screen. The same was true for many other actors living in the British community in Hollywood. Whenever a British actor was hired by the major studios, it was expected that he or she should fit the stereotypes created for them. The experience of Colman's friend Hardwicke is a case in point. Having been met at the station by fellow émigré Nigel Bruce, who took him out for a quiet dinner, Sir Cedric Hardwicke was astonished to read the next day in the press that a chauffeur had picked up "the English nobleman" and driven him in state to his hotel (Hardwicke 77). Another British actor in Hollywood who had to adopt the stance expected of him was Sir C. Aubrey Smith., He actually came from one of the finest British aristocratic families and was public-school-and-Cambridge-educated. Going on the stage in 1892, he preceded almost every other British émigré to Hollywood. He made his first film in 1915 and continued working until his death in 1948 at the age of eighty-five, playing everything from a jungle trader in *Tarzan of the Apes* to various bishops, admirals and lords.

The images of Britain that appeared in many Hollywood films were equally stereotypical. The British were heroic, but in a calm, unemotional kind of way--especially when they were defending the Empire in films such as *Clive of India* (1934) and *Gunga Din* (1939). Any film with a London setting, such as *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1939), or *Waterloo Bridge* (1941), was likely to show the city shrouded in fog, with carriages clattering over cobbled streets, and ancient mansions towering over the cottages of the poor. Metro-Goldwyn Mayer (MGM) was perhaps the most Anglophile of the major studios; in films such as *Mrs. Miniver* (1942)--about a British family coping with the effects of German bombing--the Miniver house is a pretty timber-framed cottage, with a lush garden and a river at the end of it.*The White Cliffs of Dover* (1944) has the American central character (Irene Dunne) marrying an English aristocrat (Alan Marshall), which gives her the chance to move in country house society (represented by C. Aubrey Smith), where sheep graze in all the country exteriors. MGM was also responsible for many adaptations of novels such as, e.g.,*The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1945), in which the eponymous central character (Hurd Hatfield) drinks in a grimy London dockside den, before returning through misty streets, and climbing up rickety stairs to his small apartment. Another film,*Lassie Come Home* (1945), has the boy hero (Roddy McDowall) losing his dog but never shedding a tear, obviously to accommodate the wartime notion of the British as a titanically stoic race.

Such stereotypes proved to be a recipe for guaranteed success at the box-office.*Mrs. Miniver* made 5.5 million dollars at the box office. Bosley Crowther of the *New York Times* described it as "the finest film yet made about the present war, and a most exalting tribute to the British, who have taken it so gallantly"; while

Winston Churchill said in Parliament that the film had done more for Britain than a flotilla of destroyers (qtd. in Shipman 578-579). Films like this were not meant to be a reflection of real life; aimed at boosting the morale of the film-going public, they created fantasy-worlds, full of instantly recognizable images (as might be seen in travel brochures or popular fiction), in which good invariably triumphed over evil.

Some actors exploited the stereotypes to obtain fame in Hollywood. A poor young English actor fantasized freely in the press about a recently-collapsed horse-racing plan in which he had been involved and earned the headline "British Sportsman Arrives. Plans to buy over 100 head of Polo Ponies"--though it was some time before David Niven achieved fame either as sportsman or actor (Niven 221).

The Hollywood of the 1990s is a very different place from what it was half a century earlier. The major studios still exist, but they are now subsidiaries of very much larger conglomerates; the studio system, where one picture after another rolled off the production line, has long gone; film stars are no longer under long-term contract to major studios. Nonetheless, the stereotypes of Britain and the British still survive, even if the themes may be treated differently. Take the 1991 film *Three Men and a Little Lady*, in which the "Little Lady" in question (an 11-year old American girl) is taken to an English country house by her mother, who wants to marry the country gentleman who owns it (Christopher Cazenove). The mother marvels at the architecture of the house, and the apparently endless vistas of green fields surrounding it. However, this film is no remake of *The White Cliffs of Dover*: both the girl and her mother are 'rescued' from their fate by a trio of American stars--Steve Guttenberg, Tom Selleck and Ted Danson--and Selleck eventually marries the mother.

Moreover, such stereotyping casts British actors in roles connected in the minds of Hollywood filmmakers as having a British character. To illustrate, the British actor Michael Gough has been made in recent years to play butlers--calm, unflappable, dependable in *Batman* (1990), and *Batman Returns* (1991); or aristocrats, as in Martin Scorcese's costume drama *The Age of Innocence* (1993). Most recently, the actor Hugh Grant, whose portrayal of a bachelor--with an impeccable sense of fair play, who believes himself to be unlucky in love (until the final scene, that is, when he marries the American heroine)--in the British-made *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994), has enjoyed considerable success, has made his Hollywood début, playing yet another bachelor.

Nothing demonstrates better than Grant's career, which benefited greatly from the recent publicity concerning his private life, the change that the once scandal-fearing Hollywood has undergone in the 1990s. But this also shows that one feature of the British actor's role remains the same: his life off screen is just as important as his acting on screen.

Identifying stereotypes of America in British films is a more difficult task for several reasons. American stereotypes have been used in films from many different countries, including Britain: the cowboy in the Italian-made 'spaghetti westerns' (often played by Clint Eastwood) is but one example. The British version of this can be seen in *The Sheriff of Fractured Jaw* (1959), in which the sheriff (Kenneth More) is both literally and figuratively acted off the screen by the well-endowed American actress Jayne Mansfield. Or what about the screen partnership of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, which danced across the screen in several films made by the American studio RKO in the 1930s, and which spawned a variety of imitators including the British couple Anna Neagle and Michael Wilding in films such as *Spring in Park Lane* (1948) and *Maytime in Mayfair* (1949), and the Italians Marcello Mastrioanni and Giuletta Masina, in *Ginger and Fred* (1978)?

Another problem in identifying American stereotypes in British films lies in the fact that many Hollywood films have been made in Britain, especially during those periods when the dollar has been strong against the pound. Most of the major studios had British bases during the 1940s and 1950s: 20th Century-Fox made films such as *The Mudlark* (1950) and *No Highway* (1951);*Disney Treasure Island* (1950) and*Rob Roy* (1953); MGM *Ivanhoe* (1953); and Warner Brothers *The Hasty Heart* (1949). In the next decade, there appeared such co-productions as *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962),*Tom Jones* (1963) and*Dr. Zhivago* (1965). A decade later, Hollywood was still making major blockbusters in Britain like *Star Wars* (1977) and *Superman* (1979). Most recently, films such as *Frankenstein* (1994) and *Rob Roy*(1995) with Val Kilmer, have been made by American studios in Britain.

One of the chief strategies employed by British studios in order to sell their films abroad has been to import American stars. This was especially true in the three decades immediately following the end of World War II, when film production in Britain was much greater than it is today. Major stars were imported, such as Fredric March for *Christopher Columbus* (1949), Gregory Peck for *The Million Pound Note* (1953), and Judy Garland for *I Could Go On Singing* (1963). If an actor was unable to find work with the major Hollywood studios, he or she could always come to work in Britain. Errol Flynn's Hollywood career reached its peak in the late 1930s, when he starred in films such as *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938) and *Gentleman Jim* (1942); by the 1950s, he was an alcoholic and a drug-addict. His career received a major boost, however, when he was invited by the British producer Herbert Wilcox to star in two films opposite Wilcox's wife Anna Neagle,*Lilacs in the Spring* (1954) and*King's Rhapsody* (1955). Flynn's performance in the first of these films was described by one critic as totally lacking in "Hollywood professionalism ... The result is a film for connoisseurs, a camp classic" (Shipman 795). Following these two films, Flynn returned to America, where he died in 1958.

Then, there were the lesser-known American actors, who worked regularly in Britain as the stars of endless thrillers and murder mysteries: Bonar Colleano, Richard Basehart, Forrest Tucker. None were big stars, so they could not have the pick of the parts; they were far more likely to be cast as gangsters, big business people or financiers in British films copied from American models. Such films were mainly intended for the domestic market, as supports for major American films; as with many serials produced for television in the 1990s, they aimed to obtain the maximum return for minimum financial and artistic expenditure.

In terms of film comedy, it is often said that Britain and America are two countries divided by the same language. Apart from notable exceptions such as Chaplin and Peter Sellers, few British comedians have established a reputation in Hollywood. The same is true in the television age: the only comedian who really achieved success in America was Benny Hill (whose shows, despite their popularity abroad, were eventually taken off British television--a middle-aged man chasing young women in swimsuits was considered inappropriate for the 1990s). On the other hand, several American comedians have proved successful in Britain: Eddie Murphy, Robin Williams, Jim Carrey. To take their 'revenge' on what they perceive as an over-excessive Americanization of Britain, several filmmakers have created comedies based around a familiar scenario, of the worldly American being educated in the skills of life by the simple, yet infinitely resourceful Briton. An example of this occurs in the 1962 film *The Iron Maiden*, where a rich American (Alan Hale Jr.) discovers the pleasures of sleeping in the open air and eating breakfast cooked on an ancient steam traction engine, while his wife wonders why he is not at home preparing to meet an English lord. The stereotype resurfaces again in *Local Hero* (1983), in which an oil-rich millionaire (Burt Lancaster) gives up his plans to build an oil refinery on a remote Scottish island, after having suffered from the tricks played upon him by the locals. Towards the end of the film, he arrives on the island in a helicopter, steps out, takes in a few lungfuls of air, and exclaims to one of the residents that he could certainly get used to living here; that the air is pure and healthy, and that it should stay like that for the foreseeable future. The might of industrialized America has been held in check by the jolly burghers of a Scottish island.

In looking at how the two countries, Britain and America, have represented one another in their films, it is clear that there is a considerable imbalance of material. The Hollywood version of Britishness has not only impinged itself on audiences all over the world, but it has also affected the ways in which the British themselves have made their films. For example, Jeremy Irons played reserved, tight-lipped heroes in*The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1981), and the television serial *Brideshead Revisited* (1982)--since then his career has never looked back.*A Fish Called Wanda* (1988), derived much if its success from the conflict between the American actress Jamie Lee Curtis and the tight-lipped, reserved Englishman John Cleese (whose character in the film was called Archie Leach, the real name of the British actor Cary Grant). The reason why such stereotypes survive is obvious:

to sell a British film abroad, particularly in America, producers have had to conform to prevailing myths about their country. In contrast, it is difficult to find any authentically 'British' representations of Hollywood in British films, simply because Hollywood has had such an influence over the industries of every other country in the world. To use a cinematic metaphor, the 'main feature' for discussion in this paper has been 'Hollywood UK; 'UK's Hollywood', on the other hand, can only be thought of as the 'support feature'.

Works Cited

Baxter, John.*The Hollywood Exiles*. London: Macdonald and Jane's, 1976.

Caine, Michael. *What's it all about?*. London: Sphere Books, 1993.

Hardwicke, Cedric.*A Victorian in Orbit*. London: Methuen, 1961.

Negri, Pola.*Memories of a Star*. New York: Doubleday, 1970.

Niven, David.*The Moon's a Balloon*. London: Coronet, 1971.

Shipman, David.*The Story of Cinema from 'Citizen Kane' to the Present Day*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1984.