

Ealing Studios and the Ealing Comedies: the Tip of the Iceberg

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In lecture form this paper was illustrated with video clips from Ealing films. These are noted below in boxes in the text.

My subject is the legendary Ealing Studios comedies. But the comedies were only the tip of the iceberg. To show this I will give a sketch of the film industry leading to Ealing's success, and of the part played by Sir Michael Balcon over 25 years.¹

Today, by touching a button or flicking a switch, we can see our values, styles, misdemeanours, the romance of the past and present—and, with imagination, a vision of the future. Now, there are new technologies, of morphing, foreground overlays, computerised sets, electronic models. These technologies affect enormously our ability to give currency to our creative impulses and credibility to what we do. They change the way films can be produced and, importantly, they change the level of costs for production.

During the early 'talkie' period there many artistic and technical difficulties. For example, artists had to use deep pan make-up to compensate for the high levels of carbon arc lighting required by lower film speeds. The camera had to be put into a soundproof booth when shooting back projection for car travelling sequences.

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Non-directional microphones, that would record the smallest off-camera noises, the way people often spoke, required re-voicing even when shooting on a sound stage. The way sound was assembled, together with the processing of the sound negative, before a sound print could be made, and then this sound print put into a sub mix, which in turn could be added to the main sound track, meant extremely long and expensive production procedures, with many staff involved. Most of these basic technical difficulties remained until the mid-1950s, and were all to be encountered and overcome for the Ealing comedies.

Before 1954

Before 1954 the United Kingdom had some 19 film processing laboratories, five newsreel companies, and 32 film studios. There were 292 production companies, which produced around 120 films a year including quota quickies but excluding documentaries, newsreels and cartoons. These were shown in well over 5,000 cinemas.

Although we had some five home grown cameras available for filming, American Mitchell cameras were used on most major films. As the industry started to make films in colour after the war, the systems used were mainly complementary negative systems—Italian Ferania colour, Belgian Gavacolour, British Cinecolour, Dufay Tricolour, Radiant Colour, Agfa Colour and American Eastman Colour. These systems used one, two, sometimes three colour negatives. The Technicolour tri-pack process came contractually with their cameras and lighting cameramen. In this case the picture was split by a prism on to three black-and-white negatives, each carrying one of the three primary colours. With three magazines to load and unload the technology was cumbersome, time-consuming, and expensive in both film stock and support staff terms.

Various frame sizes were introduced during the post-war period, when aspect ratios went up from the Academy screen size of 4 x 3 to a 2 x 1 ratio. Images were squeezed on the negative and expanded on projection by anamorphic lenses. This affected set

sizes, art direction costs, and choreography of the artists on the larger sets. From an editing point of view, in the early days the close-ups became like watching a tennis match. These techniques showed up the shortcomings of accompanying sound, for stereo sound had yet to be adopted commercially.

The sound was produced mainly on variable area, and variable density, tracks. These were not compatible and could not be integrated with each other on replay. This limited the use of library sound effects, and the inventiveness that we now take for granted with magnetic tape. The two major companies producing sound equipment for recording were RCA and Westrex, both from America. There were many European derivatives but since the replay equipment for projection, theatre reproduction, and sound recording studios primarily used RCA and Westrex systems, American royalties had to be paid for their usage.

Studios were, by and large, committed to American systems in the post-war period. These independent systems were only gradually phased out of production from the early 1950s, with the introduction of magnetic film and tape, when equipment had to be specially made, and current equipment modified, to cope with editing problems.

Programming

The definitive length for a major film was 90 minutes in order to get the lion's share of box-office receipts, whatever the value of the story. Films were sometimes 'stretched' in the shooting and further paced in the editing stages to make up the magic length. Cinemas were usually run with a double bill; that is, a major film and a second feature which ran between 50 and 85 minutes. There would be also a ten minute newsreel, advertising films and slides, and very often a cartoon. Finishing times (and hence starting times) depended on the hours that usherettes and projectionists could get the last bus home, as few working people had cars. All of this affected programme schedules.

With the growth of television in the mid-1950s and hence declining box-office receipts, Ealing Studios was financially forced

to close down. The studios were subsequently sold to the BBC. The number of film studios was then reduced from 32 to eight, with distribution controlled principally by 20th Century Fox, United Artists, British Lion, and the Rank Organisation. Big circuit exhibition was in the hands of Rank, with 650 Gaumont British cinemas. Rank then bought the Odeon circuit, giving them over 1,200 cinemas. The ABC circuit, with 700 cinemas, was the only other of a size able to compete. Film producers were at the mercy of the two big circuits for wide release. Gradually, cinemas were sold off, to make way for supermarkets, bowling alleys, and of course television, run and controlled by the BBC at that time.

Ealing Studios

What sort of place was Ealing Studios (formerly Associated Talking Pictures)? The Silent Stage was the largest of the five stages; many of the *Scott of the Antarctic* (1948) scenes were shot here. Stage 2 was the next largest, followed by Stages 3a (with a water tank) and 3b, which were linked by an enormous sliding door opening up to produce one very large stage. This was often used by the music department for recording the 80 piece London Philharmonic Orchestra. Finally there was Stage 1, used principally for smaller sets or inserts.

Ealing was completely self-contained, with its own music and editing departments, plaster shop, wardrobe and make-up departments, scene dock, publicity, stills, negative cutting, and model departments; and props, scenario, and administration departments. There were two small theatres, and a larger one seating about fifty people which was used principally for dubbing and for screening of rushes to give as nearly as possible a 'cinematic' feeling. Facilities included a staff canteen and a directors' dining room with its own round table, where Sir Michael Balcon used to have lunch-time discussions with directors, writers and stars.

Stage entry was often controlled by security. Administrative staff were seldom allowed on the sets, as it was felt that if the art of film making and the techniques used were made known to all

and sundry this would be counter-productive and ultimately affect attendances. Audiences might become sceptical and indifferent to the film makers' art, as it were taking the magic out of the silver screen and its idols.

The Ealing company was essentially a family company, with relations or close friends working there; I had an uncle in the props department and an aunt in wardrobe, which illustrates the close-knit companionship. This was markedly different from today's director/auteur style, with its hire and fire approach. Production and administration staff were permanently on the payroll as part of the studio 'system' (as distinct from artists, who were on individual contracts). This supported creativity and generosity of spirit. Ealing's ethic was that if you were not actively engaged on a particular film, as could happen, you were encouraged to watch recent films from Hollywood and elsewhere, sitting with in-house writers and directors and mulling over new ideas to see if some expertise or technique might be adapted to our own productions. Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* (1941) in particular evoked enormous interest at Ealing, as elsewhere, as did captured German UFA newsreels and French 'cinema verité' films.

Film music was important. Ernest Irving was the musical director, conductor, and sometimes composer for Ealing. For one film, *They Came to a City* (1944) he made use of Scriabin's Third Symphony, broken into segments. For *Scott of the Antarctic* he had Vaughan Williams compose an awe-inspiring score, with Irving ensuring that it fitted to the scenes perfectly.

The studios operated six days a week, eight and a half hours a day, starting with a seven am call for artists, make-up, wardrobe and lighting. Sound mixing, with two shifts a day, would often go on until midnight, with chauffeur-driven cars to take staff home. Ealing would run films before press and general release in a local cinema, to test the reactions of the staff and the general public in order to find out what might be boring, or make an audience laugh in the wrong place—or not at all. The production would sometimes be re-worked and tightened, and even entire scenes re-written, re-shot, and generally honed, before a West End premiere.

Sir Michael Balcon: Gainsborough/Gaumont to Ealing

Balcon's father had moved from South Africa to Birmingham, where Mick (as he was invariably known at Ealing) did not distinguish himself at the local grammar school. Poor eyesight exempted him from military service in the 1914–18 war. After the war he and Victor Saville joined a company called Victory Motion Pictures as salesmen but they soon started a company producing advertising films. In 1922, with financial support from C. M. Woolf, a distributor, and Oscar Deutsch, of Odeon, Balcon was able to embark on his first major feature film, *Woman to Woman*. Alfred Hitchcock served his apprenticeship in designing and making the titles.

In 1924 Balcon established a 'hundred pound company', Gainsborough Pictures, with Graham Cutts, selling their services to the Gaumont company (the two companies later amalgamated). In 1926, under Balcon's leadership, Hitchcock directed Ivor Novello in *The Lodger*, and the following year the three were responsible for *Downhill* (1927). In 1931 there were the smash box-office successes *Sunshine Susie*, starring Jack Hulbert, and *The Ghost Train*, starring Jack Hulbert and Cicely Courtneidge. 1932 saw *Rome Express*, starring Conrad Veidt, and in 1933 there was *I was a Spy*, starring Herbert Marshall and Madeleine Carroll, and *The Good Companions*, from J. B. Priestley's novel, starring Jessie Matthews and John Gielgud. This last was overwhelmingly popular, and was the first 'talkie' to be seen by King George V and Queen Mary.

In the midst of this spate of commercial films, in 1934 Balcon found time to be responsible for the documentary *Man of Arran*. In the same year *The Iron Duke* was made, starring George Arliss as Wellington, followed by *Forever England*, a naval epic of the first world war starring John Mills and Betty Balfour. By to-day's standards, the style of *The Iron Duke* is interesting. One will notice how the sound effects stop when Wellington speaks in the carriage scene, so that the action has all the elements of a set theatrical piece. Also interestingly, George Arliss's name, the director's title, the company name, and the place of filming all

appear on the same credit card. At that time credits were given only to very senior people in the industry—unlike today’s credits, which seem to include the third assistant tea lady.

The Iron Duke: first 5.30 mins, finishing on Wellington’s ‘he’ll promise them the earth—he nearly had it once’.

In this inter-war period Balcon also worked in pre-Hitler Germany, where with Erich Pommer he was responsible for large productions such as *The Blackguard* and *Mountain Eagle* (1926). His crews also made *Journey’s End* (1930) in Austria, *Bard* and *The Constant Nymph* (1933) in the south of France, *Rhodes of Africa* (1936) in Africa, and *The Great Barrier* (1937) in Canada.

In 1934 there was another Balcon-Hitchcock combination, *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, which was one of the earliest films in which Peter Lorre was to play his hallmark sinister character. In the same year *Jew Suss* was made, starring Conrad Veidt. This was one of the most controversial (and one of the costliest) productions under Balcon’s aegis to come out of Gainsborough/Gaumont British. Its satirical treatment of the growing Nazi movement angered the German government, who tried by diplomatic pressure to have it banned. Consequently Balcon went to Princeton University to seek the help of Albert Einstein. Einstein failed to recognise Balcon on his arrival, although he did recognise his chauffeur. Nevertheless Einstein gave his support to *Jew Suss*, which had great success. (It is worth mentioning that a travesty was made in Germany in 1940, in which the Jew rapes Aryan girls: values were reversed to promote anti-semitic feeling. Joseph Goebbels is said to have pronounced this version ‘highly recommended for its artistic value’.)²

Production at Gainsborough finally ended, owing to a financial crisis, and Balcon resigned in 1936. A group of writers who were sacked decided to club together to give Balcon a ‘funeral lunch’. They met at the Royal Palace Hotel dressed in mourning and carrying lighted candles and lilies. The humour and whimsy of the situation, which can be seen in Ealing’s *The Man in the*

White Suit (1951), I believe stimulated Balcon to produce the range of Ealing comedies to come. Meanwhile, he had an offer from MGM to take charge of their United Kingdom studios. The result was the highly successful (and highly expensive) *A Yank at Oxford* (1937). He was unhappy with the sycophantic relations at the American studios, and severed his ties to move, in 1938, to Associated Talking Pictures, later changing the name to Ealing Studios.

Ealing and the War

The first Balcon production (under the old studio name) was *There Ain't No Justice* (1939), among the earliest of his films to touch on social problems. The same year saw *Proud Valley*, concerned with the problems of Welsh miners, and *Convoy* (1940), an early naval war drama. War broke out on 3 September 1939, and the call-up to the armed services affected the film industry as it affected all other walks of life. Some talented people went to form the Army Film Unit. Balcon was accepted as the unofficial spokesman for the industry and the Films Council. He took the view that Ealing would go on producing whatever the difficulties—which included the pounding of London by bombers and the V1 and V2 rockets. He made films of a semi-propaganda nature as well as comedies. I joined Ealing in May 1942 and my career began in the editing department, where I became involved with the George Formby and Will Hay films. Peter Ustinov appeared in his first film, with Will Hay, *The Goose Steps Out* (1942), a patriotic thriller. In the same year Balcon made *Next of Kin*, with the propaganda theme 'careless talk costs lives', and in 1943 *Ships with Wings*, a Fleet Air Arm story which Churchill tried to have banned because he thought it would put off young men from joining the Fleet Air Arm. A string of such war films, too many to list here, appeared in between 1941 and 1945. One of these was *The Bells Go Down* (1943), a story of the London Fire Brigade at the height of the Blitz, which starred Tommy Trinder, with James Mason in his first supporting role. It had unexpected problems. After the set was 'gelled' to imitate a building on fire, the blaze

got out of hand. The fire engines which were on the set could not be used as the hose couplings did not fit the studio water mains, and there was pandemonium. The local brigade sent a tender which could connect to the street mains but the fire was not put out before a large hole was burnt in the studio roof.

During these war years Ealing did produce some comedies, the forerunners of the post-war Ealing comedies. One of these was *My Learned Friend* (1943), the last of the Will Hay comedies. It involved a chase up the Big Ben clock face, and there was no theme music for this. I had to create something on the spot with a Hammond organ, and to my delight it was dubbed into the film immediately. Another was *Pink String and Sealing Wax* (1945), a Victorian melodrama. But the first film generally recognised as belonging to the post-war Ealing comedies was *Hue and Cry* (1946), starring Alistair Sim.

There were other ventures, of course. With the large amount of money made during the war, Balcon embarked on two of the costliest films ever undertaken in Technicolour. These were the historical drama *Saraband for Dead Lovers* (1948), with a cast including Stewart Granger and Joan Greenwood, and *Scott of the Antarctic* (1948), with John Mills and impressive artificial snowscapes. Both films turned out to be box-office disasters.

The Tip of the Iceberg

These disasters came at a time of falling cinema attendances. Balcon and Reginald Baker decided to cut budgets drastically by making low cost comedies and dramas. These were to be filmed in black and white, with 'cub' or untried directors, and untried writers. In this way what are now known as the Ealing comedies came about because of financial pressures. This was the case with *Whisky Galore* (1948), based on Compton Mackenzie's novel and starring Basil Radford and Joan Greenwood. It was directed by a newcomer, previously a scriptwriter at Pinewood, Alexander McKendrick.

The Isle of Barra, in the northern Scottish Hebridean Isles, was known to be fraught with every imaginable technical difficulty

for the making of the film. In an era of studio sets and few exteriors, where producers were able to keep to shooting schedules by avoiding unwanted problems from the weather affecting continuity and sound recording, the structural elements and necessary location were against all conventional film-making wisdom. Studio shooting kept the crew on the set, with all important facilities close to hand. For *Whisky Galore*, no sets were built, the local pub and other local buildings were used for both interiors and exteriors, and locals became extras. Shooting under difficult conditions on a remote island, with negligible communications (there were no two-way radios, faxes, internet, mobile 'phones), and off-the-cuff shooting in director/auteur style almost led to calamity. In the event of equipment failure, the back-up of Ealing's camera and sound maintenance department and its many other facilities would not be available. Not least of the difficulties was the inability to screen the rushes daily. It was recognised that if the light weight experimental production didn't come off, at least the costs could be written off at a modest £65,000.

In practice a light aircraft landing on the beach would take the exposed negative film to the ferry. It then went by sea to Oban and to London by rail, to be processed in the Rank laboratories and edited there because the Ealing facilities were blocked with ongoing production in various stages of editing.

McKendrick's shooting off the cuff while changing the script as he went, meant the continuity sheets bore little relationship to the scripted dialogue. Continuity sheets often arrived six to ten days after the rushes were screened in London, so that assembling the picture became a huge problem. In the nicest way, Balcon asked, 'What's going on? ... Why can't I see what is shot in continuity order?' When the rough cut was eventually screened, with various senior people and myself in attendance, Balcon sat silent for what seemed an eternity, then pronounced, 'We haven't got a picture, what do you think?'. The supervising film editor, Sydney Cole, suggested that if all of the 'NGs' (the no goods, abandoned takes) were printed up, something useful might be found. Balcon, not to be fobbed off, said, 'Sandy, I think you need a holiday. Why don't you go to Paris for a couple of weeks, and

we'll see what we can do', and a red-faced McKendrick left the theatre for France. The last straw was that in an attempt to get a clever shot, an expensive and precious Mitchell camera had been blown off a cliff.

After the NG takes had been found to be worthless, Cole dreamed up the hiding of the whisky montage. The love scenes between the sergeant and Joan Greenwood were re-written, shot on the small silent stage, and brought up to the early part of the picture. Many of the close-ups in the confrontation scene between the Customs officers and the villagers were optically blown up in the laboratories from wide-angle shots in order to get dramatic tension into the sequence. The ship at sea was a 'glass shot' to fill in a gap in the story line about the villagers' schemes to get to the shipwreck with its cargo of whisky. At the studios a plaster mock up was made of a hillside promontory and placed in the camera foreground. A painting of the ship on a large sheet of glass was then filmed against a background of the sea from the islanders' perspective which had been shot at Barra. One of these shots was deliberately darkened with a sky filter, to give the appearance of night. And of course there were other technical tricks by way of rescue.

Balcon refused to trade-show the film in the West End but was persuaded to run it for the Press in the comparative secrecy of the studio theatre. After that screening, the film was written up as a breath of fresh air, away from cardboard sets and phoney dialogue, a film with innocent charm and total credibility, and so forth. The outcome was that for an expenditure risen to around £80,000, Ealing made some £750,000 from its exhibition.

Whisky Galore: 2.47 mins to 7.23 mins.

McKendrick was forgiven by Balcon, and later directed *The Man in the White Suit* (1951), starring Alec Guinness and Joan Greenwood, the story of a young laboratory worker who invents an indestructible fabric that would spell disaster for the whole clothing industry. He followed this with *The Ladykillers* (1955), a

dark comedy of mobsters who hide out in a London boarding house and, plotting to kill the landlady, have the tables turned. Both films were widely praised.

Before these successes, however, Ealing comedy continued with *Passport to Pimlico* (1949), starring Stanley Holloway and Margaret Rutherford, an odd tale of Londoners who discover that by ancient charter their civic boundary is excluded from the law of the land and declare Pimlico a 'no go' area to get away from petty bureaucratic local authorities. This was followed by *The Lavender Hill Mob* (1951), starring Alec Guinness and Stanley Holloway, a sharply told comedy of a deferential bank clerk who plots to steal gold, have it moulded into model Eiffel Towers, and export it to France. As with *Whisky Galore*, the direction first 'sets' the characters before developing the plot and its comic resolution.

The Lavender Hill Mob: 3.55 mins to 15.07 mins.

The post-war years saw more than the making of comedies, of course. Among other productions, there was a series of semi-documentary dramas set in the Australian outback, although edited back at Ealing: *The Overlanders* (1946), *Eureka Stockade* (1948), *Bitter Springs* (1950), all starring Chips Rafferty, and then *The Shiralee* (1957), starring Peter Finch. These have faded, though, in the public memory

The most enduring of the comedies must be *Kind Hearts and Coronets* (1949), starring Dennis Price, Alec Guinness (who played eight roles), Valerie Hobson and Joan Greenwood. It is, again, a comedy of death, of what is now called a serial killer, as a penniless relation removes the eight members of the family who stand between him and a fortune and a dukedom. In 1949 I was among those working on the film. The director was Robert Hamer, who in his first such assignment for Ealing brought the film in under schedule and under budget. Sometimes a group of us would escape to one of the theatres to discuss some difficult point or other in the production—a hothouse approach but one which remains in my

memory of Hamer. His elegant persona permeates the film and sustains it in memory.

Kind Hearts and Coronets: selected scenes, about 10 mins.

Ealing Studios has gone down in film history as the maker of eccentric, unconventional, whimsical films. These and similar descriptions are as true of the films as they are of the people who made them; but they are the visible tip of the rest of the iceberg. It is pleasing to know that Ealing is now being restructured, with new facilities. Over a hundred million dollars is to be spent in the next four years. The aim is to revive the Ealing studios of the comedies.

Notes

- 1 In preparing these recollections I have consulted *Michael Balcon's 24 Years in Films*, ed. Monja Danischewsky, London, 1947. See also David Robinson, *World Cinema: a Short History*, London, 1973.
- 2 Reported in *Halliwel's Film & Video Guide*, 14th edn, ed. John Walker, London, 1998, p.422.