Classic Film Group
2015-16
Season 1
September – December 2015

Best of British
Tuesday, September 8th  BLACK NARCISSUS (96 minutes)  1947
Directors: Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger
Cast: Deborah Kerr, David Farrar, Flora Robson, Sabu, Kathleen Byron

*Powell and Pressburger’s colourful, hilariously over-the-top melodrama about a group of nuns (Deborah Kerr, Flora Robson and Kathleen Byron amongst them) living in a Himalayan convent, a former harem.*

Tuesday, September 22nd  THE 39 STEPS (82 minutes)  1935
Director: Alfred Hitchcock  Cast: Robert Donat, Madeleine Carrol

*Pre-Hollywood Hitchcock’s splendid, loose adaptation of John Buchan’s spy novel, with falsely-accused Robert Donat fleeing London for Scotland and, inconveniently hand-cuffed to Madeleine Carroll, on the run from police and dastardly foreign agents alike.*

Tuesday, October 6th  A ROOM WITH A VIEW (109 minutes)  1985
Director: James Ivory
Cast: Maggie Smith, Helena Bonham-Carter, Denholm Elliott, Simon Callow, Daniel Day-Lewis

*Sumptuous ‘heritage’ film adapted from E.M. Forster’s 1908 novel with chaperone Maggie Smith and charge 19-year-old Helena Bonham-Carter indulging in upper middle-class snobbery and romance in Florence and the Home Counties.*

Tuesday, October 20th  BRIGHTON ROCK (92 minutes)  1947
Director: John Boulting  Cast: Richard Attenborough, Carol Marsh, Hermione Baddeley, William Hartnell

*Graham Greene wrote the screenplay from his own Catholic-themed novel for this best ever British ‘film noir’ about a psychopathic gang-leader seeking to save his neck by marrying a murder-witness tea-room waitress in a pre-war seedy Brighton.*

Tuesday, November 3rd  HOPE AND GLORY (108 minutes)  1987
Director: John Boorman  Cast: Sebastian Rice-Edwards, Sarah Miles, Ian Bannen

*Boorman’s golden-hued, heart-warming tribute to his own Blitz-era London suburban childhood.*

Tuesday, November 17th  A TASTE OF HONEY (100 minutes)  1961
Director: Tony Richardson  Cast: Dora Bryan, Rita Tushingham, Robert Stephens, Murray Melvin

*Quite possibly the best - and funniest - film of the British New Wave with Rita Tushingham as a pregnant teenager neglected by single-parent mother Dora Bryan in grimy Salford.*

Tuesday, December 1st  THE PASSIONATE FRIENDS (87 minutes)  1949
Director: David Lean  Cast: Ann Todd, Trevor Howard, Claude Rains

*After two much-acclaimed Dickens adaptations a return by director Lean to the theme of his earlier film, Brief Encounter: extra-marital temptation. The Passionate Friends is much less well-known, but the better film by a mile.*

Tuesday, December 15th  A CHRISTMAS-THEMED SURPRISE CLASSIC FILM
Sister Ruth: I gave up my vows! I'm finished with them up there!

Mr Dean (Farrar): I see.

Sandwiched between their other two, much-loved post-war hits, A Matter of Life and Death and The Red Shoes, the Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger film-making duo turned the 1-10 scale technicolor-and-melodrama dial up to 11 in Black Narcissus, a tale of a group of nuns becoming 'disorientated' in a Himalayan convent that has been hastily and half-heartedly converted from a former harem.

The exotic scents and surroundings (and the sight of late-1940s heart-throb, David Farrar, bare-chested and leather-trousered) understandably make it difficult for the nuns, lead by Deborah Kerr, not to entertain a few doubts about their vocation. Some of the confusions take mild form: with the help of the village children Sister Philippa (an underused Flora Robson) inexplicably plants flowers instead of vegetables in the convent garden. More extreme is Kathleen Byron's scenery-chewing turn as Sister Ruth, who proves that 'hell hath no fury like a woman scorned' (particularly if it's by David Farrar) and goes - metaphorically and literally - over the top.

If the seraglio-convent shenanigans of Black Narcissus weren't more than enough, there's also a slight sub-plot involving a lightly browned-up, 18-year-old Jean Simmons as an Indian beggar-maid, Kanchi, enslaving the heart and, one can assert with some confidence, the loins of The Young General (Sabu). This she achieves by dint of smouldering Eastern Promise and the sporting of a series of alarmingly large jewels in her pierced nostrils. Indeed, The Young General himself turns out to be no slouch in the fashion stakes and his various 'peacock' outfits, standing, of course, in sharp contrast to the simplicity of the nuns' robes, are a camp wonder to behold.

After an initial luke-warm reception on release, critical and cinéphile affection for Powell and Pressburger's Black Narcissus has, happily, grown over the years. It has often been said of the duo's films that "they were ahead of their time". On the evidence of Black Narcissus one would be hard pressed to disagree. The film is in a class, if not a universe, of its own. Aside from a few flashback Oirish hunting and fishing location scenes where Sister Superior Clodagh (Kerr) recalls the lost love that presumably lead to her becoming a nun, the film was shot, Himalayas and all, entirely on set at Pinewood Studios and must, frankly, rank as one of the oddest movies ever made.

Unmissable.

Hannay to Pamela: There are 20 million women on this island and I've got be chained to you!

By the time *The 39 Steps* was released in 1935, and after a mere decade of film-making, Alfred Hitchcock was already a very famous director. Four years later he left Britain for Hollywood and the infinitely vaster resources offered by the major American studios. He very occasionally came back to the home country - *Stage Fright* (1950) and his penultimate film, the occasionally distasteful *Frenzy* (1972) were both set in London - but for forty years until his death in 1980 Hitchcock essentially remained an Englishman Abroad. Made in the decade or so of Hitchcock's 'English period' *The 39 Steps*, along with *The Lady Vanishes* (1938) has proven enduringly popular and has long figured in the British Film Institute's 100 Best British Films list (*Vertigo*, *Psycho* and *Rear Window* enjoy a similar status in the equivalent American standings).

Based rather loosely on the 1915 John Buchan spy story, *The 39 Steps* features Robert Donat (as the very-English-sounding) Canadian adventurer, Richard Hannay, on-the-run and fleeing London for Scotland after being falsely accused of murder. The insouciant, droll Hannay is intent on solving the mystery of 'The 39 Steps', a puzzling phrase whispered in her dying moments by an enigmatic foreign agent - Miss Smith(!) - who has sought shelter in Hannay's Portland Place apartment following their meeting at a music hall.

The film is said to be the first to employ what Hitchcock called 'a MacGuffin,' a device that is the motor of the plot, but which is unimportant in itself'. Here it is 'The 39 Steps,' which turns out to be - spoiler alert! - the code name for a ring of spies planning to take very important secret information out of the country.

All of this is hokum of the highest order, of course, and provided that the film is approached in that spirit, *The 39 Steps* represents a marvellous 82-minute entertainment. At the same time, the film, the prolific Hitchcock's eleventh movie in the sound-era alone, is important, since it is very much the template - thematically, stylistically and technically - for his following four decades as a director: 'the wrong man', suave villains, male-female tension, suspense, (mostly quite dark) humour and lengthy tracking shots figuring amongst the trademarks. Another Hitchcock 'signature' was his brief appearances in his own movies, usually within the first ten minutes. See if you can spot him here!

After Donat/Hannay flees London and takes The Flying Scotsman to Edinburgh and onward into the Highlands the film becomes a series of enchanting set pieces: a night spent at a crofter's cottage where the achingly sad and beautiful young crofter's wife played by Peggy Ashcroft protects Hannay from her husband's treachery; Hannay, mistaken for a visiting parliamentary spokesman at a by-election meeting, transforming his own refugee experiences and parlous situation into an ad hoc, rousing speech about human rights and universal justice; escaping the dastardly foreign agents and handcuffed together, Hannay and (the first of Hitchcock's long line of 'ice-cool blondes') glamorous Madeleine Carroll seeking a room for the night at a remote inn, and – to her horror - being mistaken for a newly-married couple.

Two further film versions of *The 39 Steps* were made in 1959 and in 1978, both jolly romps. The latter version is said to be the most faithful to the original Buchan novel, but neither remake holds a candle to Hitchcock's utterly charming original.
Charlotte Bartlett, being shown her and Lucy's rooms at the Florence pensione: This is not what we were led to expect. We were to see The Arno. The signora wrote: 'South rooms with a view, close together.' Instead of which we have North rooms without a view, and far apart.

A Room With A View, directed by the American James Ivory, was a world-wide success in its release year, 1986, grossing many times its apparently small budget and being nominated for no fewer than twenty-two Oscars, Golden Globes and BAFTAs. True, it didn't win too many and only at home in the UK did it win a BAFTA Best Film Award, but its sumptious art direction, the interior sets and exterior landscapes, the Edwardian costumes and its beautifully witty script by the third member of the Merchant-Ivory creative team, scenarist Ruth Prawer-Jhabvala were all commendably and amply recognised.

This 'heritage' costume-drama takes place half in Florence and half in the Home Counties and initially follows young, upper-middle class Lucy Honeychurch's (Bonham-Carter's) travels in Italy, chaperoned by a much older, spinster cousin (Maggie Smith). At a Florence pensione they encounter the foward-thinking Emersons, father and son, who make the awful faux pas of offering the newly-arrived and disappointed female travellers their south-facing rooms with a view. On a picnic excursion into the Italian countryside the young Emerson, George, suddenly and passionately kisses Lucy. Months later and back home in Surrey we find Lucy in the process of being engaged to the prissy aesthete, Cecil Vyse (a great turn by Daniel Day-Lewis) ....

There are a few too many plot-driving coincidences for one's liking in this film, but they are easily overlooked because of the overall quality of the production. The superb 'look' of A Room With A View has already been mentioned. The film also benefits from a great score - largely Puccini for the Florence sequences - and rather more modern vamping on the piano by Lucy and her brother Freddy at home in England. The use of witty inter-titles (Lucy Lies To Cecil, for example), which mirror the novel's chapter headings, are delightful. More than anything, though, this is a British cast to die for: Maggie Smith, Denholm Elliott, Simon Callow, Judi Dench (fairly briefly), Daniel Day-Lewis, Rupert Graves, Rosemary Leach and Julian Sands, as the young Emerson. This was the 19-year-old Helena Bonham-Carter's first film rôle - a remarkably complex performance: 'reasonable and romantic, generous and selfish, and timid right up to the point where she takes a heedless plunge into the unknown' (Vincent Canby/The New York Times).

In sum, A Room With A View is a sumptious entertainment from start to finish and by far the most comfortable viewing in this season's Best of British Classic Film programme.

The first, substantial phase of 'heritage cinema' of which this film is a prime example was, like The British New Wave, a short affair: just eight years separated David Lean's last classic movie, A Passage To India (1984) and the third, equally prize-winning Merchant-Ivory film, Howards End (1992), with A Room With A View, Maurice (1987) and Where Angels Fear To Tread (1991) made in between. The mid-90s brought us the historical likes of The Remains of The Day and The Madness of King George. Thereafter, it was Jane Austen's turn to provide inspiration for would-be 'heritage' film-makers.
Pinkie Brown (in a recording booth, making a disc for the doting, oblivious Rose):  

"You wanted a recording of my voice. Well here it is. What you want me to say is, 'I love you.' Well, I don't. I hate you, you little slut."

Made the same year as *Black Narcissus*, but poles apart in style, *Brighton Rock* (aptly, but unsubtly retitled 'Young Scarface' for the US market) was adapted for the screen by Graham Greene from his own 1938 novel and is often claimed to be 'The Best British Film Noir'.

Shot in superb black-and-white by veteran cinemaphotographer, Harry Waxman, the film concerns rival gangs involved in racecourse extortion rackets in a seedy-looking Brighton. The focus of the film, though, is very much on the young leader of one of the gangs, the reptilian Pinkie Brown - a never-to-be-equalled acting performance from Richard Attenborough - and his scheme to 'silence' a waitress who could lead to his conviction for murder.

Director John Boulting extracts splendid performances from a great supporting cast of British character actors – Hermione Baddeley (who has a marvellous Hitchcockian moment during an end-of-pier pierrot show), William Hartnell and Nigel Stock amongst them. There is also a luminous début by the 21-year-old Carol Marsh as the naïve waitress, Rose - much less dowdy than in the novel and in the 2010 *Brighton Rock* remake -, whom Pinkie marries as part of his scheme to save his neck.

As is often the way with older movies, there are some unintended laughs. In *Brighton Rock* it takes a great deal of good will, for example, to believe that the two central characters are both 17-year-olds (at the time of filming Attenborough was 24) and some of the gangster argot, ('He's milky.'), is distinctly, if charmingly, odd.

And as might be expected given the source novel and Greene's involvement in writing the screenplay, themes of Catholic guilt and of redemption, underplayed as they may be, are never far away. Given the moral code of the time, too, one won't be much surprised to learn that teenage gangster Pinkie gets his comeuppance.

Director Boulting, doubtless worried that we would miss the subtle religious elements of *Brighton Rock* due to all the nasty gangster business, shoehorns in a surreal and very physical manifestation of Catholicism in the film's final moments, thus rendering the coda-ending both highly ludicrous and utterly brilliant.
Eight-year-old evacuee Bill Rohan about to board a train for Southampton to take a boat to Australia remonstrates with his tearful mother: 'I'm going to miss the whole war and it's all your fault!'

John Boorman’s 1987 semi-autobiographical film *Hope and Glory* is about the pains and pleasures of growing up as remembered many years on. We witness through the eyes of his lightly fictionalised eight-year-old self normal events: family Christmases, seaside outings with friends, visits to grandparents and Bill (a remarkably mature performance by Sebastian Rice-Edwards), forever trailed by his little sister, playing with the other children on their south London suburban street. However, these are no ordinary times: after a seemingly eternal 'phoney war' of nothing happening, WWII has begun in earnest.

In their neat back garden a ‘Dig for Victory’ allotment replaces flowers and bushes. An Anderson air raid shelter is built. Dad comes home on leave from officer-training with a tin of German jam that his wife Grace thinks may be poisoned: 'They know how much we love jam!’ Gas masks held in small cardboard boxes become part of the compulsory school outfit. The elder sister Dawn jitterbugs and fraternises with a Canadian soldier stationed nearby. At Christmas the family and friends listen to George VI’s stuttering Christmas speech on the radio (‘He's done better this year.’). The bombed-out houses become playgrounds and sources of war trophies - shrapnel, bullets, shell cases - for gangs of small boys.

With their own house become uninhabitable the Rohan family is obliged to take refuge in the riverside home of the maternal grandparents. The irascible grandfather, called 'Dadda' by Grace and her three sisters, Faith, Hope and Charity, is played by the great Ian Bannen in a gallery-addressing performance. (Late in the film we see the the four sisters perform an excerpt from Mozart's *Eine kleine Nachtmusik*. Quite apart from the fact that they're obviously miming, the music connoisseurs amongst us are invited to spot the deliberate mistake!)

*Hope and Glory* has a strong cast including Sarah Miles and David Hayman as the Rohan parents. Perhaps one should reserve most praise, though, for the RSC actor Derrick O'Connor and for Susan Woolridge, who play the Rohan family's friends, Mac and Molly, the latter ever full of *joie de vivre* and *double entendres*. The quiet, thoughtful Mac and Grace Rohan were once near sweethearts and their scenes together talking about what might have been are superb.

With The Blitz, 'The Great Fireworks Show,' as its background and with splendid acting, great cinematography and superb production design *Hope and Glory* - Boorman's last major success - is a warm, nostalgic, and very British tribute to survival and togetherness in a different age.
November 17th

**A TASTE OF HONEY (100 minutes)**

1961

**Director: Tony Richardson**

Robert Stephens as the boozy, leering 'fancy man' of Dora Bryan's feckless mother and, in a brief, sympathetic role, Paul Danquah as the black sailor with whom Rita Tushingham's neglected, resilient Jo – an astounding début performance - finds brief comfort.

The interplay between mother and daughter that forms the core of the film is acting of the highest quality. One should watch out particularly for the scene of Dora Bryan's good-time Helen recalling the brief afternoon of 'love' that lead to her daughter Jo's conception and birth.

A Taste of Honey is part of that 'It's Grim up North' quintet of films – Saturday Night and Sunday Morning, A Kind of Loving, The Loneliness of The Long Distance Runner (also Richardson-directed) and This Sporting Life – that perhaps more than any others defined the brief moment in cinema history that was The British New Wave. By 1963 Richardson, for example, was already making the bawdy, Oscar-winning Tom Jones.

Those afore-mentioned, 'kitchen sink', male-protagonist films ended in futile gestures, compromise and defeat, Arthur Seaton's 'don't let the bastards grind you down' proving a hollow maxim. By contrast the final scenes of A Taste of Honey see the now heavily-pregnant Jo surrounded by a chorus of children clapping sparkler fireworks and gazing in wonder at the light of a Guy Fawkes night bonfire – a final, brief moment of happiness for her or, somehow, the start of a brighter future?

Jo (daughter): *I hope to be dead and buried by the time I reach your age. Just think, you've been living for forty years!*

Helen: *I know. I must be a biological phenomenon!*

Viewing Tony Richardson's A Taste of Honey again after a gap of half a century one is struck by a couple of things: firstly, how humorous the film is given the poverty and squalor of the Salford settings and its serious themes of negligent parenthood and teenage pregnancy; and, secondly, how little the film betrays its stage-play origins, testimony to the ability of the director and the young playwright, Shelagh Delaney, who worked on the screenplay with Richardson, to create something truly cinematic.

Whilst Walter Lassally's black-and-white photography of terraced houses, wasteland playgrounds, Manchester shipways and polluted canals is superb, it is more than anything the principals that make the film special: Murray Melvin as the kindly, gay art student who briefly sets up home with the pregnant teenager,
Stephen: Why won't you marry me?
Mary: I don't know! I want to belong to myself!
Stephen: Then your life will be a failure.

In the mid-to-late 1940s director David Lean made two much-acclaimed Dickens film adaptations, *Great Expectations* and *Oliver Twist* (1946 and 1948 respectively) before returning to a theme he'd covered in his very famous 1945 film *Brief Encounter* – (1940's style) extra-marital relationships.

Titled *One Woman's Story* in the US, *The Passionate Friends* is much less well known than *Brief Encounter*, but arguably the better film. The setting is certainly a bit more exotic than that steamy (no pun intended) Carnforth railway station: Chamonix and Lake Annecy here double for Switzerland (and London is also featured to very good effect). However, this film is not about another 'brief encounter', but more the case of first loves meeting by chance and design again (and again) over a period of years.

Based on a little-known 1913 H.G. Wells novel, *The Passionate Friends* is ambitious in structure: a flashback within a flashback within a flashback, with the odd day-dream thrown in for good measure. Within this framework there are great performances from the three leads: socialite Ann Todd (soon to become Mrs David Lean in real life), Trevor Howard as the first-love 'jolly decent chap', later Oxbridge don, and particularly Claude Rains as the cuckolded, wealthy financier husband.

Watch out for an amazing sequence early in the film set at a London New Year's Eve ball where the former lovers meet by chance and their and their respective partners' faces – the ironic 'Auld Lang Syne' on the soundtrack – fleetingly reflect a multitude of hopes, insecurities and anxieties; acting and film-making of the highest calibre!

At the end of *Brief Encounter* Celia Johnson 'does the decent thing' and goes back to her long- and silently-suffering wimpish husband ("You've been a long way away. Thank you for coming back to me."). In *The Passionate Friends* will home and (very impressive) hearth be Ann Todd's destiny or will the attraction of her Keats- and Galsworthy-quoting first love prove too, too powerful? Let us hold our collective breath!
To conclude the 'Best of British' season we'll be screening a 'surprise' Christmas-themed Classic British movie (Not, We Repeat, Not 'Love Actually'!).

Classic Film Group Members are invited to guess the surprise film's title beforehand and, in case there is more than one correct guesser, to write a very short, 'tie-breaker' review of the film (60 words maximum). Entries, please, to rob.townsend@yahoo.co.uk by 21.00, Sunday, 13th December.