

Leslie Howard ~ 30 Films



Leslie Howard Steiner was born in Forest Hill, London on 3 April 1893. His father, Ferdinand was a Hungarian Jewish immigrant. His mother, Lillian (née Blumberg) was from an upper middle class family who initially opposed her marriage. Soon after Leslie's birth, the Steiners moved to Vienna, where a second child, Doris, was born. After a reconciliation between the Steiners and Blumbergs, Leslie's family returned to live in London.

Even as a small boy Leslie had something about him - a naive, elusive quality - which rather perplexed his elders. I have since heard them confess that there were times when they suffered from occasional uneasy wonder as to whether the boy might really be a bit of a genius - and to English parents there is always something a trifle uncomfortable about the word genius.

He was, however, so completely normal a youngster as to reassure them. A good all-round sportsman, he played rugger, cricket and hockey, and, above all, acquired the intense love of horses which is still a ruling passion with him. But even in those days he was laying the foundations for his successful stage career. I'm afraid his home-work at times must have been sadly neglected, as most of his spare moments were [given to the] studying and writing of plays.

My earliest recollections are of Leslie deep in an armchair devouring drama, comedy, farce, from Shakespeare to Sutro, or shut up in his own special "den" writing pages of manuscript. Nothing pleased me better than to be allowed to sit with him (if I kept very quiet) while he scribbled away and occasionally read aloud to me bits that particularly pleased him. My mother still has, tucked away as a souvenir, some of his earliest efforts, painstakingly copied into exercise books in his schoolboy hand, complete with stage directions neatly underlined. I was terribly thrilled by those plays of Leslie's, especially when, at the early age of four, I was dressed up and allowed to appear on the "drawing-room stage" with various friends to fill up the cast, and Leslie alternating between the leading role and stage managership.¹

Howard was educated first privately and then at Alleyn's School in Dulwich, where he was an undistinguished pupil. He did, however, show an interest in writing and theatre, an interest supported and encouraged by his mother, though *not* his father, who insisted that, on leaving, his son take a regular job.

While he was at school, he wrote quite a number of plays, and he and his fellow-students acted in them. Nevertheless, he confesses, he never thought very seriously of the stage as a career and his writing plans failed to materialise. It was not really his fault that he didn't become an author. When the time approached for him to leave school, he thought very seriously about this writing business. Authorship, though, is not one of those things you can take up as a career. No influence in the world can help a writer to succeed. Leslie knew this and so did his father. He was always something of a dreamer and writing had always figured very prominently in his dreams. But the dreams had to be abandoned. Writing could perhaps come later. Meanwhile, he had to have a job.

Most prosaically, he went straight from school into a bank. He really doesn't know why, except that it was a job, and a quiet, safe one at that. He hated the work. It was tedious, and it bored him. He didn't remain in the bank for long, though. War clouds were gathering over Europe. That fateful August in 1914 arrived. War was declared.

Leslie Howard joined up. He was youthful, healthy and yearning for adventure. The war came to him not as a tragedy but as an exciting opportunity to break away from his dull, conventional life. It uprooted him from his uncomfortable seat in the bank as nothing else could have done. So he went to the front and fought for his country ... and for his freedom.

Out in blood-spattered France, he was one of the leading lights of those amateur theatrical shows the soldiers got up amongst themselves.²

So, at the outbreak of war, Howard left Cox & Co. to enlist in the Northamptonshire Yeomanry. After training in Colchester, he served in France as a second lieutenant. Back home, shell-shocked, in May 1916 he resigned his commission. Two months earlier, following a brief courtship, he had married Ruth Martin.

Being a tremendously keen horseman, he joined the cavalry, and was attached to the 10th Hussars. He never talks very much about the War or his war experiences. Soldiering was his duty, his career for the time being, and that was the end of it. In 1916 he was sent home on sick leave, and shortly after was discharged as unfit for further service.¹

Ruth ... shared his love for the stage and was very supportive. Leslie's mother was a warm supporter, too. She loved theatre and had even acted in several amateur productions. So [after leaving the army, and rather than return to the bank] Leslie haunted a theatrical agent until he got a role in a touring company, and that was the beginning of his extraordinary career.³

With the confidence of youth he set out to break into the world of acting, without experience, without the help of influential friends - but with an engaging personality, and a grim determination to succeed. He had to succeed. He was a married man now. There was someone depending on him. They were difficult days, though. The man who was afterwards to command fantastic figures from the film studios knew what it was like to be anxious about every penny, to lay awake at nights worrying about the future.

How to set about the business? The best thing, Leslie decided, was to hang around the agents' offices until something turned up. Better still, hang around one particular agent until, in sheer self defence, he found something for the young man. This was what he did. He found an agent who seemed to be quite promising. He plonked himself in his office. He was there early in the morning, and he didn't leave until night. This went on for several weeks. Then one day the agent smiled cheerfully. "I think I've got something for you. In the provinces, of course, and it's not much money. But it's a start."

It was a very humble start. Leslie played a small role in Peg O' My Heart. He had no idea how he would shape as an actor on the

*professional stage. Didn't even know whether he would like it or not. He needn't have worried. He shaped pretty well and he loved the work. Acting got into his blood almost at once. As he himself has said: Once you're in the theatre, you stay for life.*²

Howard began acting in touring theatre companies and after minor roles in popular pieces such as *Peg O' My Heart* and *Charley's Aunt*,⁴ made his debut on the London stage in 1918 in Arthur Wing Pinero's *The Freaks*. In April of that year, his first child Ronald was born, named after Ronald Herrick, Howard's character in *The Freaks*. Further stage success followed: *The Title* by Arnold Bennett, Gladys Unger's *Our Mr. Hepplewhite* and A. A. Milne's *Mr. Pim Passes By* all drew favourable notices. During this period, Howard also obtained small silent film parts in *The Heroine Of Mons* (1914), *The Happy Warrior* (1917) and *The Lackey And The Lady* (1919).

In 1919 Howard, Milne, Adrian Brunel (later a successful director) and others set up Minerva Films, which produced six comedy shorts in its two years of existence. Some of these films survive in the BFI archives. Four - *The Bump*, *Twice Two*, *Five Pound Reward* and *Bookworms* - were Milne-scripted, with the lead roles in the latter pair taken by Howard himself.

*The first time I met Mr. Milne was when I was engaged for the juvenile role in Mr. Pim Passes By. Later I induced him to write some scenarios for a motion picture concern I helped organise.*⁵

In 1920 Howard officially dropped his surname to become Leslie Howard. After another strong showing in *East Is West* at London's Lyric Theatre, impresario Gilbert Miller cast him as Sir Calverton Shipley in his new Broadway production of A. E. Thomas's *Just Suppose*, which took the actor (alone - wife and child to follow) across the Atlantic for the first time.

This gentleman was in charge of the stage door and of him I enquired the whereabouts of the actor-manager who had engaged me. I was told quite kindly that nothing could gain me admittance to him now as he was on stage conducting a rehearsal of Just Suppose.

"But I've just travelled three thousand miles for the express purpose of playing in that piece," I told him. "Surely I ought to be allowed in."

"Really? What is the name?" he enquired, and I told him.

"Not Mr. Howard of England!"

"The same," I murmured nonchalantly.

The effect was electric. He left me, rushed onto the stage and announced dramatically: "Mr. Howard of England is here!"

Now I have been known as Mr. Howard of South Kensington, I have even been know as Mr. Howard of London, but to be known as Mr. Howard of England gave me an almost Imperial responsibility. I felt myself raised to ambassadorial rank as the actor-manager came out and charmingly welcomed me to the American theatre.⁶

In the period 1922-24, consistently lauded in plays such as *The Truth About Blayds* and *The Romantic Age* (both by Milne), *Aren't We All?*, *Outward Bound* and *The Werewolf*, Howard quickly established himself as "Broadway's favourite Englishman". Further success in Michael Arlen's *The Green Hat*, which opened in September 1925 and ran for a year, made him a matinee idol and undisputed star.

During the '20s, he and his family lived in Great Neck, Long Island, where in 1924 his daughter Leslie Ruth was born. Still keen on writing, Howard had several stories and articles (mainly about the theatre) published in *The New Yorker*, *Vanity Fair* and elsewhere. He staged, directed and acted in his own play *Murray Hill* (New York, 1927, renamed *Tell Me The Truth*, London, 1928). In 1929 he drew rave notices as time-traveller Peter Standish in John L. Balderston's *Berkeley Square*.

In 1930 Howard began his Hollywood career with the film version of *Outward Bound* (as Tom Prior - on Broadway he'd played Henry) and was soon leading opposite fashionable screen heroines such as Ann Harding (*Devotion*), Marion Davies (*Five And Ten*) and Norma Shearer (*A Free Soul / Smilin' Through*). In 1932 he co-starred with Myrna Loy and Ann Harding in *The Animal Kingdom*, the screen version of the play he had brought to success on stage. In 1933 Mary Pickford chose him to co-star with her in her last film *Secrets*. The same year, he reprised the Peter Standish role in the screen adaptation of *Berkeley Square*, a performance that gained him his first Best Actor Oscar nomination. In 1934, his Sir Percy Blakeney aka *The Scarlet Pimpernel* was widely acclaimed.

Though the Hollywood studios were keen to sign him, Howard refused to tie himself into the kind of long term contract they preferred, since he wanted to be free to go back to the stage and to make films in England. He had bought an old house, Stowe Maries, in Westcott, Surrey, that he regarded as his home. In 1933 he returned to the London stage, back at The Lyric in Talbot Jennings' *This Side Idolatry*, taking the lead role of William Shakespeare. "The stage is the actor's medium," he said. "The actor controls there. But films, why, they're the director's and the cutter's. The actor is merely incidental."

After signing to co-star with Bette Davis in *The Petrified Forest* (1936), Howard allegedly insisted that the role of gangster Duke Mantee should go to Humph-

rey Bogart, who had played the part on stage. It did, which re-launched Bogie's screen career. The two men became lifelong friends. In 1952, Bogart and Bacall christened their daughter Leslie Howard Bogart - but weren't the first. Some twenty years earlier, William Gargan (see *The Animal Kingdom*), another bosom pal, named his son Leslie Howard Gargan. Elegant tributes, both.

Also in 1936, Howard (then 43) and Norma Shearer (34) played the title parts in George Cukor's *Romeo And Juliet*. In the same year, he had the misfortune to open on Broadway in *Hamlet* (financed by, produced by, co-directed by and starring himself) just a few weeks after Gielgud's acclaimed production of the same play transferred from London. Howard's *Hamlet*, his final stage role, ran for just 39 performances before being taken out of town, where it recouped some money on the road before closing altogether in April 1937. He wrote about his approach of tackling such a challenge as follows:

No, for myself, in order to find a way of approach to the problem I have gone to Shakespeare as one man of the theatre to another. I have tried to understand the methods of his craftsmanship and the conditions under which he worked. I have been governed by a spirit of reasonable humility, but not of slavish reverence. I have had the nerve to consider the two of us co-workers in a theatrical enterprise and have tried to forget that my partner is separated from me by over three hundred years of time and ringing fame. In this light I have had the following conversation with him:

Me: You see, Will, times have changed.

Will: Not as much as you think.

Me: I mean, after all, you did write for the Elizabethan theatre.

Will: I wrote for the theatre.

Me: I beg your pardon. But a great many of your allusions are contemporary. They would be understood only by your Elizabethan audience.

Will: You over-rate them. Most of the time they didn't know what I was talking about.

Me: Even so, a play like Hamlet, though Danish, has a political background which is Elizabethan English.

Will: Are you reproaching me with writing a play about a country of which I could ascertain little? Too late. Bacon was before you.

Me: Good heavens, no. Frankly, Will, your anachronisms don't worry me at all - or any of your admirers, I venture to say.

Will: Good. They never worried me, I assure you.

Me: I only mean that much of Hamlet would be a mystery to a modern audience because of contemporary allusions with which your audience would be perfectly familiar.

Will: You repeat yourself so much. I understand. What do you propose to do about it?

Me: We have to resort to a certain amount of cutting.

Will: You want to cut those parts of Hamlet which mystify the audience?

Me: (Falling into the trap) Yes.

Will: Will there be much left?

Me: Within reason, Will, within reason. The mysteries of Hamlet are its greatest attractions.

Will: (so help him) You're informing me. I have cause to be thankful for the riddles of Hamlet. It's not the best play I ever wrote.

Me: (Shocked) Oh Will –

Will: Or, rather, it's not the best play I ever re-wrote. Would you care to hear how I got the assignment?

Me: (breathless) Go on.

Will: Burbage had bought an old play of Kyd's. It was a terrific affair, full of treasons, incest, killings and poisonings. Burbage had a great time acting it. He went at it with a will and the groundlings loved it. It was the talk of the town. Then, one day, Burbage had an attack of good taste. He said to me: "That old Hamlet play is beginning to nauseate me. Take it and polish it up, Will. Give it touch of philosophy, humour and poetry (but don't injure the melodrama). You could do it in a couple of weeks and we'll put it on for Christmas."

Me: A couple of weeks. Good God!

Will: Oh, we worked fast in those days. I didn't care for the assignment, but how could I refuse?

Me: You had a contract.

Will: Exactly. 'Twas ever thus. So I went to work on it and suddenly got interested in the thing.

Me: You certainly did.

Will: It got in my blood. I worked for months on it. Burbage was livid at the delay, but I was obstinate. I said I had difficulty getting a treatment. And it was a frightful muddle - an outrageous plot, full of unexplainable loose ends, inconsistencies and absurdities. I eliminated as many as I could and left the rest to dramatic licence. It was a long time before I finished it and Burbage was very irritated. He said I'd been carried away and had overdone

the whole thing. It was too high-brow and ignored the groundlings altogether. I compromised and put back a few killings and some of the early gags, and so it was produced. I think I improved the play but Burbage never really liked it.

Me: God, what a fool –

Will: I wouldn't say that. An actor, and a good actor – of a certain type.⁷

In 1934, Howard and Davis had co-starred in the film adaptation of Somerset Maugham's *Of Human Bondage* and in 1937, after *The Petrified Forest*, were paired for a third time in romantic comedy *It's Love I'm After*. His Professor Higgins in the filmed version of Shaw's *Pygmalion* (1938, with Wendy Hiller) earned him a second Academy Award Best Actor nomination. In 1939, he starred with Ingrid Bergman in, and co-produced *Intermezzo*.

Howard's best remembered role is probably that of milquetoast Ashley Wilkes in his last American film *Gone With The Wind* (1939), after which, on 22 August, he sailed for England to lend his support during the coming war. Too old to re-enlist and advised to do what he knew best, Howard then wrote, produced, directed and / or starred in a number of British WWII films including *Pimpernel Smith* (1941), *49th Parallel* (1941) and *The First Of The Few* (1942).

On 1 June 1943, Howard was one of thirteen passengers and four crew aboard a scheduled KLM flight from Lisbon to Bristol that was intercepted and shot down over the Bay of Biscay by German fighters. Though it has since been postulated that Howard was the primary target of this attack, the German authorities would only acknowledge "a mistake".⁸ Wherever the truth lies, a man of immense charisma, penetrating intelligence, conviction and courage, not to mention one of Britain's most luminous stage and screen talents, was taken too soon, at just 50 years of age.

His friend and *First Of The Few* co-star David Niven said Howard was "... not what he seemed. He had the kind of distraught air that would make people want to mother him. Actually, he was about as naive as General Motors. Busy little brain, always going."⁹ On learning of his loss, *Pygmalion* co-director Anthony Asquith said: "People thought of Howard as a film star, but he was infinitely more than that; he was a brilliant technician. He had the art of cinema at his fingertips. I have never worked with anyone more understanding, more courteous or more sincere. He was the best of colleagues ... the best of friends [and] one of the greatest men in British films."¹⁰ Moira Finnie: "I think that the appeal of Leslie Howard might be described in the following terms: gifted, sensitive, wry, kindly, thoughtful, loyal and brave."¹¹ For film fans around the world he was one of a kind.

BOOKWORMS (1920)



This quaint Minerva-produced, A. A. Milne-scripted short tells the tale of boy wooing girl-next-door, first using a false moustache that won't stay in place, then via an unsigned note slipped into her library book (except it's not hers). Her father reads and replies to the note. Three others read his reply. All four rendezvous and pair happily off. Meanwhile, boy pays another house call to find - at last - only the girl at home. Howard shows himself to be comfortable with comedy and a natural before the camera, presaging greater things to come. A rudimentary but effective silent, running 22 minutes.

IMDb: *Bookworms* may be a short film but each individual second is jam-packed with more charm, elegance, wit and grace than you're likely to find in most full length flicks. A young Leslie Howard (above, right) plays Richard, a boy who falls in love with neighbourhood girl Miranda, played by the fresh Pauline Johnson (above, centre). The only problem is that Miranda's aunt and uncle (Henrietta Watson and Jeff Barlow) are trapped in a dried-out marriage, so to keep Miranda from making the same mistakes they made, she isn't allowed to become acquainted with any men. Miranda sits around all day, reading books and mending socks, trapped inside the monotonous life she's forced to endure. Richard, meanwhile, having spotted Miranda through his bedroom window, comes up with several strategies to save her from her stuffy relatives. *Bookworms* is one of the most potently nostalgic films I have seen. As I watched it, I got a full dose of the special sort of innocence I've always associated with the silent era. Showing glimpses of a long gone world, *Bookworms* is almost overwhelmingly bittersweet - but it's such a darling film. Seek it out!

OUTWARD BOUND (1930)



This lukewarm, quasi-philosophical musing, by turns languorous, under-worked and sappy, has not aged well, though it's hard to conceive that it would have gripped any more assertively in 1930 than it does now, which is not much. Though not new to cinema, Howard is new to talking pictures - this his first, and appropriately, his first spoken line is a greeting ("Morning, Steward!") that opens wide the door on a dozen delightful years to come. An experienced stage actor, his skills are already well honed, though this vapid, threadbare material offers minimal opportunity of expression. He also exits before the third act, which probably left some customers feeling a tad short-changed. Floats like a butter-churn, stings like a flea. 82 minutes. For buffs and diehards only.

IMDb: While an interesting idea, the film falters not just because of the Examiner's lousy payoffs, but also because it was so stark, cheesy and flat. A bit dull, a bit stagy, a bit cheap and a bit of a letdown. The 1944 remake - *Between Two Worlds* - is considerably better / Goes on way too long. A few nice twists towards the end but the actual ending is a letdown / Too much overplaying combined with some very slow pacing and a script that repeats everything in case you missed it the first three times it was said. Howard seems limp as a wet towel / Fine beyond compare / The best-written, most eloquent dialogue I have ever heard in an early talkie, rising very nearly to the level of poetry at times. But what unfortunately, and perhaps unavoidably, ages this movie, is the acting. Some of it, from Alison Skipworth (as Mrs. Cliveden-Banks, above) is quite good and Howard as Tom Prior is excellent, as long as he is being a

charming rogue. But, the minute the plot starts to gain in intensity, his performance begins to fall apart and become unintentionally funny / All of the actors have been directed in what can only be called melodramatic stage technique, so that every line sounds like a stage line. Even the great Leslie Howard is given to overacting of the worst kind / Disquieting and eerie / The cast's dramatic performance style reflects that of serious stage dramas of the time. Overall, the feel of this film is very "English" when compared to the crudely mannered WWII era remake. The 1930s truly was the golden age of movies / Interesting, but has not aged well / Howard gives no indication that he will become a great screen star - his performance is of the stage and terribly hammy / Engrossing. Howard is so often wasted in blah film parts so it's nice to see him here in a worthy role, and Skipworth is a total delight in anything you can catch her in. Here she plays a most unusual part, and plays it beautifully. All her little hmms and guttural sounds add fathoms to the dialogue / Beryl Mercer as Mrs. Midget is a charm / A very thought-provoking, atmospheric, early talkie drama, great for a rainy day.

... Howard's appearance in the stage play of Outward Bound was responsible for attracting Hollywood's attention to him. Warners purchased the film right in the play, and approached him with the idea of playing in the movie version. "No," said Leslie, briefly. He was not interested in the screen. His heart and soul lay in the theatre and he simply couldn't see himself as a celluloid puppet. But Jack Warner was insistent. He dangled every possible bait before the actor, and Leslie wavered. He liked the part tremendously and it was for this reason alone that he finally agreed to make the picture. He signed a contract for the one film only. He had no intention of making any other picture. Thus Leslie Howard made his first screen appearance as a dead man! As you may have heard, the story was about a man who was bound for the Beyond. It was a terrific artistic success and revealed Leslie as a perfect film actor.²

Four contemporary reviews:

(1) *... If a half-real, half-allegorical idea with a psychology midriff can be put on the screen in as intelligent a manner as this, then films have a wide future in an educational direction. On that score this film may be considered a laboratory experiment for the rest of the film world to ponder over and learn.¹²*

(2) *... It is, in fact, a picture in which everybody shines, a picture that, like the play, sends one away from it deeply moved. Mr. Milton has not sought to change the action, but at the same time he has succeeded in giving to this film fine cinematic touches wherever opportunity offers. Leslie Howard, who acted one of the "halfways" in the play, undertakes the role portrayed by Alfred Lunt on the stage. His vocal delivery, his expressions and gestures leave nothing to be desired. Considering that this is his first talking picture part, he is entitled to all the greater praise for his performance.¹³*

(3) ... Howard gives one of the most finished and artistic performances of his career. His scene with the steward of the ship carrying the seven to the City of God, when he confirms his belief that he is dead, is superbly done, without a single trace of sentimentality ... Every one of the supporting cast are equal to the high standard set by Mr. Howard.¹⁴

(4) If you want to see a beautifully made and acted picture; a strange, haunting, inspiring screenplay, see *Outward Bound* tonight ... The theme of a soul that goes through a purging process before earning a place in the hereafter is developed in a way that is both pathetic and rarely beautiful. All the scenes are photographed in a misty atmosphere to accent the ethereality of the story, and the actors' faces all seem to express the *Eternal Puzzle* ... Beryl Mercer's work is exquisite, Howard gives a vivid performance of the nervous drunkard and Fairbanks and Helen Chandler are superb as the young couple who are not ready for the great transition.¹⁵

[NEVER THE TWAIN SHALL MEET \(1931\)](#)



While not as grim as I expected, still this film is not very good. With his name not yet established in Hollywood, Howard presumably needed to take whatever parts he could get in these early days of his screen career. How else explain his presence in this culture-clash clunker? He could surely divine from the script that the moral and spiritual collapse of his character is scarcely credible - but a man has to work. The Polynesian belle he's meant to fall for is revealed from

the off as a petulant shrew with a personality so unattractive that it's impossible to accept anyone with half a brain pursuing her across the street, never mind an ocean. But he bites the bullet and gives of his best alongside modestly gifted Spaniard Conchita Montenegro (above) and the reliable C. Aubrey Smith, whom we'll meet again as Lord Capulet in 1936 MGM epic *Romeo and Juliet*. Like Howard, director W. S. Van Dyke would go on to much better things (*San Francisco* and the first four *Thin Man* films among others). 79 minutes. Fair.

IMDb: This film was probably written and presented as a cautionary tale in its day, for white Anglo-Saxons weren't supposed to be cavorting with the natives back in the 1930s and our hero Dan learns that fact the hard way. According to this movie, sticking with your own "kind" is the smartest thing to do because when it comes to white folks and native peoples, "Never The Twain Shall Meet." As for the performances, both Howard and C. Aubrey Smith have worked on much better films. They give it their best here, but it's not enough to keep the movie afloat / Strange but interesting. "Racist" by today's standards but must have been "racy" in its day / With better writing, this might have been a decent film with thoughtful things to say about race relations. However, the main character, Tamea, is so obnoxious and one-dimensional that I repeatedly contemplated turning off before it was done. Howard throws up his career, moves to the South Pacific with a dopey, savage she-demon and becomes a beach bum! What next? Who cares?! Patronising and dumb. A silly mess / One of many South Sea Island films luring in audiences with sex appeal and giving them a lesson about race mixing / Howard gets an emotional workout as the man jarringly confronted with his lover's unfamiliar culture; his slow dissipation is convincingly portrayed. Spanish teenager Conchita Montenegro gives an energetic and lively performance as the uninhibited child of nature who entices him to leave his wealth and position behind. Together they make a most interesting movie couple / Somehow Howard comes out of this unscathed. He's remembered today fondly for his role in *Gone With The Wind*, not this turkey.

Three contemporary reviews:

(1) *Pirandello would say, concerning the heat along the Rialto, that it's only hot if you think so. The chances are the cosmopolite won't think so if he happens to seek sanctuary during this week inside the Capitol, where a most particular brand of South Sea heat is being retailed from the screen in connection with W. S. Van Dyke's new version of Never The Twain Shall Meet. Leslie Howard, a level-headed young man if Hollywood ever saw one, makes a brave show of ploughing through the heat to reach Tamea, Peter B. Kyne's untamed island beauty, but winds up flat on his back with a dirty stubble of beard and an empty bottle of what used to be known as strong drink. As young Dan Pritchard, of the San Francisco Pritchards, Mr. Howard puts behind him uncounted wealth and a lovely society girl to achieve this end on a Polynesian atoll. He does conquer Tamea, the atmosphere and the whisky bottles in the end, because Mr. Kyne has decreed that the twain - East and West, for those with flabby memories - can never jell. But the eighty-minute battle is worth travelling to the Capitol's air-cooled auditorium to see. The action is divided*

neatly between San Francisco and the previously mentioned coral strand, and Mr. Van Dyke manages both locales very expertly. The departure from this life of Tamea's French father, when he learns that he has contracted leprosy, makes for an affecting minute or two at the beginning. It looks for the next few moments as though Tamea is going to be cute and sweet and very trying when she has her first contact with civilisation in the Pritchard household. But Conchita Montenegro gets through these scenes prettily, so that it is almost pleasurable watching her grimacing at Dan's fiancée, kicking off her new store shoes, frightening the servants and making an unabashed play for Dan's attention in the most public places. Mr. Howard comes through with another of his specimens of finished acting, investing his character with humour and personality. That is, of course, before the heat gets him and he decides to go native. After that Mr. Kyne's story goes its own sombre course and the she-is-East-and-you-are-West-and-you'll-never-be-anything-else type of dialogue gets the upper hand. C. Aubrey Smith gets in a brief but pleasant bit as the elder Pritchard and Clyde Cook [below, left] plays a worn-out beachcomber without mannerisms. In the part of Maisie - Dan's fiancée - Karen Morley plays exceptionally well, and another newcomer, Miss Montenegro, flashes an appealing Latin loveliness in the role of Tamea. Mr. Van Dyke's photography and direction are excellent throughout ...¹⁶



(2) Some beautiful performances save this talkie remake of the silent that made Anita Stewart famous. Leslie Howard, for instance, achieves real heights in

spots, but in others, he's still too camera-conscious. Conchita Montenegro makes an interesting and decidedly supple-hipped Polynesian maiden. It's lavishly produced, but, after all, the story is old enough to have known better than go talkie.¹⁷

(3) Love, passion, romance and the eternal struggle of "East is East and West is West" make *Never The Twain Shall Meet* ... one of the most colourful romances of the South Seas. Conchita Montenegro, the sensational Spanish dancer, plays the part of Tamea, South Sea Island siren, and is so real in her part that it seems hard to believe she is not a native. Leslie Howard is the American lured by the wiles of the little charmer. His infatuation for this beautiful pagan dulls his senses and blinds him to everything but the girl. His portrayal of slow degeneration on the tropical island is excellent.¹⁸

[A FREE SOUL \(1931\)](#)



This spunky little pre-Code shocker looks at alcoholism, an unhealthy close father-daughter relationship, mobsters, sex, murder and the capricious meting out of "justice" via trial by jury. Gable (above, centre) is strong in an allegedly star-making turn. Shearer (above, left) is a clothes-horse, perhaps, window-dressing to some degree, but more than that too. Lionel Barrymore's bravura performance was showy enough to win a coveted Best Actor Academy Award. Howard in a fourth-billed, relatively minor part, comes through with customary suave élan. He and Shearer will be paired again within a year in *Smilin' Through*

and in 1936 as star-crossed headliners Romeo and Juliet. And, of course, his path will cross Gable's again in 1939's *Gone With The Wind*. As for *A Free Soul*, there's little to sniff at other than the ridiculous though utterly predictable, only-in-Hollywood trial verdict. 93 minutes. Recommended.

IMDb: Howard gives an understated but effective performance. However, with the sexual fireworks between Gable and Shearer he quickly fades into the background / An excellent pre-Code flick, much better than I expected / Some movies are theatrical in the sense that all their values and methods are derived from stage values. This is one. Some, made in that sweet spot after talkies got going but before the Code kicked in, have a vitality that would be sadly lacking for a few decades to come. *A Free Soul* fits these two overlapping pockets / Shearer, while good, and stunning in the quiet parts, overdoes the dramatics with her silent screen acting. Howard once again has one of those thankless roles that doesn't tax his ability a bit. All in all, most enjoyable / It's interesting to see Rhett and Ashley tussle over a woman eight years before *Gone With The Wind*. This was one of Gable's breakthrough performances. *Sans* moustache and looking very young, his persona is fitting into place - when he slaps Jan, he packs a wallop, and he kisses a woman like he means it. Howard is an elegant, gentle and romantic Dwight, honourable as Ashley, with his protection of Jan being the only thing that matters to him. *A Free Soul* is a turgid melodrama and some of the acting may seem a little over the top, but it's still recommended for the performances and especially for the young Gable, who would be packing a wallop and kissing like he meant it for another thirty years / Sizzling dialogue and an uncommonly powerful cast make a heady mix / Astonishing. I can't believe *A Free Soul* is so little known, or that so many viewers don't get the depth of its meaning, then ... and now / This entertaining Shearer soaper concludes with one of the most electrifying courtroom performance in movie history / It is always fun to see Clark Gable charging around the screen, but Shearer is stilted. Her acting seems forced. She's not even very photogenic / An antique worth collecting thanks to a good story and fine ensemble acting / Gable slaps Shearer and becomes a star!

A contemporary review:

Talking pictures are by no means elevated by the presentation of A Free Soul ... Nevertheless, it should be stated that Lionel Barrymore does all that is possible with his role. In fact, his is the only character-isation that rings true, the other players being handicapped either through miscasting, the false conception of human psychology or poorly written lines ... Miss Shearer, who looks as captivating as ever, is called upon to act a part which is quite unsuited to her intelligent type of beauty. Leslie Howard is lost in the shuffle for some time, but finally turns up as the hero in this lurid, implausible affair. Clark Gable is all very well as a gangster, but it is problematic whether a young woman of Miss Shearer's type would ever become enamoured of an individual who behaves as he does here ... Undoubtedly all the members of the cast have ability, but the doings in this film benefit but little by their talents, except, as has been set forth, through Mr. Barrymore's portrayal.¹⁹

Leslie Howard on Norma Shearer:

About Norma Shearer, with whom I appeared in A Free Soul, I can only reiterate what has been said a dozen times before - that she does everything perfectly. She is a successful wife, a happy mother and an efficient actress. There is nothing "lucky" about her continued popularity. She is the perfect example of the actress who has got there through her own determination and good sense. Norma possesses no great histrionic talents. Her acting ability is of her own making. She has worked hard; studied the cinema technique and timing assiduously; and improved very gradually. If you see one of her films made five years ago, you can easily detect the improvement she has made. Today, she is a really polished actress, capable of placing on the screen any shade of emotion required by her director.²⁰

FIVE AND TEN (aka Daughter Of Luxury) (1931)



Dull morality tale of a dysfunctional family with wife, son and daughter (Marion Davies, above) taking their separate roads to ruin while blinkered pa - a dime store magnate - piles up the millions. One's fate saves the other three. A trip to Europe cures all ills. Howard as the Davies love-interest plays his usual suave self, but material this thin barely warrants his effort or your 89 minutes. Poor.

IMDb: Despite lavish production values, Davies and her romantic interest, Leslie Howard, are bogged down by the turgid story line, making it difficult for the audience

to find much empathy with their wealthy woes. Davies' infectious good spirits and Howard's trademark sophistication only rarely are allowed to emerge. Their one good sequence - locked on the rooftop of the world's tallest building for a night - comes too late. Excellent performances from stage veteran Richard Bennett as Davies' father and Douglass Montgomery (billed as Kent Douglass) as her younger brother rescue the film from sinking completely into melodramatics / Leaden romance overwhelms serious tale of obsession / Despite Davies' charm, the film doesn't work. The best performance comes from Douglass / Stiff, flat and extremely boring fluff / An incredibly sexy pre-code film. Sparks fly in Howard and Davies' scenes together / There's an amorality about *Five And Ten* that gives it a mature, sophisticated feel, but what could make for an absorbing depiction of a wealthy family in free-fall à la *Magnificent Ambersons* takes a back seat to the mawkishly stilted romance between Davies and Howard. The movie suffers immeasurably as the two, especially Howard, chew scenery when they go into the clinches ... A Davies vehicle in which the pair grind gears and mood for most of the ride / A solid film with terrific performances from Davies, Howard and Douglass / The effects of wealth on the characters is more interesting than the love story ... Douglass's troubled Avery steals the film / A good film that is well worth your time, though be aware that the Davies-Howard part is probably the weakest / Disappointing.

Three contemporary reviews:

(1) *It is a different Miss Davies and an effective one, her ability to convey the depth of suffering being nicely tempered by sincerity and restraint. Nevertheless, Miss Davies can't do the tempering for the story and the other characters. Though she has the assistance of such expert players as Leslie Howard and Richard Bennett, the picture resolves into a lugubrious and overdrawn study of woe as it afflicts the members of a millionaire family which has set itself to buck the chilled citadel of New York's social set ... Miss Davies and Howard play superlatively together, and Richard Bennett's characterisation is clear cut. Irene Rich is sympathetic as the unhappy wife and Kent Douglass appears as the youth who simply can't stand the strain of it all.*²¹

(2) *Daughter Of Luxury shines above all for the opportunity it provides to Marion Davies for a display of her brilliant talent as a screen actress. She still makes a captivating heroine who is not too sure about her man. But the merit of the film goes to the discovery it has made of a new star of the opposite sex. Leslie Howard by name, he has all the power and charm of an English actor, coupled with that priceless possession, from the point of view of this country's audience, a finely resonant speaking voice. One may see Daughter Of Luxury and forget it, but the acting of Leslie Howard will remain until his name is being shouted round Broadway.*²²

(3) *Miss Davies achieves a masterpiece of characterisation as Jennifer, the courageous heroine of Fannie Hurst's novel ... Leslie Howard, that distinguished young British actor, plays opposite Miss Davies as the architect who mistakes her interest in his welfare. He offers a sterling performance.*²³

DEVOTION (1931)



This luminously photographed tale of crossed love simmers without ever quite coming to the boil, though it ends charmingly and no time spent in the company of Howard and Ann Harding (above) is entirely wasted. 62 years before *Mrs. Doubtfire*, she establishes herself *in cognito* in his household as governess of his son. The rival suitor / painter is played in his penultimate film before untimely death by Robert Williams (see Jean Harlow, *Platinum Blonde*). Not bad, though Howard-Harding #2²⁴ *The Animal Kingdom* is much better. 73 minutes.

IMDb: I have always thought it was a shame that Leslie Howard is remembered today, if at all, for one of his weakest roles, that of Ashley Wilkes in *Gone With The Wind*. He was so much better than that! An actor, director, playwright, you name it, he did it all. He was also a helpful mentor to other actors such as Humphrey Bogart and William Gargan. In *Devotion*, he is a lawyer loved by Ann Harding from afar. Yes, the plot plays out a little like a Mills and Boon novel, but in such a charming manner that the viewer can just sit back and enjoy! / The lightest of trifles, with some lapses of logic - but was there ever a greater year for clothes than 1931? An enjoyable movie if you can suspend belief that Harding could disguise herself as an older woman. She was too youthful and pretty / A charming, sweet, sometimes clever love story. An assortment of great old character actors brighten the film with some earthiness before it floats away with ethereal Ann's delicate manner and beauty. One of the charms of a Harding film is looking at her shimmering blonde coif. Here it's hidden half the time - but she is quite wonderful. The storyline's emotional charge is sweet, heartfelt and reminds us of the lost innocence of early cinema / What a bore. Every bit the "creaky early talkie" with a soundtrack full of dead air and awkward silences. A chore to sit through, redeemed only to Robert Williams' naturalistic acting, which practically jumps off the screen.

Three contemporary reviews:

(1) *Devotion ... succeeds in being quite a pleasing entertainment, owing principally to the excellent cast, headed by the radiant and talented Ann Harding, and to Robert Milton's competent direction. In this Cinderella-like story ... Mr. Howard rivals Miss Harding in acting, the portrayals of both being gratifyingly restrained and agreeably sympathetic.*²⁵

(2) *Every one of the actors, down to the last bell-hop and taxicab driver, gives an extra fine performance. It is one of the best acted pictures we have ever seen. Leslie Howard is exceptionally good.*²⁶

(3) *Although basically romantic drama, Devotion has been handled with a light touch which seasons its interesting plot with gay mirth ... Leslie Howard, the handsome and talented young man who won a recognised place by his work in Outward Bound, Five And Ten, A Free Soul and other pictures, acquits himself magnificently in the romantic lead opposite Miss Harding.*²⁷

[*SERVICE FOR LADIES \(aka Reserved For Ladies\) \(1932\)*](#)



This curious but consistently watchable film tells the strange tale of Max, head waiter of London's Grand Palace Hotel, who chases off to Switzerland after a woman (Elizabeth Allan, above), only to be mistaken at his destination for a royal prince. His five times married mistress - a countess - follows. Few stories

concerning the problems of love across the social divide can have come more oddly packaged. A fascinating peek into an alien, vanished world. The King is played by George Grossmith, son of the famous Gilbert and Sullivan baritone of the same name. 71 minutes. Worth finding.

IMDb: A kind of *Cinderella* in reverse, where the boy is the one who gets the magical evening. Howard plays the role with his usual charm. I'm sure it did well in Europe, I can't see it having much of a market in Depression era America. Still it's a nice, dated antique of a film / A charming, dated and amusing little trifle from a different, more class conscious age / A very dated and deadly dull British comedy of manners. Howard, who usually has such a flair for romantic comedy, has to carry the film with very little help from Allan and Hume. The script doesn't give them enough to work with, so the performances are undistinguished to say the least / Not a whole lot of story or plot, but the cast members are uniformly talented and their characters are generally likable. A pleasant entertainment / Still retains a good deal of charm despite its age. Both a romantic comedy and a comedy of errors, its elegant, smooth touch, through the refined performances of all its leads, makes for enjoyable viewing even today. Perhaps the class distinction theme and the royalist subplot are attributable to the background of the writers, who were fellow Hungarian expats along with director Alexander Korda. Their youth was spent in the more benign twilight period of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, a time of rigid social conditions and mores roundly extinguished by later World War, the Roaring Twenties, the Great Depression and their resulting upheavals. Indeed, by 1932, the notion that a daughter of the wealthy might elope with some charmer from the working classes was no longer unusual, due in part to its actual occurrence in instances usually exploited by the tabloids of the time. The nostalgic patina of *Service For Ladies* is most likely attributable to the perspective of these Hungarian writers, who probably perceived more modern conditions as less conducive to a light romantic comedy than the remembered Europe of their youth. Thus if the film is viewed more as fairy tale than social commentary, it becomes more digestible, if not more enjoyable.

Two contemporary reviews:

(1) *Leslie Howard, one of the most ingratiating and talented among the group of English actors who have become equally well known in America, made a picture in London last Summer. Reserved For Ladies ... is the only British picture Mr. Howard has thus far appeared in. His American cinema contributions have been numerous, though still too infrequent. The requirements made upon Mr. Howard in Reserved For Ladies are very light indeed. As Max, headwaiter at the Grand Palace Hotel, who falls in love with a wealthy girl far above him on the social ladder, he need only to be polite and charming and soft spoken, things which Leslie Howard can do admirably.*²⁸

(2) *Leslie Howard, that suave English actor who made a hit in Devotion and A Free Soul plays the part of the lovesick head waiter. It is a very good role [offering] many opportunities for him to show the satirical type of actor he really is. Howard has that English touch in his acting which makes him outstanding as a character portrayer.*²⁹

SMILIN' THROUGH (1932)



"Right you are ..."

Deservedly Best Picture nominated (losing out to *Cavalcade*), *Smilin' Through* is a lovely film about hatred, grief, forgiveness and reconciliation. The tale that unfolds is sentimental, to be sure, but deeply moving and beautifully rendered, thanks to a cogent, uncompromising script (developed from a successful 1919 play) and strong performances all round. Fredric March's portrayal of Wayne Senior (the blackguard) is something of a caricature, but perhaps necessary to maximise the difference between father and son. And, while it's a challenge in any production to fault the lavishly gifted Leslie Howard, he plays here a 70 year old nearing death (see above) less than convincingly - no quaver, no stiffness, no stoop, no wrinkles or lines - altogether too *vital*. Perhaps we should blame the director? Norma Shearer, in her second film with Howard (after *A Free Soul* and with *Romeo and Juliet* to come) is terrific and it's nice to see Beryl Mercer (*Outward Bound*, *Berkeley Square*) back again. 97 minutes. Seek and savour.

IMDb: The cat's miaow. One of the best movies ever made. As long as you aren't a cold-hearted beast, you'll love it, so put the kettle on, brew the tea and settle back with Mrs Crouch's sinkers, dumplings and maybe a slender cookie or two and watch this fabulous romance right now / Too old-fashioned and sentimental / Have the tissues handy / The well-drawn characters demonstrate nobility, humour and attachment to each other with poetic simplicity. Even an elderly man, as portrayed by Leslie Howard, commits his loving, selfish and last surprising acts with grace / This classic weepy is not

that good a movie. The writing is pretty clunky / By far the best of the three filmed versions, with two unforgettably touching parts: Howard and Mooneyen's wedding and their reunion after his death / The wedding scene is a masterpiece, understated and heartbreaking, but I'm finally able to handle it. It's that very last scene that gets me every time. Best kind of tears, though - the kind you're "smiling through" / An excellent tearjerker, perhaps a little overlong, in which all three leads are amazing / Sumptuous in decor and cinematography, but with real heart and intelligence, *Smilin' Through* is a perfect, soaringly triumphant genre piece destined to give you the most delicious heartache / Deeply redolent of its time / An amazing film. Simply delightful.

Three contemporary reviews:

(1) *It is a beautiful production, too immaculate, if anything, in its scenes of the past. It is rich in sentiment, but Mr. Franklin has permitted sufficient gentle comedy to relieve the romance and the tragedy of bygone years. It is another venture that benefits by expert photography, particularly in those scenes in which a wraith-like figure appears and talks ... Mr. Howard's performance is splendid, even though his voice belies his disguise of old age. He is, however, so nicely restrained during his scenes that it is a joy to witness his interpretation at all times. And his chess partner ... is admirably acted by Mr. Heggie.*³⁰

(2) *MGM have given the film a beautiful production; delicacy and sympathy distinguish the direction of Sidney Franklin; the dialogue is completely admirable, the performances are all ... excellent and there is a sustained mood of softness and earnestness which strikes a responsive chord in the audience. Norma Shearer is honest, appealing and at times very effective. Leslie Howard, he of the magically soothing charm, is unobtrusively perfect as Sir John, young and old. Fredric March, O.P. Heggie, Ralph Forbes, Beryl Mercer and an engaging child ... complete a thoroughly admirable group of players who do much to make *Smilin' Through* the fine production it is.*³¹

(3) *This film's title is grotesquely unsuitable. Even in full it would be misleading, but the omission of the final consonant of the first word gives it an unbearably arch air of facetiousness, while in fact the film manages to be both a sensitive and sentimental account of the conflict between young love and old feud ... Up to a certain point the film succeeds in being at once rational and moving, and it owes not a little to the acting of Miss Norma Shearer as Kathleen. Only in the last few minutes does it collapse into an abyss of bathos, and for that the director is to be blamed, first for not knowing when to stop, and secondly for allowing a passion for tidying up loose ends to betray him into an absurd, as well as a faintly offensive, climax. Mr. Fredric March, as Kenneth Wayne, supports Miss Shearer adequately, while Mr. Leslie Howard, as John Carteret, makes a highly credible pretence of being an old man, although he is actually at his best in those "flash-back" scenes which show him as a young and ardent bridegroom.*³²

THE ANIMAL KINGDOM (aka *The Woman In His House*) (1932)



Stage drama *The Animal Kingdom*, written by Philip (*The Philadelphia Story*) Barry and starring Leslie Howard (who also co-produced) ran for 183 performances at Broadway's Broadhurst Theatre through the first half of 1932 before being filmed by RKO as *The Woman In His House*. Along with Howard, William Gargan, playing ex-pug butler Red, and Ilka Chase, as Grace, also reprised their stage roles on screen. Howard and Gargan were close friends and, as with Bogart when *The Petrified Forest* came to be filmed, Howard used his clout to his friend's advantage - which, in this case, is a shame because Gargan's limited acting skills impact negatively on the whole. In marked contrast, female leads Ann Harding (above) and Myrna Loy are both very good, as is the tale of games that are played, of traps that are set, of restlessness and dissatisfaction with love, with work, with art, with life. Howard's Connecticut-based publisher Tom loves free-thinking artist Daisy, but only comes the hard way to know it. 85 minutes. Recommended.

IMDb: A sparkling film examining character and intelligence, motives and integrity, the artist's life versus the conventional life. It is a love story which depicts love and friendship on many levels. This film is one of those interesting ones where the viewer has to be able to listen to dialogue and interpret meaning. There are subtle interactions between the characters and a civilized, low-key ambiance / The story hasn't aged one bit. Howard is brilliant / Surprisingly honest and frank / I enjoyed the movie, but I'm surprised that so many seem not to notice how shallow and stupid its ideas are / A super film, quite shocking even for the time. The ending was also in keeping with the pre-code Code. Entertaining, intelligent and heartily recommended / Interesting story, good

cast, enjoyable watch / There is a uniqueness in this film's open attitude towards love and friendship and how to piece them together that I have not often seen / Harding's performance is very honest ... Loy, absolutely ravishing, essays the part of the glam wife beautifully. Howard is handsome and thoughtful in the lead. Very good.

The Animal Kingdom was a particularly significant picture all round. As a production, it was a masterpiece. As an opportunity for the various players in it, it was one of the most outstanding pictures for many a year. It did much to persuade Leslie Howard to remain on in talkies. It encouraged Ann Harding after a number of not-too-good roles. It gave William Gargan a fine break (and started a warm friendship between him and Leslie). And it changed Myrna Loy's whole career, for she was on the point of saying goodbye to Hollywood, in complete despair of ever getting anywhere. She has never looked back since that production.²

Three contemporary reviews:

(1) *If The Animal Kingdom leaves something to be desired in the way of imaginative camera work, in the way of a departure from the technique of the stage, it remains nevertheless a creditable photoplay, retaining the best features of the gifted Philip Barry. It is flawlessly acted, thanks to the fine work of Mr. Howard, Miss Harding, Mr. Gargan and Myrna Loy, who, we almost forgot to tell you, plays the role of the conscientious but unsuccessful wife.³³*

(2) *The screen of the RKO Roxy gives to many of the admirably photographed scenes a sense of depth and the vocal delivery is excellent. Never has Mr. Howard been seen to better advantage, for having acted so long in the play, he was well at home in the part of Tom Collier ... Miss Harding has the role of Daisy, which she plays agreeably enough, but not always with the spontaneity one would wish. Her beauty, however, atones for her somewhat too placid performance ... Director Edward Griffith keeps the story flowing interestingly, although occasionally he is a little too fond of close-ups and of abrupt entries. Yet the incidents glide along nicely without any muddling ... Another player who does a capital work is Miss Loy as Cecelia. She speaks her lines nicely and suits the action to the words and some of her best scenes are with Mr. Howard ... It is a picture in which the playwright's ideas have been adhered to faithfully. It has the subtlety and restraint of the stage work and the settings are always in good taste.³⁴*

(3) *Leslie Howard and Ann Harding are so perfectly cast that you forget they are playing a part. They are Tom and Daisy. And, thank Heaven, the play has not been sacrificed to give all to the star. Ann Harding actually has less footage than Myrna Loy - but what she does with it! William Gargan is simply grand as an ex-pug butler. The entire cast is excellent. Don't miss this.³⁵*

Leslie Howard on Myrna Loy:

A woman who has rightly received much praise recently is Myrna Loy, with whom I appeared in The Animal Kingdom. This was the first film in which she dropped "vamping" and played the sort of part for which she is now famous. Myrna makes no pretence of being a great actress and is content to typify on the screen the wholesome, humorous American girl of today. This she does extremely well. She is quick-witted and has a grand sense of humour, which makes her an ideal player for a film like The Thin Man. It is more difficult to act such a part convincingly than many people would imagine, for, in such a film, the entertainment value doesn't rely so much upon the plot as it does upon the ability of the actors and actresses to behave naturally. They must walk and talk exactly as you or I do in private life, and it is very difficult indeed to do this when you are standing before a camera. Myrna's naturalness breathes life into the roles she plays and she shares with Maurice Chevalier the faculty of being able to say naughty things nicely and trite things humorously.²⁰

[SECRETS \(1933\)](#)



This biopic spanning fifty years in the lives of John and Mary Carlton hurries through its episodic catalogue of significant events - courtship and elopement, pioneering out West and a successful career in national politics - without ever

getting its teeth into any of them. Howard as a cowpunching roughneck homesteader is unconvincing and Mary Pickford (above) in her last film is decorous and competent, but lacks depth. Mordant Ned Sparks (see Stanwyck reviews) makes a welcome return, his character called this time not Happy but, with similar irony, Sunshine.

Arguably the silent era's most renowned female star and, according to Ethan Katz "the most popular star in screen history", "America's sweetheart" (though Canadian born!) Mary Pickford called it a day at this point in her career rather than see herself struggle with ever less conviction to play young while growing old. She said:

*I didn't want what happened to Chaplin to happen to me. The little girl made me. I wasn't waiting for the little girl to kill me ... My career was planned, there was never anything accidental about it. It was planned, it was painful, it was purposeful. I'm not exactly satisfied, but I'm grateful.*³⁶

Secrets is watchable - it's Pickford and Howard, after all - though superficial. Once is enough. 88 minutes.

IMDb: I get the impression that the film follows the three act structure of the play it's based on - First Act: light romantic comedy, Second Act: Western melodrama, Third Act: relationship drama, and finally an epilogue to tie up all the loose ends. Pickford is superb / Pickford gives a tremendous performance in her final film. She's very funny in the undressing scene and has an Oscar-worthy moment when her baby dies in the cabin. Truly remarkable. Howard is also very good / Pickford's scenes under attack in the cabin are not to be missed. I think her experience in silents helped her because, even without dialogue, she conveys panic, terror, resolution, grief and determination within seconds. Not many actors could have done it / Whole chunks of the film seem to have been edited out, leaving the viewer to piece together what remains / When the camera shows Pickford as an old lady in the Model T, there is a genuine feeling of finality to her career / Howard comes off as rather wooden and tough to understand, especially since his character's personality changes so wildly and unpredictably / The film suffers badly from a lack of continuity / Has a packaged, formulaic feel. Not terribly gripping / Three movies in one, and all unsatisfying / In director Borzage's 1924 version of this film, an old Mary Carlton looks back on her life and its "secrets". For this re-make, Pickford is initially photographed to appear as young as possible. Later, she is "aged" (although photographed in soft focus throughout) so the entire framing device of the original film is lost ... Neither Pickford nor Howard would appear on film into their 70s, which makes the ending of *Secrets* a bittersweet farewell.

Two contemporary reviews:

(1) *Notwithstanding the disjointed story, Howard favours it with an excellent performance. He is admirable as the lovelorn young man, and he looks the rugged pioneer in the subsequent episode. But one cannot say that he ever*

*strikes one as a man who has clandestine appointments with fast women. Miss Pickford is vivacious and charming in the New England phases of the picture, but her acting during the hard times in the cabin is not always convincing. She is at her best in the lighter interludes. The Western element in this pioneering outburst is not suited to her.*³⁷

*(2) A silent film has already been made out of this play ... and now Mary Pickford and Leslie Howard come along to take part in a talking version, which is too long, too slow in tempo, too stereotyped in technique and unfriendly to Miss Pickford in that it gives her a part she has neither the personality nor the versatility adequately to fill ... Mr. Howard, too, seems to find something in the film's atmosphere inimical to his acting. As a romantic young clerk he finds an occasional chance to exploit that quiet and not unsatirical humour which is so characteristic of him, but when the film moves West and John grows in years and prosperity his assurance falls away and there is no conviction in anything he does. Director Frank Borzage is much too inclined to repeat his effects, and his handling of what should have been the big scene of the film, the siege of the Carltons' ranch, is too slow and too obscure.*³⁸

[CAPTURED! \(1933\)](#)



69 minutes of crudely acted, plotted and scripted B-movie Great War nonsense, set in a German prison camp fifteen miles behind the lines. Howard is utterly

wasted in this dismal fare and Fairbanks, who wasn't very good in *Outward Bound*, is no better this time either. Understanding German would be a small help, though not nearly enough to matter. Dismayingly poor.

IMDb: Howard and Fairbanks are both impressive. Howard's role is grittier, scruffier and more virile than usual for him and he makes the most of it. A creaky plot but worth watching / A pretty good pre-Code melodrama with an impressively gritty World War I prison camp ambiance and pleasingly complicated morality. An almost-Great Escape / A somewhat far-fetched plot spoils what could have been an excellent movie / With dialogue full of clichés, some of the romantic flashbacks to Howard's past are an embarrassment / An entertaining war picture that is not really much about war at all / A feeling of artificiality ... Too predictable ... Camp commandant Lukas is by far the most interesting character in the film / Gripping / Some very good acting and nice sets that look rather authentic. However, given the improbability of it all, you must suspend disbelief. If you can, it's worth seeing and definitely gets points for being original / The film has many of the themes that later POW movies will be known for - the duty to escape vs. the duty to keep the men safe; how far the leader will go in "collaboration" with the camp commandant; duty and honour vs. personal desire; the relevance of international law during the insanity of war ... The final flying sequence alone is worth the price of admission. Recommended.

Three contemporary reviews:

(1) *Captured! is a screen conception of Sir Philip Gibbs' book Fellow Prisoners, but, despite all its adequate staging, it is a trifle too melodramatic to be credible ... Notwithstanding the lurid nature of this vehicle, Mr. Howard gives a pains-taking performance, Mr. Fairbanks is believable as Digby and Paul Lukas is quite satisfactory as the more humane German commandant.*³⁹

(2) *The picture, highly melodramatic, has yet such a ring of honesty about writing and acting that even last-minute confessions and reprieves are believable. Captured! has also Leslie Howard, whose characteristic combination of casualness and intentness has a way of making the most blood and thunder situations appear perfectly natural ... Somewhere in the writing of the role, or in the acting of Douglas Fairbanks Jr., the friend emerges as a charming but thoroughly untrustworthy cad, such that Mr. Fairbanks' efforts to make him sympathetic are only occasionally successful. Mr. Howard's role remains one of those gallant, gaily self-sacrificing ones against which the disloyalties of his co-hero have little chance. Captured! is melodrama at its best ... with one of Mr. Howard's usual fine performances and some grand war stuff.*⁴⁰

(3) *Mr. Howard, as a result of this film, is just about where he was before he made it. He does not suffer greatly in prestige (although ... called upon to provide a great deal of self-immolation) but nor could he be said to have gained. It is ... that kind of picture.*⁴¹

BERKELEY SQUARE (1933)



Howard's reprisal of the Peter Standish role he'd previously played on the stages of London and New York in 1929 earned him a first Academy Award Best Actor nomination and it's not hard to see why, for, as usual, he carries all before him, never striking a wrong note or needing to strain for effect. He was born to act, and does it sublimely. Like *Outward Bound*, *Berkeley Square* was a '20s stage hit given a '30s screen rebirth. I spent much of it wondering what happened to the original Peter Standish when the second one travels back 149 years to take his place. The answer, made clear only at the end, is that there was a criss-cross. In other words, during all the time that Standish #2 spent back in the past, S #1 (unseen, off-screen and forgotten) assumed his place in the future, and at the same moment S #2 returned to his own time, so did S #1 - to marry Kate while Helen (Heather Angel, above) pines and dies. A love story with a difference that, while lacking grip, intrigues throughout. Beryl Mercer (Mrs. Midget in *Outward Bound*) reappears and the part of Kate is taken by the same Valerie Taylor who, twelve years on, will co-script *Take My Life* with *Poldark* author Winston Graham. 86 minutes. Good.

IMDb: An amusing love story with a good dash of humour / The Tyrone Power version from 1951 was and is more cinematically viable / Howard and Angel are a wonderfully matched pair of lovers / One of Howard's better film performances / This grandfather of all time-travel movies is a charming delight / Gentle and stately / An enchanting film

badly in need of restoration. Howard is perfect - handsome, ethereal and well-suited to the period aspects. Heather Angel is delightful, petite and pretty with a soothing voice and a fragility that lends itself well to the role. A beautiful film / Creaky yet strangely haunting version of a theatrical classic / An interesting plot marred by a stilted and overly mannered set of characters / One of the earliest time-travel pictures and a hugely enjoyable romantic fantasy / An old film but a terrific one / Highly Recommended.

Three contemporary reviews:

(1) *Berkeley Square is an imaginative, beautiful and well-handled production. The atmosphere of Berkeley Square, London, is resurrected almost perfectly, as it is today, and presumably as it was in the 18th century. There's a devotion to detail and atmospherics that is almost painfully exacting. Leslie Howard in the same role he played on the stage (he produced John Balderston's stage play himself) is as near perfection as can be hoped for in screen characterisation. The rest of the cast is more than adequate. The story of Berkeley Square is still another variation on Mark Twain's A Connecticut Yankee In King Arthur's Court in which Twain used the idea of flashing a character into another century for fun. However, Balderston takes the thing very seriously. Balderston's character, Peter Standish (played by Howard) moves back into a spot used by one of his forefathers and falls in love with a gal of that period. It's a new kind of love story. Heather Angel as the girl turns in a splendid performance.*⁴²

(2) *In the matter of poetic charm, nothing quite like it has emerged from Hollywood. It is an example of delicacy and restraint, a picture filled with gentle humour and appealing pathos ... This sensitive and provocative story is admirably suited to a shadow entertainment, and director Frank Lloyd has not missed an opportunity to do justice to camera possibilities ... Except for excursions which can be taken in photography, the film echoes the play. It leaves you sometimes hungry for more of some scenes, but so did the stage work ... Mr. Howard revels in his role. He has done excellent work in other films, but it is doubtful whether he has ever given so impressive and imaginative a performance. He steps from modern attire to the clothes of the eighteenth century without any trace of awkwardness. Heather Angel is attractive and efficient as Helen.*⁴³

(3) *One will not deny that Berkeley Square is refreshingly different from the customary run of pictures. There is novelty in the idea of a young man of today falling in love with a girl of the 18th century, a lover who, perforce, has to leave his sweetheart of 1784 and return to the times to which he belongs. Here is an idea which, we would say, is better suited to the more comprehensive medium of the screen than to the stage. But as the screen is, or ought to be, essentially a medium of pictorial movement, and as Berkeley Square is, for all its velvety charm, a play which talks more than it moves, it misses being a great picture ... We fear it is not destined to be a tremendous box-office success.*⁴⁴

OF HUMAN BONDAGE (1934)



In which club-footed, failed painter med student Philip inexplicably falls for tramp waitress Mildred. While Howard is his usual assured, easy self, Davis (above) gives a broad, unsubtle performance, arguably in keeping with the sluttiness of her character, but utterly unconvincing as any kind of object of desire, no matter how perverse. Maugham mined his life for narrative - the trouble is that what he found was of rather more interest to him than anyone else, and this thin material is decidedly unpersuasive - although the original novel was very successful. Kay Johnson as Norah and Frances Dee as Sally both do well, but in comparison with other Howard vehicles - *The Animal Kingdom*, for example - this is small beer. 83 minutes.

IMDb: Davis does a fine job of portraying the kind of irredeemable succubus that the writer evoked with such chilling accuracy / A cautionary tale that delivers / Creaky and primitive, with some unintentional laughs along the way / This is a movie that suffered at the hands of the Hayes Code. "It's not me lungs, is it?" croaks Mildred. Sure, he can see all the way down your throat to your lungs. Actually, Mildred had syphilis, but in the old movies, syphilis and TB were really pretty much interchangeable / Davis in *Bondage* is an example of an actress's triumph - not that she doesn't overdo it at times / Davis is stunning in several scenes but makes the viewer wonder what Philip sees in her that makes her so much part of his obsession. She alienates the viewer early on and makes you realize what a fool he is by continuing to subject himself to her boorish behaviour / Davis is way too shrill, almost demonic, so strident and predatory as to seem scarcely human. Howard, in contrast, is excellent. His wan, somewhat wilted

good looks are perfect for this failed aesthete. Nor does he impose a personal interpretation on the part, which gives his work a rare clarity. He seems completely in control here, as he should be, playing a man with a rational intellect who is in the grip of irrational emotions he cannot manage or even fully satisfy, as the object of his affections moves him in ways he cannot understand. Howard was a fine actor, too often cast in standard romantic parts which compelled him to fall back on charm, which he doesn't use here / Ridiculously unbelievable / A beautiful story, tragic and bitter-sweet / Enjoyable in spite of Howard's performance / Still gives me goosebumps / Howard is great / One of the finest films of the '30s / LIFE magazine called Bette's work here "the best performance ever recorded on the screen by a US actress" - and they're right.

Four contemporary reviews:

(1) *If one did not remember Leslie Howard's clever acting in Outward Bound and Berkeley Square, one might be tempted to say that his portrait of Philip Carey ... excels any performance he has given before the camera. No more expert illustration of getting under the skin of the character has been done in motion pictures. Mr. Howard suffers seemingly all the woe and cheer experienced by Carey. Another enormously effective portrait is that of Bette Davis as Mildred Rogers ... John Cromwell, the director, has given many a subtle and imaginative touch to his scenes. Now and again he makes use of staccato bits of music to emphasize Carey's clubfoot limp. It is pathetic, but strong, to observe this young man, always aware of his affliction. There is nothing stereotyped about this film, and even the closing scenes are set forth with a pleasing naturalness and a note of cheer.*⁴⁵

(2) *Leslie Howard gives an excellent portrayal of the tortured, crippled, neurotic hero of Somerset Maugham's famous novel. The screen version is reasonably faithful to the book. Miss Bette Davis gives a spectacular portrayal of the vulgar woman who dominates the unhappy hero. The film is intelligently written, but only fair entertainment results.*⁴⁶

(3) *With a restraint and integrity rare in motion pictures, RKO studios have fashioned one of the most famous novels of the twentieth century, Of Human Bondage, into an engrossing cinema experience. It provides Leslie Howard with a role worthy of his sensitive talents, and unexpectedly reveals Bette Davis as an unusually vivid actress, who up to now has been languishing for want of a character she could dig her teeth into. Mr. Howard, in passing through New York last week en route to England, expressed the opinion that he feared Of Human Bondage was too good. He meant presumably that it would not click at the box office ... "You disgust me!" These three words are memorable and greatly satisfying. In addition, they give Miss Davis an opportunity to launch one of the most effective tirades this reviewer has ever witnessed. It is a brilliant revelation of a thoroughly despicable character and Miss Davis makes it as ugly as could be desired ... We have said little of Mr. Howard's perform-*

ance, but it has the same dignity, understanding and perfection which he brings to all of his portrayals, and it is probably the most interesting he has thus far contributed to motion pictures. Mr. Howard and Miss Davis dominate the production so completely that the other actors are quite submerged. But they are all competent. John Cromwell's direction is responsible for much of the film's merit.⁴⁷

(4) A sincere and noble effort to translate into screen terms the secret drama of a human soul, this is a pioneer in psychology as translated into photography. The quivering traces of emotion in Leslie Howard's sensitive face, the slight tremble of his hands, these tell us of the sick misery, the writhing humiliation of a proud nature bound by some inexplicable fascination to a cheap and common one. As the thwarted medical student agonisingly aware of his clubfoot, who dreams of dancing like other men, Howard gives a performance that makes one ache with sympathy. As Mildred, the little anaemic, grasping waitress, Bette Davis is devastatingly perfect. With few comedy moments to lighten the pity and pain of Phillip's long enslavement, the effect may be too depressing for the average amusement seeker, and yet any movie fan owes it to himself to see this tenderly directed, superbly photographed and faithfully performed classic. It is very touching - a picture you'll remember. Highlights: Davis' emotional outburst when she pours out the venom of a repellent mind; Reginald Owen as the earthy and cheery benefactor; the womanliness of Frances Dee and Kay Johnson; the ravaged face of Leslie Howard.⁴⁸

Leslie Howard on Bette Davis:

The most courageous woman with whom I have ever worked is Bette Davis. She is a girl whose mentality has a strong masculine streak and she lacks almost entirely the normal vanity of her sex. When the cast for *Of Human Bondage* was being assembled, Director John Cromwell approached quite a score of famous actresses to play the part of the heartless trollop with whom the hero of the story fell in love. It was thought that whoever played the part would be finished in films, and everyone refused. The only girl with sufficient courage to do it was Bette Davis. It is safe to say that, had any other actress attempted the characterisation, she would have tried to compromise. She wouldn't have dared to make the girl as ruthless and superficial as Somerset Maugham visualised her. She would, as it were, have apologised for her and tried to show that underneath there was a heart of gold - or silver, anyway. Not so Bette Davis. She seemed to delight in placing on the screen the girl's despicable psychology. She lost her glamour doing it, but she gained something far more important - the plaudits of the intelligent filmgoer. At the moment, Bette is acknowledged to be one of Hollywood's most promising character actresses, and her reputation should increase as time goes by, for it is founded, not upon sex-appeal, but on real ability.²⁰

THE LADY IS WILLING (1934)



Based on a comedy by French playwright Louis Verneuil, *The Lady Is Willing* is unique in being the only film made in England by Columbia Pictures in the 1930s and the only film directed by famous Broadway producer Gilbert Miller. A brisk and simple farce, it tells the story of a group of investors getting their own back on the financier who swindled them and gives Howard the chance to have some fun with disguises: within the first fifteen minutes we see him as a window cleaner, soldier and (above, centre) bearded doctor. The "real" doctor is played by Leslie's younger brother Arthur (1910-1995), earning his first screen credit in the pair's only joint film venture. 68 minutes of mildly diverting chaff.

IMDb: Although the decades have sadly given the film's print a real beating, the director's and cinematographer's most stylish moments are still able to shine, with Miller and Walker superbly using a blurred lens to show Gustav being unable to recognise Latour's changes of outfit. In his adaptation of Verneuil's play, writer Guy Bolton seasons his caper comedy screenplay with dashes of film noir by offsetting Latour's mad-cap costume changes with his friends' preparedness to come to grips with anyone standing in the way of them getting back their lost savings. Howard gives a terrific performance that keeps Latour's determination at its centre whilst also jumping off the screen as a cunning charmer / It is rather surprising to find Leslie Howard playing in this minor British film, notwithstanding the fact that it has a distinguished cast. *The Lady Is Willing* is not particularly good. For a much better treatment of the same idea, try instead 1959's *Too Many Crooks*.

Three contemporary reviews:

(1) *Gilbert Miller, in spite of his friendship and long professional association with Mr. Howard, has not done any too well by his star. The Lady Is Willing ... is a slim, mad farce fairly swimming in whimsy. Mr. Howard is called upon to play a comic detective. As Mr. Howard usually does what he's called on to do just a shade better than most actors, he plays a very comic detective. He wears false whiskers, and even tries a curly beard. He peers in windows as a window washer. He rides a bicycle as a flirtatious old doctor. He struts about as a conscientiously gallant soldier. He does it all with an air. Even so it was hardly worth doing ... A sad waste of a fine cast.*⁴⁹

(2) *Although the action is stilted here and there, obviously occasionally because of censorial deletions, the film has the compensating virtues of excellent acting, scintillating lines and original, but decidedly mad, escapades. In this somewhat exotic affair, which owes its origin partly to a French stage work, Leslie Howard appears as a French sleuth who frequently disguises himself as a physician bearing an uncanny resemblance to George Bernard Shaw ... Mr. Howard gives a highly amusing performance.*⁵⁰

(3) *The Lady Is Willing is played with touch and go, with more accent on the touch than on the go. It is a Frenchy farce, played by English in London, and directed by Gilbert Miller for Columbia. Gilbert, by the way, runs theatres in New York. It is a Leslie Howard picture, with Howard's calm, collected and cogent methods distinctly in the ascendant ... This is simply farce, played with such speed that only innocent laughter is the result. Comic disguises make the penchant of this detective. He is soldier, bucolic doctor, and what not. It is all amusement, not especially realistic, and deliciously funny. But don't look for anything played in Hollywood fashion. Oh, my, no! Isn't this Leslie Howard, Gilbert, Parker and an all-English cast? May be that's the reason why so many people who didn't get in on the first minute were kept so long wondering what it was all about. It takes an audience that is quick - just as it did in the days when we had real comedies ...*⁵¹

BRITISH AGENT (1934)

Kay Francis is Howard's love interest in this limp romance set amid the Russian Revolution of 1917. Torn between patriotic duty and personal desire, she fails to summon forth the necessary fervour on either front to convince (though the script doesn't help, moving the pair on from strangers to lovers in 90 seconds flat). Her leaden performance sinks what might in more capable hands have been a gripping film, though the stupidity of allied agents - decoding diplomatic letters before strangers and disclosing the location of a safe house to a "friend" (though not to a torturer) - is also risible. Howard once again shines, though. 81 unremarkable minutes. An opportunity lost.



IMDb: A simplistic, unbalanced and inane account of choosing between love and duty. A solid cast is wasted in this misguided effort / Provides an effective introductory history lesson, a relatively unbiased portrayal of two different countries and ideologies, plus a gripping love story for good measure / Howard is terrific as usual, and Michael Curtiz' direction is crackling / As history, *British Agent* leaves a lot to be desired. Had the film been made by a British studio it probably would have turned out better / For cryink out Pete sakes! You get Leslie Howard, Kay Francis, a flock of 'A' film character actors and Michael Curtiz to direct and *British Agent* is the best you can come up with? Where did they go wrong? For starters, the muddled plot is neither suspenseful nor compelling and the picture is saved only by its two stars. It is always a treat to watch Howard, one of filmdom's brightest and best actors in any picture, even if it's beneath his considerable talent. He had just finished *Of Human Bondage* and his next was *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, so with *British Agent* was in between pictures. Producink pipple vill be sent to Gulag / Strange and not very plausible / Despite a completely unbelievable romance, the film has got something ... / Kind of a muddle, with historical titbits mixed in with a maudlin love story - but better than *Reds*.

Four contemporary reviews:

(1) *Against the lurid backdrop of the Russian upheaval and collapse during the war, the Brothers Warner dramatise an episode from R.H. Bruce Lockhart's autobiographical chronicle of last year. As Britain's unofficial emissary to the revolutionary government, Leslie Howard is enormously helpful to the drama, while the momentous and delicate climaxes which crowd the story come to life on the screen in vigorous, melodramatic style. There is an unfortunate irony implicit in the structure of the photoplay which prevents British Agent from conveying to its audiences the full impact of its material. Although the love of*

*the young Briton and the fascinating Russian spy has been described with the proper tenderness and urbanity, it still fails to escape a rather furiously unimportant appearance alongside the really great events with which the film is concerned. The unofficial ambassador, in Mr. Howard's excellent performance, is so passionately chauvinistic in his blind devotion to Great Britain that when his country betrays him and jeopardises his life for the sake of diplomatic appearances, the tragedy is infinitely touching. When, thereafter, Mr. Howard and his passionate Russian begin to suffer over their personal difficulties, with an epoch-making revolution for a background, their romantic woes have a tendency to seem less than important to the spectator. Michael Curtiz has staged the drama capably, painting in the scenes of revolution and violence with swift and convincing strokes. Mr. Howard's performance, played in a key of high nervous tension and desperate courage, is all the more impressive after his totally different and equally fine performance in *Of Human Bondage*.⁵²*

(2) The romance of the love story, an obviously synthetic bit of Hollywood box office, is heavily stressed. The starring presence of Kay Francis, in what might more happily have been a minor role, throws the picture out of balance ... British Agent has as background one of the most stirring periods of modern times. When, after the imprisonment and murder of the Czar, the British Ambassador withdrew from Russia, he left behind a young consular officer. The picture calls him Stephen Locke and is most fortunate to have Leslie Howard to play the part. Mr. Howard, poorly photographed for almost the first time in his screen career, is still quietly effective as the puzzled, earnest young man who, as England's unofficial representative, finds himself forced to make promises he cannot guarantee his country will back. Mr. Howard has some ridiculous things to do, as far as the love interest is concerned. That bit of nonsense may have been unavoidable. It does harm to an otherwise fascinating film.⁵³

(3) Regarded purely from the dramatic and not from a political viewpoint, British Agent is a creditable achievement ... Leslie Howard, as Stephen Locke, gives a magnificent performance in the title role, a performance which we are inclined to regard as one of his finest on the screen. Kay Francis ... has fewer opportunities than Mr. Howard but acquits herself commendably.⁵⁴

(4) British Agent, which marks the debut of Leslie Howard and Kay Francis as co-stars, also marks a change in characterisation for both of them. Howard, the mental romanticist, goes elemental and adventurous; Kay, who is also pretty good at portraying mental suffering, turns animated adventuress. And the suspense of the story sizzles like a lighted fuse on a bomb, with a terrific surprise due any moment. In fact, there is one breath-stopping scene in the picture in which the two are together, emotion-telling, unconscious of a nearby bomb. Here is a skilful blend of realistic acting, realistic backgrounds and a realistic spy story. It's a rare combination.⁵⁵

THE SCARLET PIMPERNEL (1934)



Another epic that goes to prove the old ones are the best ones. Howard leads a fine cast through their well-drilled paces to put over a stirring tale of nobility unbowed by the worst excesses of Republican thuggery. 93 minutes.

IMDb: Howard and Massey are perfect foils for each other / Brilliantly focused and sharply contrasted. The sets are realistic and evocative. The story is one of hidden identity, of unsung heroism, illusion and danger, of risk and reward, of good men doing what's necessary to save doomed people. It's also a moving love story / The quickness and authenticity of Howard's transition from fop to sensible man to passionate hero is amazing. And his voice! He is the perfect Pimpernel / Captures the essence of the story beautifully / Howard's beautifully understated performance is based mostly in his facial expressions, which gives it its power. Later actors playing the Pimpernel tend to overdo the fop business, but he gives it just the right intensity. Oberon (above) is perfect as Lady Blakeney and has wonderful chemistry with Howard / One of the best "spy" films ever. James Bond can't hold a candle to The Pimpernel! Flows very nicely ... Practically flawless / Did Howard as Blakeney ever make a visible slip-up? Show me! Did he ever let a scene fall flat? Show me! / Well-written, well-acted and also contains a good balance of action sequences and verbal sparring. Yet it is Howard's performance that stands out most of all, in a dual role that allows him to use his talent and distinctive persona to their best advantage / Howard's finest hour / Howard is perfect / By far the best cinema version. The intelligent and succinct script sparkles with understatement. The actors' faces speak as eloquently in the pauses as in any silent drama. The black and white photography is sumptuous, from the lavish ballroom scenes to the grimy Lion D'Or, and Howard is endlessly watchable in an ever-changing portrayal of leashed strength in masquerade / Close to perfect / Sink me if this version isn't the best!

Baroness Orczy on the casting of Sir Percy Blakeney:

We felt that one of the chief difficulties about screening a story like The Scarlet Pimpernel, which has been read extensively throughout the world, was that people had formed their own idea of the chief characters. This was brought home forcibly to us when Alexander Korda cast Charles Laughton in the chief role. Indignant letters came pouring in from people of all rank and nationality saying that casting was absurd, though I personally thought that Laughton's fine acting would more than counterbalance his obvious physical unsuitability. However, public opinion decreed that Laughton should not play the part, and Leslie Howard, after much difficulty, induced his American company to allow him to come to England to characterise the Scarlet Pimpernel. Korda has been helped considerably in his work by Mr. Howard, who has such a command of technique that he can tell as much with a glance or a gesture as it would take a less-accomplished actor several lines of dialogue to put over. Mr. Howard has also grasped the psychology of the part. Too often, actors are just themselves dressed up in fancy clothes. Unless an actor really knows the mind of the character he is portraying, the finished production is almost certain to be disjointed. I was very impressed by the way in which one particular incident was handled in the studios. It was the one in which the Scarlet Pimpernel escapes from the Market Place in old Paris under the very eyes of the French police. When I wrote the novel I simply said that Sir Percy Blakeney adopted the disguise of an old woman. That was easy enough to write, but I imagined that it would be most difficult to screen. Leslie Howard, as the foppish Sir Percy, was ideal, but I did not see how he or any other male actor could play the part of an old woman without looking absurd. But, having seen the incident as it will be shown in the finished picture, I have to admit that it could not have been done with more conviction. Howard ... must have studied the ways of old women carefully to have given such a vivid interpretation.⁵⁶

Leslie Howard on Merle Oberon:

Merle Oberon is an actress of a very different calibre. Her part of Lady Blakeney opposite me in The Scarlet Pimpernel did not give her much scope, but her acting in The Battle, if immature, was exceptionally good. And I still think that her study of Anne Boleyn in The Private Life of Henry VIII, was the highlight of that famous film. Merle has beauty, dignity, innate acting ability and the intelligence to use it properly. At the moment her reputation rests to some extent upon her work in The Dark Angel. I haven't seen it yet, but of one thing I am certain - given good pictures and discerning direction, Merle is bound to become a great international star. Even a series of mediocre films that would ruin most of us might not harm her irreparably. She has that indefinable something possessed by Rudolph Valentino and Greta Garbo. Let us hope her producers will not misuse it.²⁰

Ginevra Di Verduno on Howard as Sir Percy Blakeney:

As Percy Blakeney, Leslie Howard was sensational. I realised that he must have been exceedingly amused when playing that role. The ravishing grace of his movements and the unequalled irony of his speech won me over. His slender, elegant figure was enhanced by the Eighteenth Century clothes, and the close-ups on his youthful face - actually, he was forty-one, but he looked ten years younger - highlighted his eyes, so intensely expressive. He fully embodied my Percy Blakeney, as I had fancied him when I was eleven. I discovered a great actor I have never ceased to love.⁵⁷

Two contemporary reviews:

(1) I must confess that I had my doubts as to the wisdom of casting Leslie Howard as Sir Percy in Baroness Orczy's evergreen romance The Scarlet Pimpernel. I have a great admiration for that actor and I would put his performance in Berkeley Square as one of the finest the screen has given us, but as Sir Percy, no. Well, I need not have had any misgivings. Leslie Howard is brilliant. He makes the character of the resourceful adventurer who rescued the victims of the French Revolution and hid his identity under the mask of aristocratic foppery come to life. To hear him repeat the piece of doggerel he wrote, in the character of Sir Percy, to amuse the loungers of clubland and the ladies of the court: They seek him here / They seek him there / Those Frenchies seek him everywhere / Is he in Heaven, or is he in Hell? / The demned elusive Pimpernel! is to obtain a full measure of enjoyment from the intriguingly devised, romantic character. His change of poise, too, is cleverly marked both in expression and manner. He convinces you as the man of action and as swiftly assures you - or, rather, his enemies - that he is a fop pure and simple. Alexander Korda has made a very good picture but Howard dominates it by his performance. As Sir Percy's wife who unwittingly betrays her husband's identity and then tries to undo the wrong she has done, Merle Oberon is good, if rather nebulous, but Raymond Massey is excellent as Sir Percy's mortal enemy, the French ambassador, Chauvelin. The brief glimpse Ernest Milton gives us of Robespierre during scenes of the Terror in Paris is noteworthy and Nigel Bruce is convincing as H.R.H. the Prince of Wales. As aristocrat the Comte de Tournay, whose family the Pimpernel rescues from the guillotine, O. B. Clarence is exceedingly good, and all the supporting cast fits admirably into the realistic and colourful background. If anything, Alexander Korda's direction errs on the slow side. He is apt to over-prolong scenes, but since they are so extremely well devised this fault does no more than cause a little action lag which can be forgiven. Vincent Korda's settings are remarkably good. The picture strikes an authentic note right through, whether it is dealing with the mob in Paris, the court in England, the hair's breadth escapes of

*the Pimpernel or the matching of wits between that gentleman and his arch enemy Chauvelin. There is a definite polish about the whole thing, including the costuming by John Armstrong. You will not be disappointed with the way this popular romance has been brought to the screen. It is first class entertainment.*⁵⁸

*(2) An excellent entertainment. It is one of the best Alexander Korda has produced, or has come out of England. It has human interest, an engrossing story, a lavish production and good acting. But it is a class picture. Most of the credit for its entertainment must go to Leslie Howard, who gives a magnificent performance as the courageous English Lord who risks his life to save French aristocrats who were sought to be sent to the guillotine. It is a treat to watch him behaving like a fop in order not to have people suspect that he was the leader, known as The Scarlet Pimpernel. Howard wins the spectator's sympathy from the beginning. One is held in tense suspense throughout, because one does not know how Howard, who had been cornered by the French soldiers, would escape from them. The love interest is appealing.*⁵⁹

[THE PETRIFIED FOREST \(1936\)](#)



Howard, like Barbara Stanwyck, is a beautifully natural actor. Though her range (in a much longer career) was considerably greater than his, both are a pleasure to watch in anything they take on. Bogart, in contrast, when playing a thug

assumes a silly sneer that proclaims: "Look, I'm acting!" (badly). Clint Eastwood ("from the Mount Rushmore school of acting") frequently does the same, and their grimaces relegate them, inflated reputations notwithstanding, into the second division of "stars". Dick Foran (above, right) as Boze isn't very good, either. But others perform ably to put across material (the screen adaptation of a Robert Sherwood play in which Howard and Bogart starred) that engages throughout, even though it's less profound than it thinks it is. (In particular, Grandpa's relish for "killing" makes no sense.) This would be the fourth and last time (after *Outward Bound*, *The Animal Kingdom* and *Berkeley Square*) that Howard reprised a successful stage role on screen. 79 minutes.

IMDb: Howard was born to play the part of the disaffected English writer. He speaks his poignant lines with conviction. Davis shows her dreamy side - just as compelling as her bitchy aspect - and this is the first time that Bogart really *is* "Bogart" / Fascinating though flawed. The setting is very strange to modern eyes. There aren't many places like this in America anymore, though they used to be common ... Davis can act, and when Bogart arrives on the scene, you can see why he became one of Hollywood's greatest stars / Dated, stagy, literate, effective / Howard was far ahead of his time, an extremely naturalistic actor in a Hollywood obsessed by type-casting and *The Petrified Forest* is the film he should be best remembered for. His disillusioned intellectual whose personality never survived the war stands at the heart of the movie. Davis is also strong / To Bogart, Davis and Howard add a classic story with modern undertones, a stage play that works on screen, clever dialogue, bittersweet longing for a better place, missed chances for love, violent gangsters and a quaint desert cafe. Blend. Out pops a doosie from 1936 still good today / A first rate "existential" drama / A glorious movie based on a wise and compassionate play that savagely indicts a lifeless civilization / Howard relates his failed marital history with a genteel but real frankness not usually found in pre-war cinema / Silly and pompous. Howard is unbearable from the very start and his behaviour in the finale is so absurd that the film turns into farce / Superb!

It was in *The Petrified Forest* that Howard's outstanding talent first caught my eye. Matched against screen heavyweights Davis and Bogart, he outshone Bette and outclassed Humph with sublime grace and easy assurance. So, another terrain to prospect, more gems to unearth. And what struck me seventy-odd years on was clearly evident right from the off:

Master Of Understatement

Understatement is a virtue practiced by few artists. The general attitude seems to be that if a thing is good a lot of it makes it better. We have found that one can use too much garlic, too many adjectives, too many superlatives, too much good nature, too much charity. Still, we are not an artist - only a critic. Which brings us to the subject of acting. There has been considerable scenery-chewing masquerading under the name of dramatic art these many years. True, the days when the villain showed his manliness and the heroine showed her virtue

are departed from this earth. No more do wandering boys come home in time to lift the mortgage. No more - or very seldom - do fathers caution their careless or indiscreet daughters about darkening the door. And certainly no more do little children go down to the corner saloons to fetch their rum-soaked daddies. But heroes are still pretty heroic and villains are still pretty villainous. Scenery chewing and chest beating are prevalent on the stage and screen. For all we know, Leslie Howard in his salad days may have eaten his share of scenery.



But, if he did, he lost his taste for it long ago. Not since we saw him first in Her Cardboard Lover on the New York stage have we noticed a single tooth mark in the scenery around him. Howard, as far as we are concerned, is a master of understatement. Whether it be comedy or tragedy, he underplays it. Howard the comedian is a gay, charming fellow - but not too gay, or too charming, or too witty, or too wise. He seems to sense the fine line between real comedy and buffoonery, and then stays well on the right side of the line. Howard the tragedian is one of Thomas Wolfe's "lost and by the wind-grieved ghosts." By that we mean he has a wraithlike, out-of-nowhere quality that is the essence of all real tragedians. It seems to us that Howard understands the meaning of the word - understands that sudden death, for instance, is not its only ingredient; that futility and defeat are more tragic than awful calamity. We have never seen Howard as Hamlet, but we feel that he will underplay the part of the melancholy prince as he underplayed the strange, almost ethereal Peter Standish in Berkeley Square. The other day we went out to the First National

studio to watch Howard work in The Petrified Forest. We wanted to know if his role of the swashbuckling Scarlet Pimpernel had changed his acting technique. If anything, we found, Howard paints the character of Alan Squier with even more delicate strokes than he did in making his notable portrait of the hero of Berkeley Square. In the scene we watched, Howard was sitting at a table in a desert barbecue stand opposite Bette Davis. He was telling her the story of his life and of his quest for some reason for living and dying. There was little actual movement in the scene. Two people faced each other and talked. But there was no feeling that the scene was static. Howard's voice, the light smile touching his lips now and again, the lost and lonely look that seized him when he looked into the future gave it sweep and breadth. Not once did he raise his voice or make a violent gesture. Every action was underplayed. Every thought was understated. The scene was a moving, beautiful thing, and you could put your finger on no one thing that made it so. And when the scene was done, we went away feeling that, though understatement may not be the only reason for an actor's greatness, it helps a lot.⁶⁰

[ROMEO AND JULIET \(1936\)](#)



Forget that the combined age of the four "young" leads here is 175. Concede that youth's loss is art's gain; that without talent first and foremost, all else is lost and find much to savour. Howard, in his element, wears his 43 years very lightly; mother of two Shearer (34) - though her performance was Oscar nominated - rather less so. Barrymore (above, left), Rathbone and Nurse Edna May Oliver (above, right) are all fine - indeed, the single miscast is Andy Devine in the small part of Peter. The film looks and sounds superb. Shakespeare is laudably well served; receptive viewers also. 124 minutes.

IMDb: My advice to anyone wishing to watch this film: read the play first! The leads are too old. These "teenagers" seem rather formal and polite / A modern audience may find this version of the play a little deliberate, but I thought the Zeffirelli version, once you get past the novelty of its modern approach to sex and passion, dull at its heart. This is much better / Howard is a dispassionate Romeo and Barrymore's Mercutio is pure ham ... but a must-see for Shearer's luminous performance / Wonderful production and direction but some things - poor casting and mediocre acting - don't click / Barrymore is brilliant. Yes, he's ham - but a succulent one / This 1936 version may be the most literal, but the Zeffirelli and Luhrmann films are both more faithful to the spirit of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* / Howard was 43 and Norma Shearer in her thirties - ridiculous! / This is quite simply the best version of Shakespeare's beloved tragic drama that has ever hit the screen. A quintessential problem with the play is that its characters are not at all well-suited to film. The stage allows middle-aged experienced actors to play the parts, for the distance between an audience and actor on the stage can supply all necessary illusion. The intimacy of the camera makes a demand, however - either sacrifice this understanding for youth, or sacrifice the youth for understanding. The title characters are supposedly meant to be only in their mid-teens, but to successfully portray them, an experienced mentality is needed, and so it is imperative that the latter sacrifice be made. On film, rarely does the depth that the two characters require come forth, substituted instead with youthful energy. This has allowed plenty of young, age-appropriate actors to deliver perfectly horrible performances as the young lovers. When Franco Zeffirelli produced his overrated version of this tale in the '60s, he cast Olivia Hussey as Juliet and Leonard Whiting as Romeo - and the two animated Romeo and Juliet teenagers with no sense of real love but only horny teenage lust. In casting Norma Shearer (around 34) and Leslie Howard (43) as the two leads, MGM forsook supreme youth but gained a precious, near-perfect understanding of the characters. Shearer's delivery is perfect, particularly in the spine-tingling rendition of Juliet's death-contemplation monologue just before she takes the poison. Howard nearly matches her with his Romeo, throwing some lines at the audience in a totally new, fresh and unexpected way. Edna May Oliver perfectly captures Shakespeare's Nurse, filling her with both bawdy humour and genuine care for Juliet's well-being. As Tybalt, in a role cut down but nonetheless impressive, Basil Rathbone is astonishing; earning a Best Supporting Actor nomination for his work here. Also of note is John Barrymore, whom I have read was at times totally ossified while filming his scenes - and his age *does* show. He is no longer the leading Baron from *Grand Hotel*, but his controversial performance is, if not to all minds good, at least totally engrossing. He was for a time the most celebrated of all Shakespearean stage actors, and this film marks his only completely recorded performance in a sound film of the Bard's work, which makes this film further noteworthy. To add to this pedigree cast, MGM put their top technical men on the job. Adrian and Cedric Gibbons perfectly capture the look and flavour of the play with their elegant costumes and sets. The sleek, art-deco look ingeniously blends modern architecture with what is expected from Shakespeare's day. The camerawork is brilliant also, and Herbert Stothart's blend of Tchaikovsky's haunting Love Theme and original music creates the perfect musical score. All of these elements combine to create the first truly great Shakespearean film adaptation, and also one of the best films of the era. Far superior to Zeffirelli's version, or any other I've seen, George Cukor's *Romeo and Juliet* is another masterpiece from one of the all-time great directors, who helmed such classic, well-regarded productions as *Dinner At Eight*, *David Copperfield*, *Adam's Rib* and *The Philadelphia Story* / A pleasure for those who know the play.

A latter-day review:

MGM's Romeo and Juliet was Hollywood's first feature-length adaptation of a Shakespeare tragedy. Producer Irving G. Thalberg pronounced it 'a cultural undertaking of importance', and the studio pulled out all the stops.

In the quest for 'authenticity', months of research went into the vast sets, and the 12,000 costumes designed by Oliver Messel and Adrian. William Strunk Jnr, Professor of English at Cornell University, was hired as literary adviser to ensure, he said, 'that no injustice was done' to Shakespeare. It cost \$2 million - perhaps \$80 million today - and MGM deserved 11 out of 10 for effort. The finished product rates less highly.

The age of the stars was the fatal flaw. Shakespeare's pivotal characters - Juliet, Romeo, Tybalt and Mercutio - were entrusted, respectively, to Norma Shearer (34), Leslie Howard (43), Basil Rathbone (44) and John Barrymore (54). Once they were chosen, the film unquestionably had star power, but could not hope to capture the play's tragic spirit: impetuous, young lives cut short.

Howard and Shearer (whose casting was not unconnected to her being Thalberg's wife) move in a spectacular world of romantic luxury, with Herbert Stothart's arrangements of Tchaikovsky's Romeo and Juliet as appropriately grand theme music. The magnificently choreographed ballet during the Capulet ball is a breathtaking highlight. Howard's Romeo watches Juliet rejecting a dozen masked suitors before dancing with Ralph Forbes's muscular Paris.

Once admiration turns to conversation, however, Howard and Shearer seem overwhelmed by an obligation to deliver Shakespeare's verse with more reverence than feeling. Cukor and his stars forget that however ornate the language of the balcony or wedding-night scenes, the words come to life only in the mouths of flesh-and-blood characters. Howard and Shearer fall short of that description.

Howard had suggested in a tie-in book that making Romeo interesting was 'a task to frighten any actor', and it proves beyond him. Perhaps inevitably, given his age, this self-absorbed Romeo would be more at home playing Hamlet.

Better off without him ...

Only when Romeo has been banished can Shearer lift Juliet clear of a chaste, Snow White persona (she is first seen feeding deer in the Capulet garden!). There is real pain when she defies her father (gruff C. Aubrey Smith) and silently renounces the Nurse (shrill-voiced Edna May Oliver) - scenes which helped earn her a Best Actress Oscar nomination.

Set against these leads and the one-dimensional, though Oscar-nominated, villainy of Rathbone's Tybalt, Barrymore's hammy Mercutio is refreshing. He fleetingly brings some joie de vivre to Cukor's Verona, then dies cursing the Capulet and Montague clans with absurd politeness - a characteristic that deadens the film. By the time the lovers have died prettily, the energy of the opening scene (a massed swordfight broken up by the prince's cavalry charge) seems a distant memory.

Critical opinion generally praised the film's production values ahead of its performances, with The New York Times suggesting that the 'expansive sets' had 'gloriously released the play from the limitations of the stage'. The New York Sun mourned the absence of tragedy: 'It does not wring the heart, nor stir tears of sweet sympathy or bitter resentment.'

Thalberg lived just long enough to absorb this response to a project he had nurtured for ten years, but not his Best Picture Oscar nomination: aged 37, he died of pneumonia in September 1936, three weeks after Romeo and Juliet's premiere.

It eventually grossed about \$2 million, yet the huge print and marketing costs left MGM with a loss of \$900,000 and it was that relatively poor performance which contributed to Hollywood's refusal to tackle the Bard for another seventeen years, until MGM re-entered the arena with Julius Caesar.

*Cukor himself, looking back on Romeo and Juliet in 1971, conceded that his lovers had been 'too stodgy'. He went on: 'It's one picture that if I had to do over again, I'd know how. I'd get the garlic and the Mediterranean into it.'*⁶¹

Leslie Howard on Romeo:

In the spring of 1936, with plans already in place to bring Hamlet to Broadway, with himself in the lead role, Howard was offered the part of Romeo in MGM's Romeo and Juliet. Howard, not classically trained, had never previously played any Shakespeare character, on stage or screen, though he had played the Bard himself in an unsuccessful London production of Talbot Jennings' This Side Idolatry (the title from Ben Jonson's post-mortem tribute: I loved the man, and do honour his memory, on this side idolatry, as much as any).

Howard's performance did not please the critics:

Howard ... possesses Shakespeare's mask, can look the beatific sheep to perfection, and of all our actors best suggests the spiritual soil in which Shakespeare's genius might be supposed to put forth its unforced blossoms. But in this play he does nothing to turn a bad

part into a good one ... and Mr. Howard makes it worse by playing nearly all of it pianissimo and none of it louder than piano ... Except once when he gently thumps his chest and says that that is where Hamlet's tragedy takes place ... On Thursday night Mr. Howard did not even revel in his own sense of beauty, but played throughout in a manner so hushed and circumscribed as to suggest he was still under film discipline.⁶²



With Margaret Rawlings in [This Side Idolatry](#)

The play opens beautifully with Shakespeare young, nervous yet determined ... Mr. Howard plays this prelude to adventure exquisitely ... but the piece fades out on a note of philosophic gloom, and Mr. Howard's performance comes close to a dangerous understatement.⁶³

Very many early talkie-era films are diminished by the overly-theatrical playing of stage veterans unaware that cameras and microphones require far less projection and much greater subtlety and restraint than a live theatre audience. Although from 1930 onwards, Howard worked more in cinema than theatre, he continued intermittently to tread the boards, leading in *The Animal Kingdom* in 1932 and *The Petrified Forest* in 1935 (both subsequently filmed), in addition to *This Side Idolatry*. He also directed without appearing in *Out Of A Blue Sky* (1930) and *We Are No Longer Children* (1932). It's logical to assume that an actor might struggle to switch from film mode to stage mode as readily

as *vice versa*, and Howard's strongest suit - on camera - was always his sensitivity. He freely acknowledged the lack in himself of that streak of exhibitionism bound to stand the stage aspirant in good stead:

*I am one of those unfortunate persons to whom any kind of public appearance is an embarrassment, for whom to have to perform before my fellow men is a misery. To enjoy acting, one must be an exhibitionist at heart. Exhibitionists ... are the ideal actors.*⁶⁴

So one reason why he might have wished to take on Romeo was to right this perceived wrong, to try and square himself, not with the critics, but with the Bard himself - although his initial reaction to the idea was more or less wholly negative:

That every actress would want to play Juliet is as understandable as that every actor should want to play Hamlet. Both are rich in the elements that make great roles ... But that any actor should want to play Romeo is a horse of another colour. Shakespeare must have been ideally in love at the time this play was written. His whole interest is so clearly centred in this shining girl Juliet. She is the perfection of youth, beauty, passion and unswerving fidelity ... Romeo was simply necessary since you cannot have a love story without a lover. But he seems hardly to be a three-dimensional figure since his principal function is little more than to be the object of Juliet's affection. Compared with any of the great Shakespearean roles he is a silhouette cut from cardboard ... This would seem to be borne out by the stage history of the play. Successful Romeos are conspicuous by their sparsity ... Is Romeo therefore a bad part - and are my suspicions that Shakespeare was not very interested in him correct? ... Yes - with qualifications ... He is nothing more than a man in love ... If he is as young as Romeo is reputed to be we do not take him seriously. And if he is as old as the average actor has to be to have the necessary experience for the role, he is a bore. Furthermore, as the play opens, he is in love with another girl - obviously one of a succession of infatuations. The fellow is in love with love - and what is more depressing in a man? Even his friends are laughing at him. To make Romeo interesting is a task to frighten any actor. But ... the very fact of Romeo's constant love affairs can be turned to advantage if one sees him as a philanderer, pursuing love affairs like a game, suddenly involved in a love so deep that he is led to his doom. This pitch to which he is brought, this final ensnarement, allows him to grow into a character of interest. And later, after the first youthful raptures, when he is banished and waits miserably in Mantua, the stunning news of Juliet's apparent death produce in

*him for the rest of the play a mood which has some stature and nobility. Then he is overcome by a fine philosophic world-weariness and melancholy prophetic of that profound character study which Shakespeare had not yet created when he wrote Romeo and Juliet. Romeo becomes a baby Hamlet.*⁶⁵

Two reasons, here, then - one implicit, one explicit - in favour for accepting the role, and both connected to the *Hamlet* on Broadway plan: first, taking on Romeo will necessarily immerse the actor in Shakespeare's world of unfamiliar language and lore, making it an excellent preparation for the greater challenge of *Hamlet* to come and, second, essaying the character - a "baby Hamlet" - may well lend greater insight into the more "profound" psyche of the Dane, thereby assisting that character's successful stage rendition. More prosaically Howard may in any case have been obliged by his MGM contract to accept the part, and he will also have been keen to bank the hefty fee involved to help offset the forbidding expense of *Hamlet*, borne with characteristic grit by Howard alone.



As Hamlet, 1936

IT'S LOVE I'M AFTER (1937)

A well-turned comedy in which a young girl falls for a Shakespearean actor who agrees with her fiancé to put her off him, but of course only succeeds in making her love him more. The pair are played - charmingly on both sides - by Howard and De Havilland (below, right), soon to be husband and wife in *Gone With The Wind*. Eric Blore as the manservant makes the most of an unusually meaty part and Bette Davis (below, centre), in her third and last film with Howard, holds her own, as you might expect, although there's an indefinable something about her acting that I can never quite warm to. Provided you're in the right mood, 90 minutes of top-notch Golden Age entertainment.

IMDb: Howard hams it up hilariously, and Davis is almost his equal / A farcical piece with too few jokes, too much bland patter and set-ups for laughs that never arrive. Bette Davis is given the short shrift in favour of fey Leslie Howard and girlish Olivia de Havilland, a terrible pity since this is when she was at her peak / Screwball comedies

don't get any better than this. A real gem! / Adorable / Hysterical / De Havilland, who never achieved the "star status" of several lesser actresses, is perhaps the least celebrated best actress in Hollywood / Lots to enjoy - the whip-smart dialogue, Eric Blore's bird impressions, Howard's combination of intelligence, rapier wit and at times



completely moronic behaviour make this an easy recommend to anyone who enjoys classic comedy / A long-lost classic / Sumptuous / Howard is a riot, Davis a beautiful Spitfire, De Havilland lovely and Blore hilarious. A wonderful, witty treasure, not to be missed / Howard's funniest film. I laughed so hard, I cried / A truly funny comedy with an excellent cast / Viewers who enjoy Shakespeare and live stage performances will find it especially funny / I don't care what movie it is, but if Davis is in the shot, I find that I just can't look anywhere else / Streets ahead of most other golden era comedies: intelligent, romantic and uproariously funny, eliciting the particular buzz that comes with watching something that's clearly very special / Dazzling! / Sophisticated comedy, satire, laughter galore and rollicking good fun at the hands of some marvellous actors, writers and filmmakers. One of the very funniest movies ever made / Although Bette Davis was not noted for her comedic skills, this is one (in fact, the best) example of how she could adapt her intense, almost neurotic, qualities to screwball comedy with excellent results. Watching her get wound-up to the point of explosion is one of the great treats of this virtually forgotten film. Howard is her equal as both the catalyst for and the recipient of her eye-popping fits. And Davis never looked prettier / It seems that in Hollywood there were two legitimate British actors: Howard and Charles Laughton. Laughton's weight forced him into fatherly roles and Howard's good looks pushed him toward romantic leads. Howard's presence here reflects both his talents as an actor and this stereotype, but the two are incorporated brilliantly. He shines.

Two contemporary reviews ...

(1) *A delightfully insane comedy, revealing the backstage life and amours of a conceited Shakespearean matinee idol, comes to the screen from Warner Studios. In spite of its Class Q title, It's Love I'm After is a sparkling, urbane affair. Leslie Howard is a fascinating Romeo. Bette Davis is his Juliet, off as well as on stage. Olivia de Havilland is a starry-eyed debutante. All three get into a most hectic triangular confusion. Situations arise which make everyone misunderstand everyone else, with accompanying vase and furniture throwing. Mr. Howard again demonstrates that hilarious agility with character parts which he showed in Stand-In. The same cannot be said of Bette Davis, but then she isn't around much.*⁶⁶

(2) *... The character drawing is exceedingly good. Apart from Howard's performance, which dominates the picture, Bette Davis is brilliant as Joyce, and the two play up to each other admirably. Olivia de Havilland scores a personal success as the infatuated Maria and Eric Blore is at his best as the actor's faithful valet. The film opens with the closing scene of Romeo and Juliet, with the two leading players muttering vicious asides to each other between the lines, and from then onwards it develops with plenty of action, some verging on slapstick, to its particularly joyous conclusion.*⁶⁷

... and Leslie Howard's take:

"It's Love I'm After is a burlesque of the matinee idol," the disarming Mr. Howard smiling assures you. "In the second place, it's a bit of fun at the expense of the worshipful girl who works herself into a soulful state and gets dizzy looking up at her idol without ever suspecting he is quite capable of letting her down with a hard bump. It's really a lesson to her."

*Serene in his corrective frame of mind, Mr. Howard lets himself down into a chair, comfortably fills and lights his pipe, then complacently stretches out his slender length. "In a sense," whiffs this amiable iconoclast, "it's debunking of the film idol to feminine fans. It is said, let us hope not in vain, that pictures aim always to be educational. Of course, the matinee idol no longer exists. Drove of people don't wait outside stage doors for him. Today it is only for the film star they endure similar hardship. What induces this cheerful strain on the patience and the feet I am unable to explain. It may be a particular actor's genius for exhibitionism which, unfortunately, is hopelessly lacking in me. I haven't the gift. But there are certain people who are definitely actors, born to be exhibitionists. They no doubt get great pleasure out of it. I've never got any particular pleasure out of films, merely an occasionally vicarious satisfaction through audiences accepting one of mine, and that's only second-hand, isn't it? I got into the profession by accident, and now I am anxious to get out."*⁶⁸

STAND-IN (1937)



Limp "comedy" about a bloodless accountant sent by New York bankers to apply business methods to an ailing Hollywood studio they own and wish to sell. Howard and Joan Blondell (above) fight a valiant but ultimately losing battle with hopelessly trite material and ham acting from some of their fellow cast. Bogart (plus dog, below) is anodyne. Films set within the film industry recur regularly - *Sunset Boulevard*, *Sullivan's Travels*, *A Star Is Born*, *The Player*, *The Artist*, *Ed Wood*, *Wag The Dog* and more - and are generally better appreciated within the community (who are more likely to catch all the in-jokes, caricatures, swipes etc) than without. A 90 minute miss.

IMDb: A fast and snappy spoof of the studio system / One of the funniest films I have seen in a long time! / The very talented and likeable Leslie Howard and Joan Blondell make the movie watchable, but there's not much meat. Weak and sappy / This was the film that persuaded me that, along with his dramatic skills, Howard had an incredible gift for getting laughs, and I've been a fan ever since. Blondell and Bogart are also terrific in this minor but hugely enjoyable '30s gem / An intelligently made blend of satire, humour and farce / Howard and Blondell make a wonderful screen couple. The film is filled with funny lines but is at times unfocused / As a comedy, *Stand-In* sucks. As a movie about the movies it is interesting / A rare comic role for Bogie in which he appears somewhat uncomfortable / Peters out. A curiosity that doesn't really need to be seen / Leslie Howard is one of that handful of actors whose name alone on the credits will get me to watch anything, but given the variety of other talent involved here I must admit I was left somewhat disappointed by this lightweight comedy carried out more or

less by-the-numbers / A glorious satire on '30s Hollywood. Leslie Howard is at his comic best (see also *It's Love I'm After*) / A half-great movie. In the first hour hardly anything is bad - the only significant defect is Bogart the producer - but the last half-hour stinks. So what? I had my fun / High-grade ... many good moments.

A contemporary review:

The Hollywood scene emerges again, this time under the title Stand-In. It is becoming a mania, or - as the industry more reticently phrases it - a trend. It doubts still lurk as to the inside workings of the west coast glamour mill, haste to Walter Wanger's new film where Joan Blondell, Leslie Howard and others reveal the art of picture making ... The Howard performance is a knock-out, destined to surprise his vast audience who have never seen him do a comedy character part. Miss Blondell is so typically Hollywood that she glides through her role as if there weren't a camera within miles. Humphrey Bogart, cast as the producer and sole honest executive of Colossal, proves that he can be sympathetic as competently as he has been villainous in the past. Alan Mowbray gives a hilarious caricature of the temperamental foreign director. Special laurels go to those loony script writers, Gene Towne and Graham Baker, for kidding the pants off the industry, and to Tay Garnett, the director, for sustaining the burlesque spirit throughout. Stand-In, being a Hollywood product, naturally descends into plenty of sentimental glorification at the end, but so did A Star Is Born. Movies have feelings like the rest of us. We can't expect them to spank themselves all the time.⁶⁹



PYGMALION (1938)



In his *Metamorphoses*, Ovid relates that Pygmalion was a Cypriot king who, when he could find no living woman worthy of his love, carved a wonderful ivory statue of a woman lovelier than any ever born. So beautiful was she that Pygmalion fell passionately in love with her. At a festival of Aphrodite, he prayed the gods to grant him a woman like his statue. But Aphrodite saw into his heart, and granted him what he really wished: when he arrived home again, he found that his statue had come to life. He married her and she bore him a daughter. Only in postclassical times was the name Galatea given to the statue-woman.⁷⁰

The myth has inspired artists across the spectrum - literature, sculpture, painting, poetry, drama - the latter including Shakespeare (the final scene of *A Winter's Tale*), W. S. Gilbert (*Pygmalion and Galatea*, 1871) and George Bernard Shaw, whose *Pygmalion*, concerning the attempted transformation of Cockney flower-seller Eliza Doolittle into a lady, opened in London on 11 April 1914. In this sparkling screen adaptation, Howard leads (and co-directs) a quality cast through 91 minutes of cinematic bliss. His work earned him a second and last Best Actor Oscar nomination (sadly, neither resulted in a win). Shaw, whose screenplay *did* win an Academy Award, needed to be persuaded against his better judgement to sugarcoat the play's ending somewhat for a cinema audience less mature and accepting than its theatre counterpart. Note that the man-loves-statue theme will resurface in 1941's Howard-directed *Pimpernel Smith*.

IMDb: The intelligent telling of a great story / Fine adaptation of Shaw's greatest play. A masterpiece / Lovely, but why change Shaw's ending?! / Perfect cinema. One of the greatest of all British films / More richly textured than *My Fair Lady* and far less sentimental. Wendy Hiller (above) is equally brilliant as the refined lady and the "draggle-tailed guttersnipe". Howard is a wonderfully aloof Henry Higgins / Flawless / Insufferably talky / This film - more perhaps than the musical - is a reminder of just how brilliantly funny Shaw plays often are. Yes, they are talky - but such talk! / Fast paced, beautifully photographed, great entertainment, ahead of its time / A delightful movie with outstanding performances / No good? Not bloody likely! / Intriguing play makes splendid film / Classic without being pretentious / Howard and Hiller provide just the right combination of humour and humanity / Howard's performance is far more subtle and less strident than Rex Harrison's [in *My Fair Lady*] / What a joy! / A lot of fun and quite thought provoking with a nicely ambiguous ending / Concise and terrific / Great film with an unconvincing, out-of-the-blue conclusion / Unmissable!

Publicity interviews:

(1) A Rather Spiritual Young Man Returns to Comedy

When I tracked Leslie Howard to his new office in the West End I reminded him of the day I had watched him rehearse with [radio comic Eddie] Cantor.

"Yes, we certainly did work hard."

"Harder than you have to work at the BBC?"

"Well, it is difficult to say that, because I have only played straight parts at the BBC - Hamlet, for example - and then it was rather a matter of adaptation. We weren't really making something new, we were making something old that we proved could fit the limits of radio. But I rather think that the American radio people do put more into their type of show than we do into ours, for they are doing a different thing really. They are making a new type of entertainment by exploiting their medium. They are not adapting old ideas to a new form. They are creating a new idea out of the nature of their medium. They are not afraid of the studio or of the medium. They romp in and make the studio and the microphones do things - sometimes very novel and exciting things. They do not try to hide the fact that they are on the radio, but rather to make that part of the appeal. But it is interesting to see how formalised this new type of entertainment is becoming. This is best appreciated if you consider the audiences who come to watch these broadcasts. They have quite ceased to be astonished at the sight of an actor reading from a script, and to see the players, other than the principals, sitting in a straight line along the stage and only rising to say their lines. You will remember that practically no gestures are used, and there is absolutely no dramatic movement on the stage. The audiences have become accustomed to this. They no longer laugh at the effects man opening and shutting his windows. The actors feel this too. It is a new medium which already has conventions of its own. I think the Americans do more original work within these conventions, because they exploit the

medium more, because they rehearse more, and probably harder - and because they have more money to spend. The last is perhaps the most important. They can afford the best of everybody - directors, actors, writers - all the time."

"Did you do Shakespeare on the American radio?"

"Yes, I did Benedick in Much Ado in Columbia's Shakespeare series, but except for the fact that the play was cut to fit the hour, the technique was pretty much as it would have been at the BBC. It is in the new kinds of entertainment that American radio is most significant, and they seem to do more with new material than we do here."

"And now, Mr. Howard, I'm going to ask you the question that everybody is asking you?"

"Yes, I know, you are going to ask me what made me become a comedian? You are going to ask me, have I suffered a spiritual change? Or are you going to suggest that I am now back again in the fold doing the things we all like, after letting the side down rather badly by trying to be a highbrow? One paper really did say that, you know."

"Well, my question was going to be something like that."

"It's very funny really. Everybody is talking about me 'switching' from drama to comedy. All the critics made the point. It just shows, I suppose, how short the public memory is. A few years ago I was known only as a comedian. My first stage successes were in comedies. I was playing in Her Cardboard Lover when I read Berkeley Square. I liked it very much and wanted to play it. But no one would believe I could be anything but a comedian. But we wangled it somehow, and the play, as you know, became very popular. I played it on the screen, and there followed a series of parts which transformed a one-time comedian into a rather spiritual young man. The Petrified Forest, Of Human Bondage and Romeo and Juliet completed the transformation and the comedian was forgotten. When Warner Brothers proposed another film, there was not a suitable story available, at least not a drama requiring a soulful young man. I suggested a comedy, and the old situation came up the other way round. Once again I had been fitted into a nice little watertight compartment and typed as a romantic actor. No one could imagine me as a comedian. But I liked one story particularly, so It's Love I'm After was made. It was, as you know, a success, so we followed on with Stand-In. This story was originally not a comedy at all, but Warner Brothers were now quite happy in the idea that I could be a comedian, so the script was re-written and cast as a comedy. It so happened that Stand-In reached London before It's Love I'm After, but actually it came into being as I have said."

"And the next venture is Pygmalion?"

"Yes, and this time I am going to have a hand in the direction. Anthony Asquith and I will co-direct, and I will play Professor Higgins. It is still difficult for an actor in Hollywood to take any real part in the production. Every aspect of production is so self-contained, and there is so little come and go between writers, directors and editors, that the best they can do is to become as expert

as they can in their own limited field. It is the only way they can make any impression on the finished picture. And the same is true of the actor. The only impression he can make on a film is through his acting. He can have little effect on the people who work in these other air-tight compartments. But in England production is not so rigid, and I am going to try to contribute something more than I can through just acting."

"And who else is in the cast with you?"

"There's Wendy Hiller who did such good work in the original cast of Love On The Dole. She will, of course, play Eliza, and Wilfred Lawson will play Alfred Dolittle. Lawson has been getting great praise for his work in I Have Been Here Before, and I am sure he will be grand as the dustman."

I know he will, for the first time I saw Pygmalion about fifteen years ago, Wilfred Lawson was Alfred Dolittle. I look forward to seeing what fifteen years have done to Mr. Lawson's Dolittle, what Leslie Howard will do to Professor Higgins, and what time and the cinema will have done to Pygmalion.⁷¹

(2) Taking Stock of Leslie Howard

No star is sitting prettier than Leslie Howard, who on top of his success with Pygmalion, has drawn the role of Ashley in Gone With The Wind. Motion Picture takes stock of him as he is today.

It's perfectly nice, you know, to be making a quarter of million dollars a year, or so, and to be quite, quite famous, and to have people barging around asking for your autograph, and all that sort of thing! It's perfectly splendid, too, and somehow egotistically satisfying to have a completely devoted family - an adoring wife, a worshipping daughter and an admiring son - and to be able to give them all the finer things of life. But, darn it all, if he didn't have all those quite lovely things, Leslie Howard could have such a hellish lot of fun out of life!!! He's gotten around to the age - pretty close to fiftyish, now - where he's taking stock of living. And while he wouldn't take ten billion dollars, plus all the tea in China (which is, in itself, a huge inducement to anyone as British as Leslie) for that family of his, nevertheless a man can't help imagining, can he? And so Leslie Howard curls himself upon a big, fat divan, with one leg twisted under his sitzplatz, and a particularly puckish expression on that long, thin, horsey face of his, and he admits things right out loud:

"If I didn't have a family," he says, "I'd have an attic."

"An attic?" you ask.

"Precisely - an attic," he repeats. "Preferably one with a fireplace. A fireplace that doesn't smoke, you know. And a typewriter. And a piano. And a camera or two. And a lot of work - oh, a great deal of work to do."

"Money?"

"Oh, no, not much money. Just enough money to support the attic, and the piano, and the fireplace, and the typewriter and the cameras."

But if he wants those things, why doesn't he have them, you want to know. And then he explains. He loves his family deeply. He owes that family a great deal. Moreover, he has accustomed them to having all the finer things - a big house, and automobiles, and servants, and jewellery, and imported foods, and dogs, and horses - and, of course, fame. He's gotten them so used to such things that they'd be quite put out without them. And in as much as he's the only one in the family, as yet, who can earn such things for them, why, he's got to go on being famous, and acting, and getting a quarter of a million a year, or so, and giving them houses and servants and automobiles and all that. Darn it all, a man does get himself into the most confounded spot, doesn't he?

From all of which you may gather that Leslie Howard is back in Hollywood again, and that he's up to his usual trick - bellyaching hellishly at the state of things in Leslie Howard's life. For Leslie, lovable as he is, is the most incorrigible bellyacher in moviedom ... I for one have never talked with him without hearing him proclaim that he'd rather be doing this-and-that and so-and-so, and that by heaven and high water, that's what he's going to do. For instance, he's unquestionably one of the finest actors on stage or screen today, and he loves it. Yet he bellyaches and bellyaches about acting, and vows that he'll never be happy until he quits being an actor, and becomes a writer or director, instead. But, give him a chance to stop acting and he finds eighteen dozen assorted excuses for not stopping. Leslie, my lad, you're a colossal bluff!

*For instance, this role in *Gone With The Wind* he's going to play. Ashley, it is. I'm positive that Leslie Howard would have given his right arm, rather than lose a chance of being in the most-talked-about picture of the decade. Yet, when the role was dangled in front of him, practically for the asking, he hemmed and hawed and back-and-filled and tacked and side-stepped until his poor agent, not to mention Old Man Selznick, was in a state of jitters.*

"It'll take so long to do," he complained. "It'll keep me from going back to England, and making movies the way I like to make them, with a cup o' tea, you know. Oh, yes, I fancy you'll pay me a pretty penny for it - but, after all, money isn't everything ..."

And that's the way it went. But it so happened that I dropped in at his agent's office on the day Leslie finally and irrevocably attached his signature to the contract to play Ashley. And did he do it with a flourish of delight and joy, like Viv Leigh must have, when she got the role of Scarlett, or as any actor might, when he finds a perfect plum of a role dropped into his lap? No, not Leslie. He did it with a bored "Oh, very well, I may as well do it, I s'pose."

And then he came out of the office and curled up on a couch and looked all of one colour, with those fawnish-hued corduroys, that beigish polo shirt, that nondescript tannish sports jacket and that sandy hair and brownish face, and told me about how he'd like to have an attic instead of a family.

Hollywood used to take Leslie Howard seriously at first. But Hollywood has gotten over that. Hollywood now takes Leslie with a pinch of salt. It loves Leslie, but snickers and chuckles at him at the same time. It knows that Leslie,

for instance, is never on time. Clocks are just something with hands that go around.

"You Americans are always too, too in a hurry!" he remonstrates, if you mention a clock. And then he tells you how he and his co-workers made *Pygmalion* over in England. They thought they'd make it, so they bought it from George Bernard Shaw ...

"Everyone asks me about Shaw. I s'pose you want me to tell you about Shaw," Leslie interpolates about here. "Well, we rather thought the old chap would be positively haunting the studio, but he didn't, you know. He made one single blessed appearance, and that was at the luncheon we gave when we started work. We had tea and champagne and things, and we all drank toasts, and it came Shaw's turn to drink a toast. So the old chap raised his glass and said: 'Well, you've all been drinking a lot of toasts to so-and-so, and this and that, and you've neglected one person. You've neglected me. Shamefully! So I drink a toast to George Bernard Shaw!' And I s'pose that was a particularly Shavian remark, and what everyone expected him to say, and there you are..."

So, anyway, Howard goes on telling about how they accumulated a director and a cast and got some space at Pinewood studios about fifty miles from London. It's built on an old English country estate, and the manor house is used as a sort of clubhouse by the cast. Making movies is rather social in England. They all lived at the manor house, and it was a glorified weekend that dragged on for several weeks. They'd knock off making movies around four each afternoon and have a spot of tea and they'd talk. They'd talk over what they'd do next day, maybe.

"The picture just grew at these sessions," Leslie explains, vaguely and naively, "and we were all so jolly surprised when it turns out to be making money, actually!"

Underneath his offhandedness, however, Howard is really delighted at the success of *Pygmalion*. He speaks many words of praise for the Britishers who helped him make it, and he says he's going back to make more pictures that way, now that they turn out to be profitable. Getting money from English backers for making movies is the worst task of all:

"Englishmen would never be so foolish as you Americans are, putting millions of dollars into a project that has so much chance of turning out in the red!" True, it has a chance of making money, too, but a chance isn't what English investors want. They want certainty!"

Leslie hopes, sincerely, that British movie production never improves. It'd be a shame. It'd spoil all the fun of making movies as they made *Pygmalion*. What he hates about Hollywood methods is the mass-production system. "It keeps me on the verge of a nervous breakdown," he complains. "It's work, work, work all the time. You start at the studio at seven in the morning and you finish at midnight, and you're in a state of collapse by the time you get home and into bed, only just in time to get up again and do it all over again."

Just at present, Leslie's family is still abroad. But now that he's signed for

Gone With The Wind, he'll bring them to Hollywood again. His son, Ronald, is in Cambridge. Ronnie still looks like Papa Leslie - but not as much as he did a few years ago, when he used to "double" in autographs for his dad. The resemblance between the two used to be so strong that when crowds descended on Howard for autographs, Ronnie could step in and pose as Leslie and sign all the books.

Then there's Leslie Junior - not another son, but a daughter. It's Leslie Junior who's the apple of Papa's eye. He's mad about the girl. They're pals, devoted pals, play polo together, do the night spots in London together, even though she's only fourteen. If you think an American girl is sophisticated, you should experience a fourteen-year-old British girl of the social class the Howards move in!

And of course, there's Mrs. Howard. When Leslie works in Hollywood, Mrs. Howard is a fixture in Hollywood's social life. She's a matronly, Britishly competent wife and mother and utterly devoted to Leslie. She has had him for many years now, and knows him inside and out. She knows his reputation about town for being the most ready, catch-as-catch-can Don Juan on the reservation. True, a great part of that reputation is synthetic. Howard likes lovely women, as what normal male doesn't? But the chatter that runs around town, if it were true, would reduce even the most virile Leslie Howard to a mere wreck - if it were true! So Mama Howard doesn't mind. She hears the gossip and smiles. She observes the lovely young British-French secretary that Leslie has, and smiles. Why, she admits, shouldn't a man have a pretty young secretary if he wants one, instead of some hatched-faced hen, or perhaps a mincing male secretary? So Leslie has his pretty young secretary, and isn't it nice? And he goes his Howardish way about Hollywood, impressing women with his charm and his winsomeness and his utter desirability. I recall the most indicative remark one Hollywood damsel made to me, when she was talking about Leslie:

"He strokes so beautifully!" she said. He's like John Boles, that way. Both Leslie Howard and John Boles have learned the knack of how to practice the laying-on-of-hands without offending the layees! On the contrary!

*Note candid camera carried over his chest - it's the fiendish terror of the movie town. And so there you are. There's Leslie Howard, back in Hollywood again. He's going to be with us quite a while, now, for it'll certainly take a great, long time to make *Gone With The Wind*. He'll putter around town. He'll stroke women so beautifully. He'll complain about his lot in life, about having to work under these horrible rush-and-rush conditions in Hollywood, about how he'd much rather have an attic than a family. Yet he'll be the dotting husband and father, through it all. He'll set innumerable hearts aflutter; he'll irk the very devil out of innumerable executives; he'll delay production by vanishing at tea time; he'll annoy innumerable hostesses by being anywhere from an hour to a week late; he'll work himself into a rage at the income-tax people; he'll play polo with his daughter; he'll snapshot innumerable people in innumerable,*

*unspeakable positions with that candid camera which is the terror of Hollywood; he'll wear the sloppiest clothes in town; he'll bellyache in that quiet, calm way of his from morning till night - and he'll do a wonderful job, as always, in *Gone With The Wind*. And then he'll go back to England with his wife and family and enjoy himself by sitting around with a cup of tea, complaining: "Movie studios are sweatshops. They kill the best in actors. Hollywood is full of creaky stories and time-worn plots. Oh, dear, dear, dear ..."*

He'll do all that. He always does.⁷²

*INTERMEZZO ~ A LOVE STORY (aka *Escape To Happiness*) (1939)*



The dependable Leonard Maltin calls *Intermezzo* "one of the best love stories ever filmed" (so why not four stars, Len?) and, while not enough of a film buff to be so bold as that, even I can see that it's exemplary of its kind - an artfully directed, beautifully shot, well scripted and flawless acted weeper. Its tale is simple enough, but wholly convincing, and its end gives a resonance to the film's title over and above prior expectation. Just 67 minutes - short but very sweet. Recommended.

IMDb: Ingrid steals the movie with her freshness and innocence / Old-fashioned and clumsy / We get a glimpse of a star being born - one that will shine forever / A film rich in subtext and metaphors / 65 minutes of Hollywood bliss. Lose yourself / A beautiful movie about love, affairs and the pain brought to all concerned. Dazzling, moving and

every bit as theatrical as the title suggests. Along with *Gone With The Wind*, surely Howard's loveliest film / Outstanding / Deservedly Oscar nominated for its black and white cinematography and film editing - but this was the year of *Gone With The Wind* / Though some feel that Howard's phoned-in Ashley [*Gone With The Wind*] doesn't hold up today, in fact, he was the embodiment of Wilkes without making much effort, a soft dreamer with impractical values from another time, and so he is here, not thinking ahead and lost in a romantic fog / A thoroughly affecting, well-made film / Howard's delicate acting lifts this above a melodrama. The film becomes a real examination into what love is. A great movie / The impossibly striking Bergman is the primary reason to see this predictably developed film / A thoughtful study of adultery. If you liked *Brief Encounter*, this is worth a shot too / Howard is good, Bergman is gorgeous / Adultery-lite: visually stunning but let down by its dismayingly simplistic moral message / There is a good message here: that a married person having a fling with a pretty young woman might be an exciting prospect but, in the end, "you reap what you sow" and if either of the two parties has a conscience, the illicit romance will be doomed, especially if there are kids involved / The performances of Bergman, Howard and Todd are fantastic, and Ingrid looks like a pianist in the birthday party sequence. Her beauty shines and her accent is lovely. The music score gives an additional touch of class to this film. The moral conclusion seems suitable, given the values of 1939, leaving a message of forgiveness and understanding.

Could Howard play the violin?

(1) *The musical duets seemingly performed by Howard and Bergman were played by professional musicians and dubbed onto the soundtrack. However, the actors' hands show the actual music being played: Bergman plays the full piano parts of Grieg's Concerto in A minor and Sinding's Rustle of Spring so her fingering matches the soundtrack. Howard could not play the violin, but Bergman explained the trick used in the original Swedish film: two violinists held the bow and violin before "Holger" in close-ups (one held the bow and the other the violin), while "Holger" kept his arms by his sides.*³⁶

(2) ... Leslie became very attached to Newman, describing to him the lessons he had received from Jascha Heifetz during the making of *Intermezzo* and the dismal squeaks he obtained from the violin while Heifetz played the sonata for the film track, more or less behind his back.⁷³

Ronald Howard on his father's "associate producer" role, Ingrid Bergman and more:

Though the role of associate producer sounds a lot more than it is - being a generalised term to cover a number of functions, like being a buffer state between producer and director - Leslie did have the satisfaction of being closely

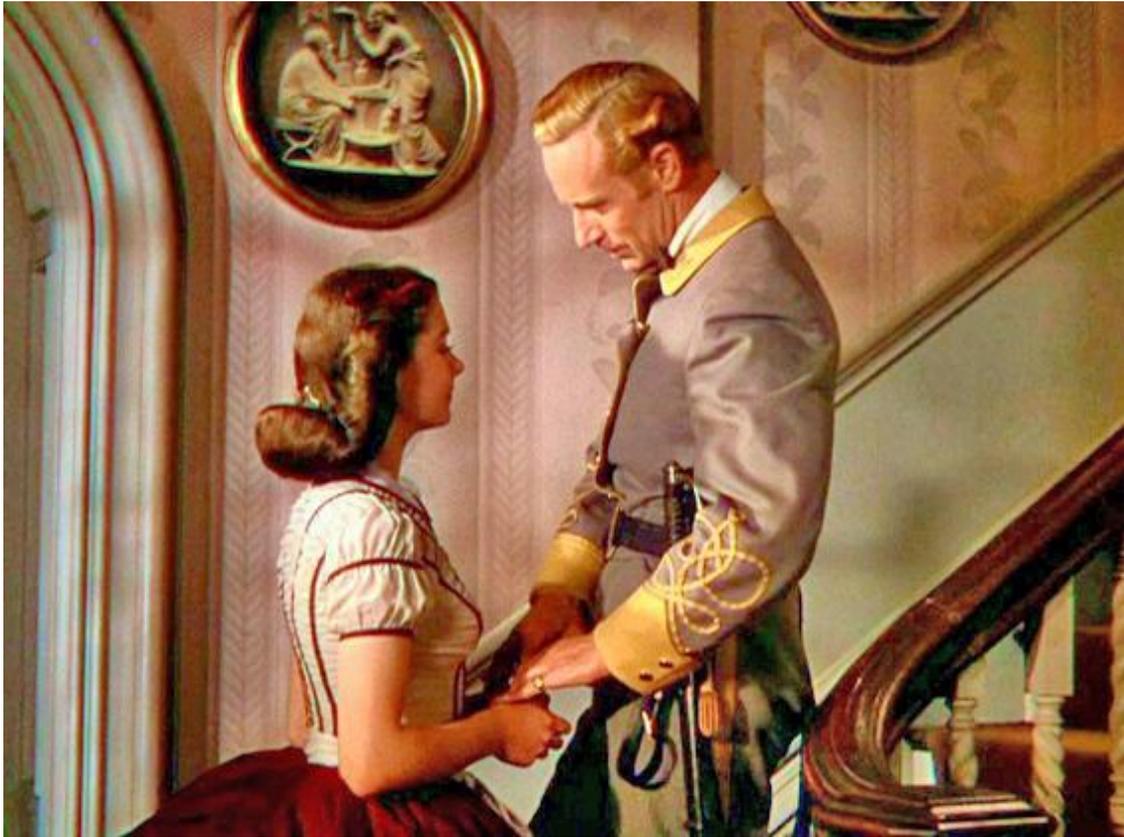
involved with the scenario and preparation of the film for production. In fact, in a quiet way, his brief was wider and he did considerably influence the way the film was made. He was also a steadying influence on the somewhat Ruritanian technique of his old Russian friend Gregory Ratoff, the director. Ratoff, if left to his own devices, was subject to flights of fancy and 'ginger bread' reminiscent of Grand Guignol. Such tendencies to elaborate had to be contained for the innately senti-mental nature of the film would have been exploited even more but for Leslie's restraining influence and restrained performance. The inherent danger was that it could so easily become a 'handkerchief' film and spill over into bathos. To achieve this a very fine line had to be steered and the girl's and the wife's part, to be credible, could in no sense be lachrymose or sugary.

A great deal of the effectiveness of Intermezzo was due to a performance of touching simplicity by Ingrid Bergman, at the time a comparatively unknown young Swedish actress, who had played the role in the original version a year earlier. [The two films were released, in fact, in 1936 and 1939.] Here she was to score again - and, perhaps, more affectingly with Leslie opposite her in that delicate relationship, almost of master and pupil, gradually deepening into love, which owed so much of its reality and tenderness to the playing of their joint scenes. And the choice of Edna Best as the wife was one of the triumphs of the film - for she made Holgar's wife completely sympathetic by a performance of great sweetness and sensitive understanding.

Without doubt, Ingrid Bergman was one of the rarest finds Hollywood ever made, which I think was mainly due to Selznick who brought her over for the film. Far from the somewhat adulterated blooms that burst upon the world from the Hollywood 'hot-house', she had an innocence and candour that had never been seen out there before, and I don't think since. Entirely unsullied and tremendously beautiful, she took everyone's breath away, even though the casting people were unsure how this girl would go down in America by comparative standards of the local product.

Leslie was enchanted by her unaffectedness - as indeed was Gregory Ratoff - and they both encouraged her to do absolutely nothing that was not entirely natural to her. She must not be forced, in any way, to accommodate or 'Americanise'. Indeed, one's impression of her performance is of a rare, almost alpine flower opening its petals for the first time at the onset of spring. It had a quality of being almost in slow-motion, as if the pace of the film had been consciously slowed down to capture each detail of its flowering. I suppose by the more astringent standards of today Intermezzo must seem old-fashioned, almost a product of the 'Vienna school' of unabashed sentimentality. Its musical score and theme song perhaps make it more so. Fortunately much of its sentimental nature was successfully suspended by its intelligent interpretation.⁷⁴

GONE WITH THE WIND (1939)



Storytelling on a grand, opulent, majestic scale - an epic saga dazzlingly, eye-poppingly presented. A film, exploiting the cinematic arts to the full, decades ahead of its time. Though all the leads perform strongly - Leigh and Gable in particular - Howard is given a thankless task in having to try and breathe life into anaemic, spare-part Ashley. Still, an experience to be savoured time and again, unique and unforgettable. Circa 220 minutes, in two halves.

IMDb: This film shows the best of the American cinema. Whether we like it or not, one has to recognize the greatest achievement, perhaps, of the creative talent of the people working in the movie industry. *Gone With The Wind* represents a monumental leap, as well as a departure, for the movies, as they were done prior to this film / A pro-Confederate travesty of history / More ham than a Danish abattoir / Vivien Leigh's beauty, sense of timing and intelligent approach to the role of Scarlett makes hers a hallmark performance. Gable, a man's man, projects passion with charm and power. His love for Scarlett, the woman he knows is wedded to a dream, speaks eloquently for itself. Olivia de Havilland as Melanie and Leslie Howard as Ashley are pitch perfect - and to omit the contribution of Oscar-winner Hattie McDaniel would be a sin. Such a natural actress, a joy to watch, excellent in any role / The mother of all soap operas / Awful / Incredibly overrated. If you want a true classic, go watch *The Godfather*. If you want an example of how a big box office can vastly exaggerate the public view of a horrible film, watch *Titanic* or this turkey / Each time I watch *GWTW*, I'm astonished by the freshness of the story, the power of the emotions it conveys and the beautiful, detailed images of a time long gone / A very, very, very, very, very, very bad movie /

Masterful in its time, and still timeless today / Cheese / Bunkum / Long, laborious and so very stupid. How is this a classic? / During the burning of Atlanta the slaves who are being marched out to dig trenches are singing *Let My People Go* - and that's just what the Union Army was coming south to do / Won eight Academy Awards and the deserves every one / An incredible spectacle / Frankly my dear, this movie sucks / The first - and best - blockbuster / Much ado about nothing / One of cinema's greatest marvels, a living testament to its timelessness and limitless potential, *GWTW*, the telling of the interwoven lives of Rhett, Scarlett, Ashley, and Melanie and the world they knew, will be viewed with admiration hundreds of years from now.

Leslie Howard on Ashley:

(1) Howard did not like Ashley Wilkes at all and - biographies say - did not even trouble to read Mitchell's novel. His daughter Leslie's book cites a few letters in which her father made ironical remarks about himself in the Ashley role:

I swear I would be afraid to meet you, I look so peculiar. My hair is corn coloured, a delicious yellow and frightfully long. It flies in the breeze and my whiskers have grown to the ends of my ears. I look like an albino butler...

Yesterday I put on my Confederate uniform for the first time and looked like a fairy doorman at the Beverly Wiltshire - a fine thing at my age.

I hate the damn part. I have done two Technicolor tests, both rotten. I'm not nearly beautiful or young enough for Ashley, and it makes me sick being fixed up to look attractive.

Yet, though he accepted the part of Ashley against his will, it is impossible for us to forget him. And this is the magic of cinema, and of the extraordinary sensitivity of an actor who was able to take up a hideous character and make a human being of him, somebody who still lives in our hearts. There are scenes in that film that will be impressed in our memory forever.⁵⁷

(2) *It's easier to talk about Gone With The Wind when you're in London, five thousand miles away from where it was made. The actual filming was like living in a dream. Every now and then you'd wake up for a few minutes and become sharply aware of other things, and then there'd be more scenes or re-takes and the dream would get you again. Everybody you met was possessed by the same dream, and that made it all the harder to shake off the sense of dimity and the deep South.*

From my own point of view it was the most - what can I say? - violent film I've ever played in. Just one climax after another. That's what happens when you

compress a story of that size and that virulence into a couple of hours. All the bits between the high spots have got to go. It's full of deaths and murders and passions and jealousies and fighting - oh, and fires, lots of Technicolor fires.

The Technicolor cameras made me break one tradition of a lifetime. I had to wear make-up for the first time on the screen. My own hair photographed reddish-brown in Technicolor. and Ashley, you know, was definitely "tow-coloured." So I had my hair bleached and I had to use a kind of greyish-white make-up on my face to get a natural pale skin tone.

Clark Gable and I hardly ever met on the floor. Our scenes very seldom coincided, and we used to work alternate shifts. Vivien Leigh, of course, was on duty all the time. I shall never forget the first time I heard her doing her stuff.

Curiously enough, we had never met in England, although we had both worked for Korda at one time. I had once wanted her to come out to New York to play Ophelia for me in the theatre, but she was tied up with her film work and with a play in London. The first test I made for Ashley in Hollywood were with another actress altogether.

Well, just as I was coming off the floor from the test, thoroughly disheartened, I heard the most terrific Southern accent on the next set. It was the best Southern I'd heard yet - talking to the coloured mammy in the scene where she pulls up Scarlett's stay-laces. I asked who it was, and they told me it was an English actress, Vivien Leigh, just come over to Hollywood on a visit. She had worked up her Southern accent in about five days, but she must have stuck at it like a Trojan. It was perfect. I believe she got the job on that scene. You realised in a flash why Selznick believed he'd got just the right girl for Scarlett at last.⁷⁵

A publicity interview:

Frankly Forty

*"Thirty-five-year-old juveniles and screen actors who try to go through the throes of passionate love scenes to thrill their audiences are disgusting to me," said Leslie Howard as he sipped a glass of milk and meditated on his return to Hollywood to play Ashley Wilkes in *Gone With The Wind*.*

While the blonde Britisher delivered his arraignment against actors who believe that they're always as young as the make-up can "pretty them" - to use Mr. Howard's wan term - he relaxed in a chair and through those narrow, half-closed eyes of his seemed to me to be looking out on a world of women who still consider him in an emotionally romantic light. But he no longer desires to appear that way. Something definite has happened to Leslie Howard, not only in his attitude toward his work, but in his analysis of himself. There's no getting

him to admit whether the change came suddenly one morning as he rose, looked at himself in the mirror and said regretfully, "I am no longer young," or whether it was a thought that developed in his mind and grew to a conviction when there was no further denying it. It was almost midnight when we had our serious talk about this matter of age and its influence on his professional life, a matter that seems to have beset the star so absorbingly. He'd had a long busy day working and then there had been a series of business conferences that had to do with contracts and things. But, even in the small room under an unflattering light that threw a ribbon of white glare across his thin face and exaggerated the shadow under his eyes, there was an ageless quality about this distinguished Britisher outlined there in his chair. Ghosts of some of the popular characters he has portrayed on the screen seemed to intrude as we reviewed his film record - the frustrated suitor of Norma Shearer in *A Free Soul* right down to his part with the same Miss Shearer in *Romeo and Juliet*.

Tragedy and frustration, that's what the record was for all the men he brought to life before the cameras. He's talking like a conglomerate wraith of all his characterisations, I thought, and watched him as he had his say. Being miserable through love for a good Hollywood salary doesn't appeal to Mr. Howard's screen sensibilities any longer because he feels he can get the salary without the emotional upheavals before the cameras. He did suggest that *Smilin' Through* was an exception because in that dramatic film he grew older as the film unreeled and, while he did create an illusion of youth in the opening sequences, he left his audiences in the twilight of the character's life and the youth part could be regarded as artistic aptitude.

When he has had time for Hollywood there has been no actor more in demand to play opposite the most glamorous women stars. While he is convinced that there are certain types of films, notably comedies and melodramas, which Hollywood does better than any other production centre in the world, the English actor is not sold on the West Coast colony as a permanent abiding place. He prefers his country home in England where, when he has retired from all his stage and movie activities, he plans to find peace. There was that one Christmas a few years ago when he went home to spend the holiday with his family. He had a telephone call in England from a California studio telling him to take a boat immediately - the boat left England on Christmas Eve. Mr. Howard argued that he had to be with his family on that one day of all the year but orders were orders and he sailed a miserable man, among the tearful farewells of his children and friends. He arrived in Hollywood and waited three months before the production was started.

Mr. Howard doesn't look his age. That voice which has thrilled millions, which has spoken so many passages of convincing ardour, so intimate that they seemed a personal message to every woman who heard them, on this particular occasion was saying things like this:

"Good actors, to be successful at forty, ought to have brains, and if they have brains they ought to know that the mantle of a youthful Romeo ill-befits

them. Of course, I realise a film product must have his touch of romance, but with actors of my age, it ought to be adult romance and not the most important thing in the picture's story. Even actors ought to be their age and there's something pathetic about men in their middle years, fixing their faces with greasepaint to make them look younger, and playing situations they could have experienced in real life twenty years earlier."

But many actors of the years about which the popular English star is most concerned do have hectic experiences in their private lives over that emotion called love - a fact I suggested at this point in the discussion.

"And what do people say of them?" queried Mr. Howard with sudden vehemence. Hurriedly he went on to explain that what people say is that these men are fools after their fashion and old enough to know better. To Mr. Howard, right now, there is nothing convincingly romantic about a man of forty making a fool of himself and while he has no control of his contemporaries' feelings in the matter, he proposes to do what he can about his own case. If he has his way, love will not be the motivating force of his screen efforts. He has a hangoverish feeling of maturity from that fortieth birthday he will not see again. Perhaps his attitude had its inception when a friend some months ago, remarking about the stage of the world, said:

"Do you realise it's twenty-four years since the World War started and that's the whole span of youth?" Howard couldn't help remembering that before the war ended he was a soldier-bridegroom with family responsibilities, sent back after the armistice to resume a peacetime life as an underpaid bank clerk. Ever sensitive to the lasting effect of his own experiences, the fighting years impressed themselves too dramatically on his consciousness to leave him content at a desk. That was the beginning of his acting career, a profession that shunted him around the English provinces, that often left him jobless and made those early years a hazardous existence. With success in London came his migration to New York under Gilbert Miller's guidance and he burst upon the Manhattan theatrical scene as one of the most brilliantly talented newcomers in several seasons. Hollywood was a logical follow-up and in his successful career he widened his audience to the four corners of the globe. His was the art of gentle persuasion and women of all types fell for it completely. Strangely enough, the women haven't changed - only Mr. Howard.

The fact that a dozen women of various ages and interests to whom I experimentally put Mr. Howard's pertinent remarks about himself were horrified he should consider himself too old for flicker love doesn't influence him at all. Apparently he isn't interested in this cross-section of female reactions nor in the indignantly expressed general opinion: "You never think of Leslie Howard's age - but, oh, isn't he wonderful?" The ladies will have only their memories of Screen Lover Howard and will have to be satisfied with their favourite in more mature roles, if he has his way.

"Life begins at forty," I offered platonically to bring Mr. Howard back to the important subject. He had another sip of milk, lighted a cigarette, blew

smoke clouds toward the ceiling and, as though ruminating on what lies before him, answered, "Yes, but it ought to be a different kind of life than that which belongs to the earlier years."

"Well, look at so many of the popular men players in Hollywood today, the ones who are still glamour exponents to the feminine fans. They're either approaching forty or they've past it and yet they are anything but ludicrous as lovers on the screen. Look at Fredric March, Herbert Marshall, Clark Gable ..."

"Gable's a few years younger," interrupted the lord of the dressing room. "And I do admit that the attitude of the world has changed in the past several years. Where once young boys were the films' romantic figures, the popular ones today, to a large extent, seem to be older. Don't misunderstand me, there is a definite place for mature stars in the motion pictures. The thing is that the part should be suited to the man; they shouldn't try to make him some personality he cannot feel. An actor who can really act bring himself to every part he accepts and his interpretation of that character must necessarily be tempered by how he feels, what he thinks in his own personal life. And he cannot satisfy himself if he feels in his heart that he is being ridiculous for his years. Even if he fools his audience, he can't fool himself."

Well, maybe, Leslie Howard is tired of feminine adulation. But, there's still a question on that score. Goodness knows there have been enough women in the past decade who have sighed over him en masse and individually; abstractly and quite personally. They've followed him in crowds, they've written him love letters, they've sent him gifts, they've manipulated a meeting with him and schemed to arouse his interest. Where is the human being who wouldn't be influenced by this sort of things continuously for ten years?

It looks as though Leslie Howard has hit the rebound. Whether it's temporary or permanent remains to be seen. Through it all there has been the figure of Mrs. Howard, the bride of his war years, and the important thing is that when Leslie Howard has at last arrived at that mental reasoning where he says "I am no longer young," she is Mrs. Howard and they are together, interested mutually in the future careers of their two children.⁷⁶

[PIMPERNEL SMITH \(aka Mister V\) \(1941\)](#)

In his 1981 book *In Search Of My Father*, Leslie Howard's son Ronald (also an actor) called his father's war years "diamond years when he reached the heights". He went on:

Looking back one senses a strong sense of destiny about them - almost of predestination. Those four years were to lift him to his creative apogee and then, suddenly, snuff him out like a candle in the wind. If one believes in a destiny one might say that his life had been a preparation for this time - for it was to be in these years that he finally found himself under the strange stimulus of war.¹⁰

While, in terms of what's seen on the screen, it's hard to agree that Howard's '40s films stand head and shoulders above what went before, what's different now is that all the unsung behind-the-scenes tasks - script supervision, finding the finance, the casting, producing and directing; jobs that would previously have fallen to someone else - are now taken on by Howard himself, in addition to acting duties, and, to that extent, during the war years, he did indeed step up. But what's also true is that *Pimpernel Smith* - Howard's best wartime film - is a remarkably assured piece of work: a clear-sighted, artfully-conceived and beautifully rendered reworking of Baroness Orczy's *Scarlet Pimpernel* in which the protagonist becomes an archaeologist working in the days leading up to WWII to liberate endangered citizens from Nazi oppression. Though patently made and released primarily for propaganda purposes, style and artistic rigour are evident throughout. The mechanics of the plot are occasionally creaky - how did the scarecrow get into the field and, once there, how did it manage to rescue the pianist, and how were the escapees able to travel so openly on the train? - but to fret about such things is to miss the point. All in all, a wonderful effort, well worth finding. The film's final five minutes are particularly affecting. With Howard below is Mary Morris. 116 minutes. Excellent.



IMDb: Together with *The Great Dictator*, one of the most effective anti-Nazi films ever made / Howard made this film to bolster his countrymen and offer hope, which it must have done, and yet *Pimpernel Smith* retains a sense of timelessness in its message that tyranny must always be resisted, no matter what the cost / The final scene, in which

Howard says from the shadows that he will always be back, is haunting, for he wouldn't live to see the end of the war. Yet Mr. Howard's spirit does return, time and again, whenever this deeply personal movie is played / Look out Violette Cunnington, the assistant in the cosmetics shop. She was Howard's last love - despite still being married to Ruth, he fell for Violette (who also appears in the German dinner scene in *First Of The Few*). It broke his heart when she died of cerebral meningitis in 1942 / In England we hold a special place in our hearts for the great Leslie Howard. He was a learned man and gave to all his roles a suave sophistication that appealed both here and in the States / Howard was an actor's actor, the highest form of praise, a man whose skill at his craft would allow him to blend into almost any character, any role. While he left behind many fine performances, it is generally thought that one of his best was the original Scarlet Pimpernel in which he had to play what was arguably one of cinema's first superheroes, complete with a secret identity. In the iconic original he manages to effectively portray the mild-mannered fop, more interested in clothes than fighting, the warrior and man of action known as the Pimpernel, and even the romantic counterpart to his wife (who, in a brilliant sub-plot, was also not what she seemed, but for entirely different reasons). It was an astonishing portrayal. Seven years later, Howard revived the same character, cast this time in a modern setting, working as an underground agent against the Nazis on their own soil. Though you will get much more out of *Pimpernel Smith* - script, direction, and acting all superb - if previously familiar with *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, in any event you can look forward to a tremendously enter-taining film made by a master at the top of his craft.

Two contemporary reviews:

(1) Perhaps a film like Mister V is basically a wish-fulfilment. It is not very likely that a shy British professor of archaeology, disguised as a scarecrow, ever could succeed in smuggling captives out of a Nazi concentration camp. But it is pleasant to dream that he could, and pleasant to see him bluff Dr. Goebbels' Propaganda Ministry into taking him on an obsequious tour of Dachau. When these adventures are presented with the deft direction and droll understated acting of Leslie Howard, the result is a film delightful and heart-warming, if only because we wish the real-life job were as easy as that.

Prof. Horatio Smith is an inconspicuous fellow with a trick of fading into the background. What infuriates the Gestapo is that, when he fades, several important prisoners invariably fade with him. The professor's rescue work is accordingly frequently interrupted, especially by a charming young woman who, in turn, rescues him from his somewhat sterile romantic love for the statue Aphrodite Callipygia. Finally forced by the declaration of war to leave Germany, the professor vanishes before the eyes of the Gestapo, leaving behind him a trail of cigarette smoke in the air and a grim promise: "Don't worry, I'll be back. We'll all be back."

This is a fairytale, but it has solid fact behind it, though its Gestapo officials are a little too gentle and gentlemanly for belief; their chief waits for evidence

before making arrests, lets minor enemies escape scot-free, and is willing to carry on a battle of wits with the professor instead of clubbing him to death. Mister V, indeed, wants you to laugh derisively at the Nazis rather than fear them. The rabby officials of the Propaganda Ministry, the ratty Gestapo subordinates, the hoggish Gestapo chief who insists that Shakespeare was German - all these are brilliant satire. In one superb moment, a German government spokesman, angrily denying rumours of the rescues, trumpets: "And, furthermore, in Nazi Germany nobody can be saved by anybody!"



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If the lines are neat, the direction is neater. There is a fine irony, for instance in the close-up of a poster on which a blonde maiden beckons: "Come to romantic Germany!" while, somewhere out of sight, we hear Hitler making a speech. The one serious flaw of Mister V is a political superficiality which mars the logic of its anti-Nazi stand. Leslie Howard, in the character of Prof. Smith, declares explicitly that history is made, progress is achieved, by a few outstanding geniuses - the artists and scientists he is rescuing. In other words, the people don't matter and only great men are worth saving. Ignoring the very existence of the German people, Mister V consequently ignores the real issues of the war and the real horror of Nazism. It must, nevertheless, be given credit for its anti-Nazi intentions, more credit for its delectable light touch, and special credit for such acting as Mr. Howard's and that of Francis Sullivan as the Gestapo chief.⁷⁷

(2) Pimpernel Smith was the first war film produced in England. Many others have followed ... but this first work will survive because it puts moral above material values and because it represents the victory of intelligence over brute force. The timeliness of the film's concluding prophesy, though written in 1940 at a time of uncertainty and adversity, is today being impressively confirmed.⁷⁸

FROM THE FOUR CORNERS (1941)



Running just fifteen minutes, this sparkling gem represents all that's best about Leslie Howard and what he stood - and died - for. Speaking through the mouths of three Commonwealth soldiers and Howard himself, first in a London pub and then looking out over the city from the top of St. Paul's, *From The Four Corners* explains briefly, lucidly and movingly why Hitler must be opposed. For

our fathers' ... ideas of justice, tolerance and the rights of man, taking shape in the sunlight and the smoke, sometimes standing still, sometimes even slipping back, but slowly broadening with the centuries ... Perhaps the men who came nearest to putting them into words were those Americans, many of them the sons of British pioneers, who, founding an independent nation proclaimed: We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed

by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. *Those words and that spirit were born and nourished here, and your fathers carried them to the ends of the earth. They are our inheritance from the past, our legacy to the future. That's why you came here - to defend them.*⁷⁹

IMDb: Howard does a fine job with a brief history of England and her empire, centred on London, from Alfred the Great to the American Revolution, and the explorers she sent out "to the four corners". Private R. Gilbert, a law student from Auckland, Corporal W. Atkinson, owner of a bicycle shop in Sydney and Private J. Johnston, a farmer near Vancouver, all do a very fine job playing themselves / Lump-in-the-throat stuff, done right, with a fairly light touch for wartime / The intelligent script maintains a sense of nostalgia and sentiment throughout. The use of montage and voice-over by the four real life characters is put to beautiful use, mainly relying on stock footage of the London landmarks and flashbacks of the three soldiers in pre-war civilian life. Despite the film's patriotic purposes and the era in which it was made, the themes are timeless and still relevant today / Produced in the United Kingdom before Pearl Harbor, this excellent, intelligent little film explores the real reasons why men from around the world should unite to fight, not for Mother England, but for the basic love of freedom and liberty they all hold dear. By examining these values, the film focuses in on the commonality shared by all members of the English-speaking nations, including the United States.

[49th PARALLEL \(aka *The Invaders*\) \(1941\)](#)



A damaged U-boat is stranded in Hudson Bay, Canada in the early years of WWII. The fanatical Nazi captain and his crew must reach the neutral United States or be captured. Along the way they meet a variety of characters each

with their own views on the war and nationalism. Director Powell and writer Pressburger make the case for the US to come down off the fence and join the Allied fight. Olivier (above, checked shirt) busks the part of a French-Canadian trapper. Howard plays the same urbane but rather dreamy intellectual he usually does, on screen and perhaps off too (i.e. himself). More slick, effective flag-waving for the cause. 117 minutes. Worthwhile.

IMDb: So unrealistic and poorly filmed that I was waiting for Nanook of the North to save the day / Truly bizarre. The last 15 minutes or so are utterly ridiculous / A superb commentary on the dangers of any ideology ... A stinging commentary on Nazism / Gets better and better with age / Although there are several preachy, propagandising spots in the film, there is a lot of action and character development too, with a zinger of an ending. If you can make it through the first 30 minutes, the rest will reward you for your patience / A series of vignettes each featuring a well-known star at its centre including Laurence Olivier (hilarious as a French-Canadian trapper), Leslie Howard and Raymond Massey. Unique and engrossing, full of speeches and propaganda yet never feeling preachy or schematic / This best of all propaganda films is also a beautifully shot travelogue of Canada / Howard plays, again and most effectively, an effete character with a hidden steely core / The trouble with propaganda is that it wants to tell lies, which makes it bad art / Absorbing and powerful / A subtle and surprisingly intelligent analysis of liberal democracy. Despite some wooden acting and poor continuity, exceptional / A wasted opportunity. Totally absurd / Canadians will find this a real knee-slapper / A profound and beautifully crafted piece of cinema / Fantastic / Having read other comments, I feel that some of the criticism is fair, but some is just bizarre and nasty. I love this film because it portrays a proud, peace-loving people roused to fight against one of the most awful dictatorships ever created, reminding their neighbours to the south that the 49th Parallel, long and undefended, is all that stands between a sleepy America and possible ruin / Educational / Terrific.

A contemporary review:

If a propaganda picture must be entertaining to be effective, and to reach the greatest number of people, then The Invaders has a good chance to succeed in its purpose. To those who will pay attention, it brings a message designed to awaken them out of any possible complacency. And to be certain of gaining that attention, it tells its story engrossingly and convincingly, despite the absence of the customary entertainment requisite, romantic interest. Wherever its German fugitives confront freedom-loving peoples in their flight across Canada, Nazi tyranny is pitted against democratic liberty, with the spectator becoming increasingly convinced as the story progresses that this liberty must be retained. Although Laurence Olivier, Leslie Howard and Raymond Massey receive top billing, their appearance in three different episodes are comparatively brief, apparently proving that these important players placed service to the Allied cause above personal gains. As the U-boat lieutenant, Eric Portman dominates proceedings, while Glynis Johns, the cast's only feminine member, impresses during her brief appearance. The picture has been well

*mounted, capably directed. Pictorial interest is heightened by the scenic backgrounds "shot" on location in Canada. No one person can predict with accuracy its success or failure at the box-office, but the fact that it entertains while it preaches is a favourable sign and, too, Olivier, Howard and Massey are names to be reckoned with where drawing power is concerned. The bulk of exploitation activities must be based on the film's timeliness, for this angle overshadows all others.*⁸⁰

Raymond Massey on Leslie Howard:

*I learned so much working with Leslie Howard. He'd whisper between takes, 'Tone it back a bit, old chap.' To me he never seemed to do much. Then I watched the rushes and he'd effortlessly stolen the scene.*⁸¹

Howard expressing reservations about working creatively during wartime:

*... Aside from all this, there are two profound psychological deterrents; the first is the inertia which strikes artists of all kinds in times of violence and destruction because creative work requires tranquillity in which to thrive, and the second is the conviction that film entertainment is a trivial occupation in times when there are such tremendous and historic tasks to be done.*⁸²



THE FIRST OF THE FEW (1942)



The First Of The Few, known in the U.S. and elsewhere as *Spitfire*, is an earnest 114 minute biopic of R. J. Mitchell, designer of the iconic Supermarine Spitfire, the fighter that figured so large in the Battle of Britain in the skies above Southern England during the summer and autumn of 1940. Made and released primarily to bolster the spirit of war-weary Britons, the film was produced and directed by Leslie Howard, who also starred (in his last leading role) alongside David Niven (above, right) as fictional composite character Geoffrey Crisp. The tiny part of Nurse Kennedy is played by Howard's daughter, also Leslie, and Madeleine by his long-time partner Violette Cunningham (credited as Suzanne Clair) who died, aged just 32, in 1942. The script is, in parts, economical with the truth: Mitchell never went to Germany, never met Messerschmitt, began working on fighter design two years before the Nazis assumed power and died from rectal cancer, which fact the film glosses over for dramatic effect. Howard's son Ronald wrote: "In the final analysis Mrs Mitchell and, to an extent, her son Gordon, who frequently accompanied his mother to the studios, had reservations about the way the film depicted Mitchell. Perhaps Leslie had carried the humanising process too far." To call *The First Of The Few*, as some have, Howard's "masterpiece and his monument" manages to recognise its many strengths (including Howard's assured direction) while implicitly taking away from other, better, more memorable, though perhaps less worthy achievements of a relatively brief but very fruitful career.

IMDb: One of the leading British propaganda films, probably on a par with the *Miniver* pictures, covering not only the Supermarine/Merlin work but also the glider design airframe research trialled by the Germans before they dumped the Versailles Treaty altogether / Fitting that one of Howard's best roles, as the idealistic dreamer Mitchell, was also his last. The film works as propaganda, as an involving war actioner and as a character study of an eccentric, inventive mind. Howard's skill as a director ensures all angles are adequately covered, leaving the viewer rarely bored / The group of airmen listening to Niven recounting Mitchell's story were real RAF pilots (one of them my uncle). The war did not stop for filming. If the bell went to scramble, shooting would temporarily be halted while those airmen would run to their Spitfires, go off and fight the war, before returning to carry on filming as though nothing had happened. At the end, Niven was so impressed with those heroes that he sent them off to The Savoy in London for the weekend, ringing the manager with instructions to give them whatever they wanted: women, food, drink, making sure the bill was sent direct to him / A fine farewell and a tribute to two British patriots: Leslie Howard and Reginald J. Mitchell / A gem of a film, whose great star - Howard at his charismatic best - never shone more brightly than here / More of a flag waver than a broad topical study, but, in a 1942 British war movie, how could it be otherwise? / The only film David Niven ever really acted in / Inspirational, then and now / Niven channels Flynn, Howard rules OK / The gap between the movie Mitchell and the real Mitchell is rather too wide for my taste / Excellent and very moving. A wonderful film.

Rosamund John on the influence of Leslie Howard:

Q: After your 1934 debut, you returned to the screen in 1942 and made three films in a row, all for Leslie Howard. How influential was he in your career?

*A: Oh, he taught me everything I knew about filmmaking. I got on very well with him and luckily he didn't want to get into bed with me, as he did with quite a few people he worked with. I was playing Mrs. Mitchell in *The First Of The Few*. Leslie made me realise that the only thing that matters when you are filming is what you are thinking and feeling, because it will all show in your eyes. Leslie was an actor before he became a director and he saw things from an actor's point of view, but a lot of directors merely looked upon actors as being inconvenient bits of furniture ...⁸³*

A contemporary review:

*The First Of The Few begins and ends with superb flying sequences covering the Battle of Britain. Produced and directed by Leslie Howard, it is a story with all the elements of documentary, about the Spitfire and the man who designed it. The documentary film maker would have made the Spitfire the centre and hero of his picture. *The First Of The Few* has as its hero R. J. Mitchell, the aeroplane's designer, and the aeroplane itself plays a secondary though important part. The interest and appeal of the picture mainly rely therefore on the human figure.*

Leslie Howard plays the part of Mitchell and he acts with customary charm and restraint. The portrayal colours the whole film with this "charm and restraint" and as a result The First Of The Few is much less exciting than it should be considering the quality and dramatic opportunities of the story, and considering also the amount of highly skilled craftsmanship that has gone into the making. Leslie Howard is a good and popular actor and his face and acting are by now well known to British audiences. Perhaps it is this very familiarity that deprives Howard's Mitchell of real character and power. Perhaps it is Leslie Howard himself.

If the designer were a genius, Howard's performance shows little sign of the strong and colourful personality that goes with genius. The film sets out to tell a real-life story and it is clear that those who made it carried out the job with all sincerity. Their sincerity, however, did not carry them far enough. In the sense that the film is documentary and propaganda they have failed on certain important points. They have failed, for instance, in clarifying their attitude to the politics of a time that is in vivid memory of most. Politics enter into the film with the refusal of the pre-war government to sanction more money to carry on research on the Spitfire, and again they enter with Lady Houston who appears in a strange interlude backed by her slogan "Wake up, England". It was Lady Houston who provided the money, but the film is content with treating her as fairy godmother without further examination of her political activities. The politics of the time cause Mitchell to expend a great deal of unnecessary time and energy combating indifference, but in spite of the important part this plays in his life, no clear picture is given of pre-war politics and no definite line is taken. This is a loss to the film and one that is not likely to be overlooked by audiences who are a good deal more politically conscious than they used to be.

There are other defects that could be overlooked in a less important and less realistic film. One is in the emphasis on the Spitfire as the aeroplane that saved Britain. But surely Hurricanes shared in the Battle of Britain!

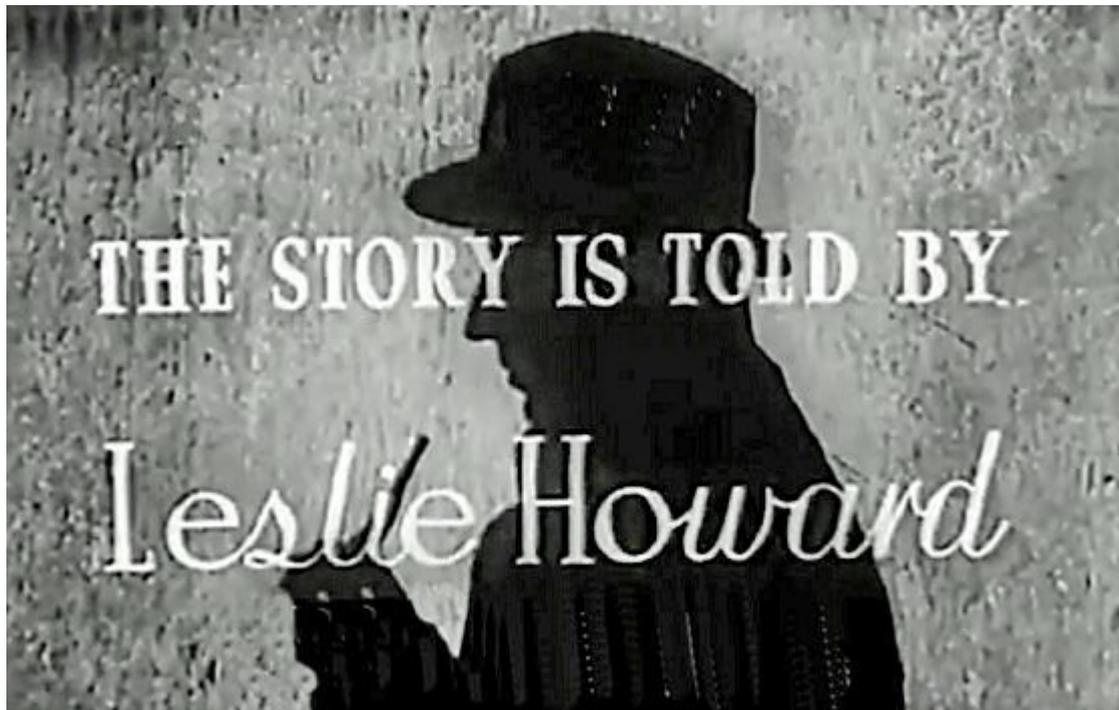
Another defect is in neglecting to give fuller details of the designing and building of the aeroplane. The chain that holds the film together is the building and perfecting of the fighter. The audience's interest is aroused from the start by reference to technical details, but for the most part, the film fails to explain technicalities that even the layman can now in wartime understand. In addition, the film never clears up the cause of the mysterious crash that occurs during a trial in America.

The turning point of the film is when Mitchell visits Germany and discovers how far advanced the Germans are in aeronautics. This section of the film is well handled. From conversations with Germans (who are made to appear rational

human beings) Mitchell is convinced about the inevitability of the war and sees that his job is to produce a fighter that can beat all others. Aware of the extreme urgency, Mitchell overworks on the Spitfire and manages to complete it before his death. From the sacrifice of his life for this purpose the film receives its title.

Despite its shortcomings, *The First Of The Few* has many good points. It is also a smooth, highly-polished job of work with possibly greater propaganda value abroad than it will have here.⁸⁴

THE WHITE EAGLE, August 1940 - March 1941 (1942)



The White Eagle is a 26 minute Oscar-nominated documentary short, written by Val Gielgud and directed by Eugeniusz Cekalski, concerning the Polish expatriate community in Britain during the time period denoted in the title. Touching on its exiled government, culture and valuable contribution to the war effort, the film is narrated through its first 22 minutes and closing 30 seconds by Leslie Howard, with around three minutes of BBC newsreader and announcer Alvar Lidell also used. It's rather disquieting to hear Howard comment under footage of an enemy plane crashing into the sea: "That's a very comforting sight!"

IN WHICH WE SERVE (1942)

Written by, scored by, co-directed by and starring Noel Coward (below, right), *In Which We Serve*, based loosely on the wartime experiences of Lord Mountbatten, features Howard in its opening and closing moments as uncredited

narrator only. He speaks the film's first seven words - *This is the story of a ship* - and then, in about 45 seconds, these final, heartfelt, defiant 92:

Here ends the story of a ship, but there will always be other ships, for we are an island race. Through all our centuries the sea has ruled our destiny. There will always be other ships and other men to sail in them. It is these men, in peace or war, to whom we owe so much. Above all victories, beyond all loss, in spite of changing values in a changing world, they give to us, their countrymen, eternal and indomitable pride. God bless our ships, and all who sail in them.



IMDb: Not only a wonderful pastiche of British society during WWII, but a complex, yet correct statement of a very simple theme - namely the duty of a country's citizens to defend the system they believe in. The simplicity of the story is one of the movie's key strengths, but the most appealing aspect of the film is the way in which each scene reflects the preceding and suggests the subsequent one. The motivation behind this may have been to demonstrate the unifying elements of the various different characters and their individual stories, but the skill with which this is done makes for a wonderfully satisfying experience. The film is excellently crafted, moving from a semi-documentary style that would have been instantly recognisable to cinema audiences of the forties, accustomed to then-common weekly news reviews, then moving into everything from light comedy to exciting action and pure drama. It is a film that for many will seem old-fashioned, but only in some of its sentiments, never in its techniques or its wisdom / Emotions go largely unspoken. They simmer under the surface in the silences and the flickering effort of concealment on the faces of the major characters. Personal suffering is borne with quiet forbearance, in the knowledge that it is borne in the service of a

higher cause and that to bear it stoically is to set the right example to others ... For the men and women in Coward's vision, *HMS Torrin* is much more than a ship - it is personified as the object of their devotion and jealousy. Above all it is a powerful symbol of the qualities and traditions that unite and must protect their vulnerable island at war. Outdated though this vision may be - part of a world left far behind through post-war socio-economic development and emancipation, it is nevertheless a compelling and entirely consistent vision which ensures the film retains a certain appeal to audiences even today and is a major reason why it can still be so highly rated as a piece of British cinema history / Can be enjoyed on so many levels that it demands multiple viewings - and you will discover new subtleties each time / Belongs in the highest rank of world cinema / A blistering film that never fails to hit the mark / First-rate / A pleasure.

THE GENTLE SEX (1943)



An unassuming, intermittently inspiring but dramatically dull film extolling the contribution of women in uniform to the war effort. Ably directed and narrated by Howard, whose brief, first minute, back-to-camera appearance is also his screen farewell. Well-intentioned but disappointing. 89 minutes.

IMDb: The film comes to emotional life only in a couple of places: but it remains what it was made to be, an informative and somewhat idealised glimpse into women's military contribution to the Second World War, in a branch of the service [the ATS] often eclipsed by the WRNS and the WAAF / A basically plotless slice of British life during the war, without drama or complexity - just a group of ladies fulfilling the mundane duties of lorry driving, drilling and manning ack-ack batteries, with plenty of prattling in between. Women will probably enjoy this film more than men, but there is really nothing in it to make it worthy of recommendation to anyone / Probably unlike any film you've seen before. A bona fide cultural treasure / Seven characters in search

of a plot / Thumbs down - a lead balloon / A soporific propaganda movie / While the production and acting standards are quite good, the whole thing lacks pace and sufficient development of either plot or characters to keep the viewer's interest / Starts promisingly but all for naught / A worthy entry in the "soldiers going through training" genre, with the difference that, this time, it's women rather than men / A time capsule, historically valuable, to be viewed with the period and circumstances of its making borne in mind / A semi-documentary WWII British flag-waver. Pretty good.

Rosamund John on the film's director(s):

Q: *The Gentle Sex* is officially co-directed by Leslie Howard and Maurice Elvey. What did that mean in practice?

A: *It was directed by Leslie. He was an extraordinary character; I suppose one would call him amoral. He just did what he enjoyed doing ... Leslie's mistress, Violette, died while we were making the film and Leslie was devastated. He asked Maurice Elvey to finish the film. I had never heard of Elvey but everyone in the studio said, 'Oh no, that terrible man!' He was a very pompous little man who had made a lot of indifferent films before the war. Leslie went off to Lisbon while we were making *The Lamp Still Burns*, and he was shot down on the way back.*⁸⁵

* * * * *

John Houseman, co-director of Howard's 1936 *Hamlet* called Leslie "the most fatalistic man I've ever known." Sculptor Oscar Nemon, who in 1943 took a cast of Howard's face in preparation for making a bust at the actor's request, said: "There can be no doubt that Leslie Howard had a deep presentiment that something was going to happen ... I firmly believe ... that he foresaw his coming end."⁸⁶ The film (released in November 1943) that Howard was co-producing at the time of his death was *The Lamp Still Burns*.

And so it does.

* * * * *

Notes and sources

¹ Howard's sister Irene, *Film Weekly*, 5 May 1933

² *The Life Story Of Leslie Howard* (1935)

³ Ginevra Di Verduno on The Bogie Film Blog, 17 October 2013

⁴ Howard was ambivalent about successful plays, since, while he obviously wished the work of himself and his colleagues to be appreciated, he hated the boredom induced by playing the same part eight times a week for months or even years on end. He believed that, after playing a character thirty times, its

every nuance and wrinkle will have been yielded up, with only stultifying and increasingly stale repetition remaining. In his early days touring with *Charley's Aunt*, he recalled acting alongside two old hands who had played the same parts for nine years in one case and fourteen in the other:

They were horrors, poor fellows. They were terrifying. They seemed to me not quite human any more. They existed in dismal rooms from one factory town to the next, living only for beer, roast beef and that ghastly rigmarole they went through at every performance. (as ⁶⁴ below, page 146)

⁵ Leslie Howard, *The New York Times*, 26 March 1922

⁶ *Trivial Fond Records*, ed. Ronald Howard, 1982, page 24

⁷ Leslie Howard, *The Stage*, November 1936

⁸ At the time of Howard's death, British PM Winston Churchill was due to return home from a well-publicised trip to Algiers. In *The Hinge Of Fate*, fourth volume of his war memoirs, Churchill wrote:

[Foreign Secretary Anthony] Eden and I flew home together by Gibraltar. As my presence in North Africa had been fully reported, the Germans were exceptionally vigilant and this led to a tragedy which much distressed me. The regular commercial aircraft was about to start from the Lisbon airfield when a thick set man smoking a cigar walked up and was thought to be a passenger on it. The German Agents therefore signalled that I was on board. Although these passenger planes had plied unmolested for many months between Portugal and England, a German warplane was instantly ordered out, and the defenceless aircraft was ruthlessly shot down. 13 passengers perished and among them the well known British film actor, Leslie Howard, whose grace and gifts are still preserved for us by the records of the many delightful films in which he took part. The brutality of the Germans was only matched by the stupidity of their agents. It is difficult to understand how anyone could imagine that with all the resources of Great Britain at my disposal I should have booked a passage in an unarmed and unescorted plane from Lisbon and flown home in broad daylight. We of course made a wide loop out by night from Gibraltar into the ocean and arrived home without incident. It was a painful shock to me to learn what had happened to the others in the inscrutable workings of fate.

Churchill could conceivably have been the Germans' target, but so too could Howard, or others. The Germans might have been sending a warning to the Spanish government about receiving or encouraging Allied cultural missions. It seems unlikely that we'll ever know.

⁹ Widely cited online, original source unknown

- ¹⁰ Ronald Howard, *In Search Of My Father*, William Kimber, 1981, page 13
- ¹¹ Moira Finnie: *A Few Kind Words For Leslie Howard*, 5 March 2008
- ¹² *Variety*, 1930
- ¹³ Mordaunt Hall, *The New York Times*, 18 September 1930
- ¹⁴ P.T.S., *Columbia Daily Spectator*, 9 October 1930
- ¹⁵ William H. Haskell, *Albany Evening News*, 16 April 1931
- ¹⁶ Mordaunt Hall, *The New York Times*, 6 June 1931
- ¹⁷ *Photoplay*, June 1931
- ¹⁸ *Toronto Star*, 11 July 1931
- ¹⁹ Mordaunt Hall, *The New York Times*, 3 June 1931
- ²⁰ Leslie Howard, *Film Weekly*, 25 October 1935
- ²¹ Thornton Delehanty, *New York Evening Post*, 11 July 1931
- ²² *The Nottingham Evening Post*, 7 August 1931
- ²³ *The Daily Star*, 27 August 1931
- ²⁴ Howard was Ann Harding's favourite leading man. They first acted together in a 1925 touring production of *The Green Hat* and co-starred in two feature films. (It could have been three: Howard wanted her to play Mildred in *Of Human Bondage* but she declined.) Speaking of him in 1936, she said:

What a craftsman. He's an absolute challenge with his perfect timing and the way he sustains everything and throws the ball right back every time. I think he's the finest actor we have.

[Source: Harding biographer Scott O'Brien]

- ²⁵ Mordaunt Hall, *The New York Times*, 3 October 1931
- ²⁶ W.M.F., *Standard Union*, 5 October 1931
- ²⁷ *The Daily Argus*, Mount Vernon, 17 October 1931
- ²⁸ Marty Dickstein, *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 21 May 1932
- ²⁹ *Schenectady Gazette*, 7 June 1932
- ³⁰ Mordaunt Hall, *New York Times*, October 15, 1932
- ³¹ Martin Dickstein, *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, October 17, 1932
- ³² *The Times*, November 14, 1932
- ³³ Martin Dickstein, *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 30 December 1932
- ³⁴ Mordaunt Hall, *The New York Times*, 20 December 1932
- ³⁵ *Photoplay*, February 1933
- ³⁶ IMDb
- ³⁷ Mordaunt Hall, *The New York Times*, 16 March 1933
- ³⁸ *The Times*, 26 June 1933
- ³⁹ Mordaunt Hall, *The New York Times*, 18 August 1933
- ⁴⁰ *The New York Sun*, 18 August 1933
- ⁴¹ Edward Cushing, *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 19 August 1933
- ⁴² *Variety*, 1933
- ⁴³ Mordaunt Hall, *The New York Times*, 14 September 1933

- ⁴⁴ Martin Dickstein, *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 14 September 1933
- ⁴⁵ Mordaunt Hall, *The New York Times*, 29 June 1934
- ⁴⁶ *The Literary Digest*, 14 July 1934
- ⁴⁷ J.W., *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 29 June 1934
- ⁴⁸ *Motion Picture*, September 1934
- ⁴⁹ Eileen Creelman, *The New York Sun*, 13 August 1934
- ⁵⁰ Mordaunt Hall, *The New York Times*, 11 August 1934
- ⁵¹ Franklin Chase, *Syracuse Journal*, 20 August 1934
- ⁵² Andre Sennwald, *The New York Times*, 20 September 1934
- ⁵³ Eileen Creelman, *The New York Sun*, 20 September 1934
- ⁵⁴ Martin Dickstein, *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 20 September 1934
- ⁵⁵ *Movie Classic*, November 1934
- ⁵⁶ Interviewed by J. Danvers Williams in *Film Weekly*, 10 October 1934
- ⁵⁷ The Inafferrabile Leslie Howard
- ⁵⁸ Lionel Collier, *Picturegoer*, 12 January 1935
- ⁵⁹ *Harrison's Report*, 2 February 1935
- ⁶⁰ *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 19 November, 1935
- ⁶¹ Daniel Rosenthal, *Shakespeare on Screen* (Hamlyn, 2000, pages 122-123)
- ⁶² James Agate, *The Sunday Times*, date unknown, 1933
- ⁶³ Ivor Brown, *The Observer*, date unknown, 1933
- ⁶⁴ Leslie Howard, *Man Bites Dog*, as ⁶ above, pages 143-144
- ⁶⁵ Leslie Howard, *An Actor's Eye-View of Romeo*, as ⁶ above, pages 137-139
- ⁶⁶ *Literary Digest*, 20 November 1937
- ⁶⁷ *Picturegoer*, 29 January 1938
- ⁶⁸ *Screenplay*, August 1937
- ⁶⁹ Donita Ferguson, *The Literary Digest*, 6 November 1937
- ⁷⁰ Jenny March, *Dictionary Of Classical Mythology*, Cassell, 1998
- ⁷¹ Thomas Baird, *World Film News*, February 1938
- ⁷² Bill Blanker, *Motion Picture*, May 1939
- ⁷³ Ronald Howard, as ¹⁰ above, page 180
- ⁷⁴ Ronald Howard, as ¹⁰ above, pages 20-21
- ⁷⁵ *Picture Show and Film Pictorial*, 27 July 1940
- ⁷⁶ Julia Shawell, *Modern Screen*, May 1939
- ⁷⁷ *The New Masses*, 3 March, 1942
- ⁷⁸ Jose Ramalho, quoted by Ronald Howard, as ¹⁰ above, page 185
- ⁷⁹ For more, see Appendix A below
- ⁸⁰ *Showmen's Trade Review*, 21 February 1942
- ⁸¹ Jim Bawden, *Massey, the Great Canadian Character Actor at His Best* at The Columnists.com
- ⁸² Ronald Howard, as ¹⁰ above, page 14
- ⁸³ Brian McFarlane, *An Autobiography of British Cinema*, Methuen, 1997, p. 329
- ⁸⁴ *Documentary Newsletter*, September 1942
- ⁸⁵ Brian McFarlane, as ⁸³ above, page 329
- ⁸⁶ *The World's News*, Sydney, 30 October 1943

Appendix A

In From The Four Corners, Leslie Howard discusses with three Dominion soldiers - Private J. Johnston (JJ) of the Black Watch of Canada, Corporal W. Atkinson (WA) of the Australian Imperial Force and Private R. Gilbert (RG) of the 2nd New Zealand Expeditionary Force - why they chose to take up arms. After sharing a drink in a pub, the four move to the Golden Gallery at the top of Saint Paul's Cathedral. Here's what is said there - words spoken, except where noted, by Howard:

[As the four gaze out over London] RG: *This church is pretty old, isn't it?*

About 250 years. You know, about 500 years ago, an Englishman described London as being "happy in the wholesomeness of its air, its ancient foundations and its most worthy liberty."⁸⁷ Well, Hitler may have made its air a little less wholesome, but its ancient foundations and its most worthy liberty still stand.

JJ: *I'll say!*

WA: *The river looks nice from here, doesn't it?*

"Liquid history," someone else called it.⁸⁸ Just over there, on its banks, short of the Surrey hills, lies Kingston - King's Town - where many of the early English kings were crowned. In fact, the coronation stone still stands in the market square. Those chaps made their mark on London. Alfred the Great for instance, the father of the British navy.

WA: *The man who burnt the cakes?*

That's the man, that's right, yes. I'm afraid we honour one of our best kings by remembering him chiefly as our worst cook. I suppose that's being typically English. In between burning cakes, Alfred found time to drive the Danes out of London. As the old Anglo-Saxon Chronicle puts it: "He sat down against the army in London and there he largely obtained the object of his prayer."

RG: *What you might call a sitskrieg.*

Apparently yes. After Alfred had licked the Danes, he didn't trample on them like a defeated enemy. He had them baptised instead. Perhaps that's typically English too. A little way beyond Kingston is a place called Petersham. Do you know who's buried in St. Peter's Church, Petersham? You ought to. Captain George Vancouver.⁸⁹

JJ: *You mean the Vancouver.*

Your Vancouver, and ours too, if you don't mind.

JJ: Is that so? Well, I must tell them at home.

Yes. A little farther out along the river, Staines way, is Runnymede.

WA: Oh, Runnymede. I know - Magna Carta.

RG: That's right. That's where it was sealed.

As a lawyer, you must know a lot more about Magna Carta than I do.

RG: Just a minute ... Yes ... "No free man shall be taken, or imprisoned, or in any way destroyed, nor will we send upon him except by the lawful judgement of his peers and the law of the land." How's that?⁹⁰

Pretty good. Yes, that's the famous clause. Today it's an elementary principle of justice all over the Commonwealth. You see, there's something here for all of us. For instance, you see that clump of tress across the river down there? That's Greenwich Hospital. Captain Cook had a job there once.

WA: What, our Captain Cook?

RG: Half a minute - ours too!

JJ: Let me tell you, Captain Cook spent ten years as a sea captain surveying the coast of Canada and Newfoundland.

Well, I guess that makes him common property. I told you that you fellows own this London as much as we do. Look down to Tilbury.

WA: Tilbury - that's where I landed.

Yes, and that's where your fathers and my fathers stood when we were threatened with the armada and invasion. They stood and listened to the queen - Queen Elizabeth. "Not Spain," she said, "nor any prince of Europe shall dare to invade the borders of my realm. Pluck up your hearts. By your peace in camp and your valour in the field, we shall shortly have a famous victory."⁹¹

WA: And I reckon that still holds good.

I reckon it does. By the way, have you seen the Shakespeare country?

JJ: Stratford on Avon?

No, Bankside, just down there, across the river below us. That was their theatreland. Will Shakespeare's plays were often running at the old Globe Theatre down there. They used to entertain the troops home from the Netherlands and the West Indies. Well, it's all yours. And that's yours, too [points towards Westminster Hall]. You have your own parliaments now, but that's the mother of them all. It mothered the American Congress, too. It was in the House of Commons that Englishmen cheered the victories of the American colonists over ourselves and the German soldiers that the government of the time had hired to fight for them. Well, that's all part of London, and part of ourselves, and of the Maoris to whom you've given equal rights as brothers and of the French Canadians who still freely administer their own law in Quebec province, and the South Africans too, and the Union. Yes, it's all there - British city, Roman city, Saxon, Dane, Norman, English. Once it ended here, just about where we're standing. Then as it put out a tentative street here, a casual row of houses there, so our fathers' minds crept along with it - and their ideas of justice and tolerance and the rights of man, taking shape in the sunlight and in the smoke, sometimes standing still, sometimes even slipping back, but slowly broadening with the centuries. Some of those ideas are written down in the constitutions of our Commonwealth and some are unwritten - we just try to carry them in our hearts and in our minds. Perhaps the men who came nearest to putting them into words were those Americans, many of them the sons of British pioneers, who, founding an independent nation proclaimed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."⁹² Those words and that spirit were born and nourished here, and your fathers carried them to the ends of the earth. They are our inheritance from the past, our legacy to the future. That's why you came here - to defend them.

Notes

⁸⁷ John Stow (1524-1605) in his *Survey Of London* (1598).

⁸⁸ John Burns MP (1858-1943). He coined the phrase in 1929.

⁸⁹ George Vancouver (1757-1798), a Royal Navy officer who served as a midshipman under Cook before, between 1791 and 1795, charting the North American Northwestern Pacific coast.

⁹⁰ Clause 39 of the Magna Carta (1215) reads: *No free man shall be seized or imprisoned, or stripped of his rights or possessions, or outlawed or exiled, or deprived of his standing in any other way, nor will we proceed with force against him, or send others to do so, except by the lawful judgement of his equals or by the law of the land.*

⁹¹ Queen Elizabeth I to her troops at Tilbury on 19 August 1588.

⁹² Howard quotes the second sentence of the US Declaration of Independence ratified in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania on 4 July 1776.

Special thanks to [The Inafferrabile Leslie Howard](#) (*inafferrabile* = Italian for *elusive*)



[Leslie Howard \(1893 - 1943\)](#) by [R. G. Eves](#)