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Margaret Rutherford, Alastair Sim, eccentricity and the British character actor

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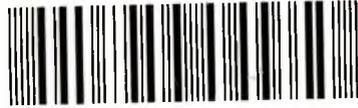
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REFERENCE

Margaret Rutherford, Alastair Sim, Eccentricity and the British Character Actor

by Chris Wilson

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of Sheffield
Hallam University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

September 2005

I should like to dedicate this thesis to my mother who died peacefully on July 1st, 2005. She loved the work of both actors, and I like to think she would have approved.

Abstract

The thesis is in the form of four sections, with an introduction and conclusion. The text should be used in conjunction with the annotated filmography.

The introduction includes my initial impressions of Margaret Rutherford and Alastair Sim's work, and its significance for British cinema as a whole.

In order to determine their enduring appeal, the first section, '*Biographical Perspectives*', uses the actors' respective biographies to combine their very distinct identities, anchor them in the time in which they lived, and indicate their value and importance to the industry.

The second chapter explores the complex relationship between the British cinema and the theatre, especially as it is revealed in the work of both actors.

There follows a survey which addresses notions around Britishness and eccentricity, and their interconnections, their representation in Sim and Rutherford's films, and recent debates about what these attributes constitute now.

The fourth part engages in a broader discussion of the art of character acting and the specific contribution made by the screen appearances of the two stars.

If the introduction and subsequent chapters attempt to bring Sim and Rutherford together, the conclusion presents the contrasts between them. However, their continuing fascination is very much revealed through the interaction of their life and work and especially the influence of their respective spouses. The relationship between their stage and cinematic output informs some of their best work in both media, although their Britishness and eccentricity can, at different times, be both an asset and a limitation. Ultimately, Sim and Rutherford are defined as flexible and diverse character actors, although a synthesis of their various aspects - cinematic, theatrical, eccentric, British, character actors - offers a more complete designation of their individuality. Above all, they exemplify the primacy of performance in British cinema. Future research might concentrate on their theatre work or reactions to them by their fellow actors, and could also usefully incorporate the largely unrecognised legacy of so many other character players.

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Introduction

The immediate genesis for this project was my M.A. Film Studies Dissertation, '*Margaret Rutherford, Eccentricity and the Character Actor*' (1999), although my fascination with Rutherford and Alastair Sim goes back much further. I remember being impressed by Rutherford's Miss Marple at the age of eight when *Murder at the Gallop* (1963) was screened at my school as a new film. I had no foreknowledge of her career nor the current debates around the British film industry. Any theoretical concerns about the medium of cinema, in which I was a willing participant, were not yet formed in my mind. If my judgment at the time was necessarily ill-informed, it was at least undistracted by the intellectual baggage of adulthood which tends to favour objective analysis over raw emotion. [1] My enthusiasm for the film was based less on its aesthetic qualities - the black and white stock, its camera angles, its Britishness - than Rutherford's central performance underpinned by Ron Goodwin's memorable bouncy score. With hindsight, MGM's Miss Marple series of the early 1960s seem slight concoctions in the context of world cinema, and there is an odd disjunction between Rutherford's status as one of the American company's highest paid British stars of the period and the rather haphazard production values which the films display. [2] However, the charm and eccentricity of the actress's amateur detective remains to delight subsequent generations of a more cynical age.

I was conscious of Alastair Sim's work somewhat later on, but his name was familiar to me long before I watched any of his films due to the slenderest of personal connections to the actor. In the 1960s and 1970s my mother and I would often visit a great aunt who lived in a country cottage near Henley-on-Thames, and she would occasionally mention her neighbours, one of whom was a famous actor (Sim). I have a faint recollection of hearing the Sims and their friends playing tennis in the summer and thought nothing of it as a child and young adult. Only later did the memory become more vivid once I had researched the biographical particulars of Sim's life and could appreciate this happenstance from another point of view. Of course, I never met him, neither did my great aunt, and despite the laughter and bonhomie that echoed through the trees, such was Sim's need for privacy that he might

not have appreciated the presence of any strangers at his house, which became a retreat from the stresses and strains of working in the theatre and on the film set.

Personal considerations apart, my selection of Sim and Rutherford as representatives of the most eccentric character actors of their generation is due not only to their invigorating presence in films from the 1930s to the 1970s, but also because their significance is often barely acknowledged even in some recent accounts of British cinema. For instance, Geoffrey Macnab is content to reduce their appeal to 'mild dottiness', while Bruce Babington, who considers that 'elderly comic eccentrics have an interestingly prominent role in the national cinema', relegates them to 'minor stardom'. [3] Babington justifies this categorization 'in a pre 1960s societal context of greater authority and less mobility' and believes the issue of stardom to be 'less theoretically resolvable...especially within the British context, in which the various criteria of stardom are often underplayed'. [4] The author tackles British stars in Hollywood, major figures in the national cinema, cult stars and even those who have an unsteady claim to stardom, but not Rutherford or Sim, who won popularity polls and achieved iconic status in the 1950s and 1960s when heartwarming appreciations of them often appeared in newspapers and magazines. It is also instructive to realise, for instance, that the exhibitors who contributed to *Kine Weekly's* yearly box office survey name Sim as the second most popular star of 1954, for *The Belles of St. Trinian's* (1954) and *An Inspector Calls* (1954), sandwiched between James Stewart and Gregory Peck (!), or that the Variety Club of Great Britain award Rutherford the accolade of best British film actress for 1963, for *Murder at the Gallop* and *The V.I.P.s* (1963), over any number of their more conventionally glamorous contemporaries. [5] What interests me is not that their contributions to British cinema tend to be undervalued, but why they achieved such enormous popular acclaim and star status at the time, an esteem which has been maintained over the years since their deaths in the 1970s. Was it that they represented a comic relief in British cinema which gave them licence to lampoon those in authority, when it might have been less acceptable in high drama during an era of a societal repression? [6] Or was it the fact of their recurring presences which reassured audiences in post-war Britain that, despite the age of austerity and the dismantling of empire, here were two stalwart survivors, an eccentric though universal aunt and uncle, on

whom the nation could depend? [7]

The Happiest Days of Your Life (1950) is their only real collaboration in the cinema, and yet its effect was to bind together their very separate identities in the public mind, and perhaps a more enlightened business might have capitalised on the film's success. [8] Despite this relative lack of support from an industry without a star system to rival Hollywood, they still emerged as international figures while remaining quintessentially British at the same time.

To uncover the reasons for Sim and Rutherford's enduring appeal and their uniqueness in British cinema, I shall first use their respective biographies as a starting point to anchor them in the time in which they lived and indicate their value and importance to the industry. Then I will explore the relationship of British cinema and theatre, with special reference to the careers of the two stars. The next section will compare notions of Britishness and eccentricity in Sim and Rutherford's films with more recent debates about what these constitute now. And finally, I shall examine the role of the British character actor in all its richness and complexity within the acting hierarchy, from bit-part to star vehicle, as exemplified in the films of Sim and Rutherford. Inevitably certain points of discussion have had to be jettisoned in favour of others. For example, I was initially engaged by the idea of British cinema as one of performance rather than the customary concentration on *auteur* directors like Hitchcock, Lean and Michael Powell. In addition, I was keen to examine the notion of 'charm' in the performances of Sim and Rutherford. Could it be measured/quantified? Was it an innate quality or mere retrospective/retrogressive nostalgia? However, pressures of space and time dictated that they be dropped. What remains are four distinct sections which cover different aspects of Sim and Rutherford's life and art. The first chapter, '*Biographical Perspectives*', clearly binds the two together as they seem, particularly in these actors' lives, to inform one another so illuminatingly. It is of more than passing interest, for instance, to make a direct connection between Sim's unhappy relationship with his father, and those he encountered in his army training, and his sharp and satirical portrayals of authority figures, or to link Rutherford's eccentric and quirky screen characterisations with her own fears about inheriting the strains of insanity, murder and suicide in her family background. I also present an account of the actors' continuing legacy through the publishing of books and articles, the holding of

retrospectives of their work, and, most of all, by the continual re-screening of their films on television (and occasionally in the cinema), to say nothing of the importance of video and DVD reissues. The chapter emphasizes the dominance and significance of theatre in both actors' lives, and it is the complex relationship between their stage and screen work which informs the substance of the next section. I examine this relationship from an historical perspective, discuss the adaptations of stage plays versus the creation of original scenarios, and question the varying degrees of success with which Sim and Rutherford use their theatrical training in their screen work. Their very theatricality on the screen leads inevitably to an examination of their Britishness and eccentricity in the next chapter. Are the two qualities connected? How are they manifest in the films? Can eccentricity be an excuse for overacting? And so on. This leads to a broader discussion around the nature of character acting in general and the specific attributes of Sim and Rutherford in particular. All these sections should be used in conjunction with the annotated filmography, which has its own introduction, and whose function is to provide plot summaries and a critical commentary on each film and television programme; in addition, the square-bracketted numbers in the text refer to notes and references which can be found at the end of each chapter. I have also included, for the sake of the convenience of an historical overview, a joint chronological listing of the actors' work, as well as separate more detailed lists for each actor which incorporate other items of more documentary interest, before a final bibliography.

The principal sources for material on Sim and Rutherford come in the form of the usual biographies, which are supplemented by articles and television documentaries. Eric Keown's book provides a useful introduction to Rutherford's art and is particularly valuable for his comments on her stage work; unfortunately the story finishes in the mid 1950s, before Rutherford's return to high-profile stardom in the following decade. [9] However, this lack of information is more than compensated for by Rutherford's autobiography (with Gwen Robyns) and a later biography by the actress's adopted daughter, Dawn Langley Simmons, which draws heavily upon the other accounts. [10] But it is disappointing to find gaps in the former - for example, a whole chapter is devoted to the circumstances surrounding Rutherford's cameo in Chaplin's *A Countess From Hong Kong* (1967), while there is minimal discussion of

Orson Welles, with whom the actress worked equally amicably; and Simmons' book too often reads like a platform for its author to tell the story of her own life rather than Rutherford's. This is also a criticism which can be levelled at Naomi Sim's biography of her husband. [11] After detailing their first meeting on the opening page, the reader does not discover any more about the actor until page 69 in the context of a relatively brief account of his life and work which runs to only 151 pages! Fortunately two excellent television documentaries, in which Naomi Sim also participates, and another shorter appreciative programme, fill out the picture and remind us of his special qualities. [12] In view of Sim's later refusal to grant interviews, those that do exist (especially the last from 1953) are precious in that they are virtually the only sources for his own thoughts and opinions. [13] There are (surprisingly) no television documentaries on Rutherford, but at least a couple of surviving television interviews and a record of her acceptance speech at the Variety Club awards in 1964. [14] Articles and interviews with both stars are enriched by the existence of a huge quantity of studio publicity material held, for the most part, at the British Film Institute in London. The BFI also accommodates rarer films and television programmes by both stars. Again, the introduction to the annotated filmography should be consulted for details of my sources for these films and television programmes, and their current availability. I should also mention the existence of a radio archive held by the BBC, even though this falls outside the parameters of the present study. Unfortunately there are no tapes of Sim's early poetry readings from the late 1930s, however Rutherford is represented by two short interviews, readings and two plays - *Miss Duveen* (1944), specially written for her by her friend Walter de la Mare, and her performance as Lady Wishfort in Congreve's *The Way of the World* (1960), whose cast also includes John Gielgud and Edith Evans. [15]

There is a wealth of material on the relationship between the British cinema and theatre, and it has been rewarding to set more general observations against a growing body of literature by actors keen to examine the process of acting itself. Similarly, older notions about Britishness/Englishness/Scottishness can be contrasted with newer ideas about nationhood. The quantity of this material shows no sign of declining, although the most useful surveys to have become consolidated into book form are probably those by Jeffrey Richards, Jeremy

Paxman and Andrew Marr. [16] The literature on eccentricity is smaller, but while articles are still plentiful, a substantial modern monograph on the subject has yet to appear. Aside from the number of volumes being published by individual actors on their craft, there are also numerous acting manuals, some written from the point of view of the director. In addition, film studies has moved on from the specific examination of stars to a broader conception of performance in all its aspects. [17] The collections by Butler, Zucker, Cardullo (et al.) and Lovell/Kramer are especially welcome, as are the more recent accounts by Macnab and Babington (noted above) which at last place film stardom in a British context. [18]

First and foremost, I should like to thank my tutors, Angela Martin and Tom Ryall, for their guidance, encouragement and constructive remarks. Regular meetings have included viewing and discussing relevant films/television programmes and providing feedback from my written work, and both supervisors have kept me supplied with titles of books and journal articles not already traced by my research.

I should also like to acknowledge the assistance of the library staff, especially at Psalter Lane, where the greater part of my research was conducted; and also those at Collegiate Crescent and the Adsetts Centre. In addition, I should like to salute the friendly and indefatigable staff of the British Film Institute who always made my visits there more of a pleasure than a chore. I must also thank the helpful telephone operators at the BBC's information and archives unit without whom I would not have been able to sample some of the rarer television work of the two stars.

I am especially grateful to Sheldon Hall for enabling me to gain access to copies of *Chimes at Midnight* (1966) and *Royal Flash* (1975). He was also responsible for coordinating a visit to Sheffield by Ken Annakin, and it was a pleasure to meet the director at a screening of his film *Miranda* (1948) at the Showroom Cinema in 2001, and quiz him first-hand about Margaret Rutherford whom he recalled with great affection.

Finally, I am indebted to my fellow former students Paul Binnion and Geff Green for always finding time to discuss points of detail and offering their valuable comments and criticisms.

Notes

1. Despite my acquisition of greater knowledge about cinema in recent years, Robin Wood's remarks, made during the course of a discussion about Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), remain persuasive. He states that 'no analysis, however detailed, can ever become a substitute for the film itself, since the direct emotional experience survives any amount of explanatory justification'. See Wood, R. (1989) *Hitchcock's Films Revisited*, Faber and Faber, p. 148.
2. This perception of the Miss Marple films (as slight concoctions) is not universally shared. Remembering her participation in *Murder She Said* (1961), Muriel Pavlow (as Emma Ackenthorpe), has considered them 'big', i.e. 'important'. See her interview in McFarlane, B. (ed.) (1992) *Sixty Voices*, BFI, p. 186.
3. Macnab, G. (2000) *Searching for Stars: Stardom and Screen Acting in British Cinema*, Cassell, p. 140; Babington, B. (ed.) (2001) *British Stars and Stardom From Alma Taylor to Sean Connery*, Manchester University Press, p. 7.
4. Ibid, p. 8.
5. See Billings, J. 'British Films Set the Pace During 1954', *Kine Weekly*, 453/2477, 16/12/54, p. 8; and Colley, R. (prod.) *Variety Club Awards for 1963*, BBCTV, 20/3/64.
6. One thinks of Sim's Miss Fritton in the St. Trinian's films, or his assassin, Hawkins, in *The Green Man* (1956).
7. Rutherford's Miss Whitchurch tackles every challenge she is faced with in *The Happiest Days of Your Life* to the extent of possible emigration by the end of the film, and her Miss Marple proves formidably consistent when dealing with the police and the courts, or solving the odd murder!
8. Sim and Rutherford both appear in an earlier film, *Troubled Waters* (1936), although the extent of their participation is unknown to this researcher as prints are scarce, while the subsequent *Innocents in Paris* (1953) features them in separate scenes. Theatregoers were fortunate to see them reunited for the final time in a production of *The Clandestine Marriage* (1966). Rutherford remarks to Gwen Robyns that 'playing with Alastair Sim again gave me great pleasure'. Robyns, G. and Rutherford, M. (1972) *Margaret Rutherford: an autobiography*

as told to Gwen Robyns, W.H. Allen, p. 200.

9. Keown, E. (1955) *Margaret Rutherford*, Rockliff.

10. Robyns, G. and Rutherford, M. (1972) *Margaret Rutherford: an autobiography as told to Gwen Robyns*, W.H. Allen; Simmons, D.L. (1983) *Margaret Rutherford - A Blithe Spirit*, Arthur Barker Ltd.

11. Sim, N. (1987) *Dance and Skylark: Fifty Years with Alastair Sim*, Bloomsbury.

12. Baines, G. (dir.) *Alastair Sim: a qualified fool: 1900-1976*, BBCTV, 11/1/83; Fisher, J. (prod.) *Heroes of Comedy: Alastair Sim*, Channel 4, 30/4/97; Ellis, J. (prod.) *Those British Faces: Alastair Sim*, Channel 4, 20/6/93.

13. Heppner, S. 'Alastair SIM is the Name', *Film Weekly*, 15/388, 21/3/36, p. 29; Newnham, J.K. 'Highbrow Turned Lowbrow', *Film Weekly*, 20/483, 15/1/38, p. 29; Hamblett, C. 'Mr Sim Has a Secret', *Picturegoer*, 20/813, 2/12/50, p. 13; Quilter Vincent, R. 'Mr Sim Lowers His Guard', *ABC Film Review*, 3/12, Dec. 1953, pp. 4-5.

14. [producer/director uncredited] *Wednesday Magazine* (interview with David Jacobs), BBCTV, 31/1/62; [producer/director uncredited] *Late Night Line-Up* (interview with Michael Dean), BBCTV, 12/2/66; Colley, R. (prod.) *Variety Club Awards for 1963*, BBCTV, 20/3/64.

15. I have not listened to any items from the BBC radio archive due to the prohibitive lending expenses. A three-minute interview costs in excess of thirty pounds to hire!

16. Richards, J. (1997) *Films and British National Identity*, Manchester University Press; Paxman, J. (1999) *The English: a portrait of a people*, Penguin; Marr, A. (2000) *The Day Britain Died*, Profile Books.

17. Star studies' first large-scale monograph is Dyer, R. (1979) *Stars*, BFI.

18. Butler, J. (ed.) (1991) *Star Texts: Image and Performance in Film and Television*, Wayne State University Press; Zucker, C. (ed.) (1990) *Making Visible the Invisible: an anthology of original essays on film acting*, Scarecrow Press, Inc.; Zucker, C. (ed.) (1995) *Figures of Light: Actors and Directors Illuminate the Art of Film Acting*, Plenum Press; Cardullo, B. et al. (eds.) (1998) *Playing To the Camera: Film Actors Discuss Their Craft*, Yale University; Lovell, A. and Kramer, P. (eds.) (1999) *Screen Acting*, Routledge. For the books by Macnab and Babington see note 3.

Biographical Perspectives

In today's celebrity-saturated culture it is sometimes hard to remember a time when even British stars were not the object of such intense media scrutiny. Indeed, when Alastair Sim and Margaret Rutherford enjoyed their first cinematic success in the forties and fifties, not only was the media much smaller but stars were far more remote from their public and worlds away from the admittedly illusory accessibility they enjoy today. Interviews were conducted largely by newspapers and film magazines, sometimes on radio, rarely on television. All this changed in the 1960s when the trendy heartland of London's metropolis was invaded by fresh media types like David Frost and Simon Dee whose dynamic and influential television personas set the tone for a vibrant new era. By this time, although attitudes to new stars were more casual, those of Sim and Rutherford's generation were still accorded due respect and deference. Rutherford's second wave of success co-incided with the beginnings of this new revolution, and although her surviving television interviews from the 1960s are slightly awkward, even staid, encounters, those in the press tend towards greater familiarity. Sim avoided all media contact after 1953 and would almost certainly have been horrified by the emergent cult of celebrity, believing that the performance itself was all the public needed to know about him. When he returned to the big screen after more than a decade, in Peter Medak's *The Ruling Class* (1972), all he would tell a doubtless exasperated studio publicity department was: 'I am an actor, I act and there is nothing more to say'. [1] Rutherford was always more expansive and media friendly, although few could have been prepared for the stories of murder and suicide in her family which were revealed after her death. Sim's early life may have been less overtly sensational, but the status of both as eccentric British character actors was more than influenced by the circumstances of their upbringing which in turn affected the roles they were offered in the theatre and the cinema.

Margaret Rutherford was born on May 11th 1892 to Florence Nicolson and William Rutherford Benn in Balham, South London. It was not a happy childhood. In her autobiography she describes herself as a 'grave' and 'lonely' child, and such was the traumatic effect of this early period that she chose to fabricate much of it. [2] In a well meant, but ultimately

misguided, attempt to protect her she was told that her father was dead, only to discover later in life that he had been committed to Broadmoor and had served time for murdering his own father. In addition, she learned that her mentally unstable mother had hanged herself. The indirect result of this double tragedy caused her to suffer from fits of depression throughout her life, overcome by the fear that she might inherit the family insanity. Her salvation was a kindly Aunt Bessie in Wimbledon who took her in and encouraged her leanings towards the stage. Rutherford considered her aunt 'conventional but unusually emancipated for that age' and was grateful for her encouragement to develop an internal fantasy world whilst 'all the time firmly and gently moulding my character'. [3] In 1954 she told Doug Anderson: 'From the age of eight I knew I *must* act. My parents were nonprofessional and not very prosperous. As they couldn't help me very much, my most obvious route to the theatre seemed to be teaching music and elocution'. [4] Thus she studied the piano for six years, along with elocution, obtaining both an A.R.C.M. (Associate of the Royal College of Music) and an L.R.A.M. (Licentiate of the Royal Academy of Music), and, having completed her own education, taught in girls' schools for the next ten years. During the First World War she recited poetry for soldiers, all the time learning the craft of acting with the local amateur dramatic society. When Aunt Bessie died in 1925 leaving her niece a small legacy, the thirty-three-year-old Rutherford decided to put her aunt's house up for sale and rent a room next to Holloway Prison! Thanks to a letter of introduction from the poet, dramatist and critic John Drinkwater she gained an audition with Lilian Bayliss and a place as a trainee actress at the Old Vic. Her first speaking part was in the pantomime *Little Jack Homer* as the Fairy with the Long Nose. She also appeared in a production of *Romeo and Juliet* as Juliet's mother opposite Edith Evans as the Nurse. Her good fortune did not last and she returned to piano teaching, joining the local repertory company in Wimbledon for the next two years and discovering a talent for comedy in Noel Coward's *Hay Fever*. After a period of unemployment she played in rep. at Fulham, Epsom and Oxford where she first met her future husband, Stringer Davis, during a run of Ben Travers' farce *Thark*. She returned to Epsom and back to Oxford where she played her first Lady Bracknell in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*. At Croydon she featured in productions of Ibsen, Maugham and Coward and returned to Oxford and Reading,

all the time honing her talents. Finally, in 1933, at the age of 41, she reached the West End, appearing as Mrs Read in James Dale's *Wild Justice*. Her next notable performance was as Aline Solness in Ibsen's *The Master Builder* opposite Donald Wolfitt who also starred. However, it was for her Miss Flower in Robert Morley's first play *Short Story* (directed by Tyrone Guthrie) that she won critical admiration. James Agate wrote that she 'entrances and convulses the house every moment she is on the stage'. [5] More importantly the production was seen by film director Bernard Vorhaus who was delighted by her eccentric character, and during the Edinburgh run of the play she was tested and accepted for her role as Miss Butterby in *Dusty Ermine* (1936). Despite her longing to play serious parts, *Short Story* convinced her it was in comedy character roles that she would earn her living; it also persuaded her that she had 'arrived' as a personality. Eric Keown comments: 'The universal aunt was emerging shining from her chrysalis, a rare and most lovable specimen. And the public was beginning to recognise her...for the first time excitingly she felt a wave of sympathy from the audience that seemed so solid...she felt she could almost touch it'. [6]

Alastair Sim's formative years could not have been more different, and yet there are some fascinating parallels and coincidences. He was born to Isabella McIntyre and Alexander Sim, the youngest of four children, on the 9th of October 1900 in Edinburgh. His father was a J.P. and a tailor, and the family lived above the shop in the Lothian Road. When he was six the family fortunes improved and they moved to the more prosperous Bruntsfield, a couple of miles from the centre of the city, where he went to school. He left at fourteen and was apprenticed to his father's business as a messenger boy 'much to my boredom and disgust' as he told an early interviewer. [7] His father found him a job at Gieves, another gentleman's outfitters, but he soon parted from his new employers without regret. He then obtained a place at Edinburgh University studying analytical chemistry and when he was eighteen went into the Officers Training Corps, although the Armistice was declared before he was sent out to the front. Naomi Sim comments that: 'The experience left him with a life-long detestation of the military mind'. [8] His greatest hope was to become an actor but his father opposed the idea so vehemently that Sim left home and (in his own words) 'until 1921, led a wanderer's life in the Highlands, chopping wood, poaching here and there when necessary, and taking odd jobs

as [a] gillie'. [9] He returned to Edinburgh to take up a succession of jobs including one at the Borough Assessor's office. More significantly, he developed an interest in speech training and enrolled as a student of the Edinburgh Provincial Training Centre at Moray House. He travelled to London, to qualify as a teacher and study elocution, and tried to find work on the stage at the Old Vic, but was dismissed by Lilian Bayliss who told her secretary in his presence: 'Well, don't take him unless he thinks he's a bloody genius. God knows he doesn't look it'. [10] A decade later she would be offering him major roles with the company. In 1925 he was appointed Fulton Lecturer in Elocution at New College, Edinburgh where he taught budding parsons how to preach effectively. At the same time he produced his own amateur dramatic shows with the hope that he might become a London professional some day. At one of these productions, *The Land of Heart's Desire* by W.B. Yeats, he met twelve-year-old Naomi Plaskitt who attended his own school of drama and speech training, became his secretary and, having completed her course at RADA, his wife in 1932. These amateur productions continued throughout the twenties as Sim began to win various medals at public verse-speaking competitions. The self-same John Drinkwater, as had written Margaret Rutherford a recommendation, saw Sim play Joseph in Gordon Bottomley's verse-drama *The Widow*, dissuaded him from becoming a producer and suggested he take up acting full time. Drinkwater's introduction of Sim to Maurice Browne (head of RADA) led to a first professional role as The Messenger opposite Paul Robeson in *Othello* (1930) at the Savoy Theatre in London. Other members of the cast included Peggy Ashcroft (as Desdemona) and Ralph Richardson. Sim now moved to the capital and joined the Old Vic for two seasons, making his New York debut in 1931 as Cardinal Fernando di Medici in Clifford Bax's *The Venetian*. He loathed America and resolved never to go there again, a promise he kept despite later financial inducements. His next notable success was a new play by Frederick Whitney called *The Man Who Was Fed Up* in which Sim played Donald Geddes. Naomi Sim describes it as 'a very funny play [which] did a great deal for Alastair's reputation'. [11] More decisive for his future film career was his role as Ponsonby, a pompous bank manager, in *Youth at the Helm* in 1934 at the Westminster Theatre, for when it transferred to the Globe the following year he received his first offers from the studios. This in turn led to his casting as

Sergeant Mackay in *Riverside Murder* (1935).

Rutherford completed seven films during 1936-7, and in quick succession was called upon to play the agent to a gang of forgers, two housekeepers, a nanny, a crook and an aristocrat, a less impressive range than this list might suggest. At least three are bit parts and none extend her overmuch; only her Maggie Carberry in *Catch as Catch Can* (1937) gives a hint of her true potential as an actress. It is unfortunate that her performance in *Troubled Waters* (1936) - probably as a villager - currently remains unavailable, especially because of the presence of Alastair Sim (as a publican) in the cast. To Gwen Robyns she admitted that they were 'all minor parts but slowly I was beginning to absorb the finer points of acting in front of the camera'. [12] She also had the opportunity of working with James Mason (twice), Jack Hawkins and Carol Reed amongst others. But the fact remained that she was being offered more satisfying roles on the stage. Aunt Bijou Furze in M.J. Farrell and John Perry's *Spring Meeting* confirmed her as a theatre star in 'a tremendously funny performance...with...a deep streak of disturbing pathos' while a subsequent Miss Prism in *The Importance of Being Earnest* was critically acclaimed. [13] The success of both productions was reinforced by the resourceful precision of John Gielgud's direction, and Rutherford would repeat her characterisations for the cinema, a recurring feature of her professional life.

Alastair Sim continued with regular theatre work, read poetry for BBC radio broadcasts, appeared on the new medium of television and completed an astonishing 24 films between his 1935 debut and the outbreak of war. In 1936 he told *Film Weekly's* Sam Heppner: 'At first, I was not sure if I liked films. The sequences are so disconnected and mechanical I thought I should have difficulty in 'getting into the skin' of the characters. But I soon found that the care, precision and concentrated energy that attends the photographing of each scene conspires to pitch one into the right frame of mind'. [14] Certainly the range of characters he is asked to portray is almost bewildering in its scope, from detectives, journalists and criminals to an insane banker, a medium and a genie! In his hands the potentially more ordinary parts attain their own special quality of outsized eccentricity while the more offbeat roles are often deliberately downplayed to make them more believable. His most successful inventions - like Angus Graham, the priest in *Wedding Group* (1936), journalist Lochlan MacGregor ('Mac') in

the 'This Man' films, and the incompetent Sergeant Bingham in the Inspector Hornleigh series - rely on a winning blend of the slightly sinister leavened with liberal doses of humour. Many of his films are more characteristic than Rutherford's seven of Depression-era trademarks. In some, like *A Fire Has Been Arranged* (1935) and *Keep Your Seats Please* (1936) he plays characters - Cutte, a devious store manager, in the first; Drayton, a wily lawyer, in the second - who function as obstacles to the progress of bumbling heroes, Flanagan and Allen, and George Formby, in their search for the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow; in others, like *Alf's Button Afloat* (1938), his genie (Eustace) is the facilitator for the wishes of the Crazy Gang. In his three Jessie Matthews films, *Gangway* (1937), *Sailing Along* (1938), and *Climbing High* (1939), his secret detective Taggett, abstract painter Sylvester and communist Max Tolliver are welcome comic diversions from the romantic and other complications of the heroine in these British attempts at Hollywood-style escapism. Whatever their achievement today as performances - Naomi Sim finds many of them unmemorable caricatures rather than credibly real people - Sim benefitted from a long apprenticeship which gave him valuable experience in the medium as well as the chance to work with stars like Edward Everett Horton, James Mason, Jessie Matthews, George Formby and The Crazy Gang, and directors of the calibre of David MacDonald and Carol Reed. However, Sim's meeting with the playwright James Bridie at the Malvern Festival in 1939 arguably had a greater impact on his later career both in the theatre and the cinema. Bridie wrote a part for Sim in most of his subsequent plays, many of which Sim also directed and took out on tour. In addition, the young George Cole came to stay with the family (including baby Merlith born in August 1940) as their evacuee, having met Sim during the run of *Cottage To Let*, later filmed, at the Wyndham's Theatre. He was the first of several unofficially adopted children whom the Sims looked after at what became a kind of country retreat near Henley-on-Thames. [15] He appeared in many films and plays with Sim over the next twenty years and became a life-long friend. Sim was ambitious for him and anxious that he should speak so that he might be clearly understood, concerned that he would be typecast as a Cockney comic, but always denied that Cole was his theatrical protégé. [16] Sim surely had Cole's best interests at heart as he was himself only too aware of being cast as the comic Scotsman. It is ironic, therefore, that the role with which Cole became most

closely associated in his adulthood was as Arthur Daley in *Minder* (1979-94)!

In a sense the Second World War was a temporary saviour for the industry, and served to engender the higher esteem with which the British product was received abroad. Many British directors, like Anthony Asquith, Sidney Gilliat and Herbert Wilcox, entered artistic maturity and gave Sim and Rutherford opportunities to shine on the world stage (or screen!). Both actors contributed to the war effort by touring with ENSA - wittily renamed by one wag: Every Night Something Awful - and participated in a re-examination of the British character in such films as *Let the People Sing* (1942), *The Demi-Paradise* (1943) and *English Without Tears* (1944). Sim also gave of his services in a couple of Ministry of Information short films, *Nero* (1940), about fuel conservation, and *Her Father's Daughter* (1941), about the training of women as engineers. But, with the exception of Sim's rather awkward professor in *Let the People Sing*, none of these wartime films yet billed them above the title, confirming the impression of both as major film stars in waiting despite their high-profile theatrical pedigree, with Rutherford outstanding in a long run of Coward's *Blithe Spirit*, from 1941, and Sim successful in no fewer than three Bridie plays - *Holy Isle* (1941), *Mr Bolfray* (1943) and *It Depends What You Mean* (1944) - and a dual role as Captain Hook and Mr Darling in J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* (1941/1942). It was as though the eccentrics for which they were both already renowned on the screen were not yet ready to emerge fully formed at a time of national and international crisis. By contrast there was an undeniable sense of post-war release in Rutherford's exuberant Madame Arcati in *Blithe Spirit* (1945) and Sim's unconventional detective Inspector Cockrill in *Green For Danger* (1946), which caught the mood of the time.

However, post-war optimism was short-lived and the state of the British film industry became more confused. And yet, by the later forties/early fifties, roles for eccentric character actors like Sim, Rutherford, Alec Guinness and others had never been more plentiful in the cinema or in the theatre. Sim maintained his star status after the success of *Green For Danger* with his appearances as the reclusive children's author in *Hue and Cry* (1947) and his ingratiating fake medium Mr Squales in *London Belongs To Me* (1948), although some consider his Irish priest in *Captain Boycott* (1947) less than ideal casting. Apart from the dire *Meet Me at Dawn* (1946) in which Rutherford portrays a spirited Madame Vermorel, her next

roles attracted critical and public recognition, whether playing a cameo for Asquith as a psychiatrist in *While the Sun Shines* (1947), the Mazurka-dancing Nurse Cary in *Miranda* (1948) or a delightfully eccentric professor of medieval history in *Passport to Pimlico* (1949). Both actors sustained their high profile in the theatre. Sim appeared in and directed three more Bridie plays, *The Forrigan Reel* (1945), *Dr Angelus* (1947) and a revival of *The Anatomist* (1948), while Rutherford worked with Ivor Novello in his *Perchance To Dream* (1945) and toured America and Canada in a successful production of *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1947), this time as Lady Bracknell. More significantly, she appeared in John Dighton's farce *The Happiest Days of Your Life* (1948) prior to the memorable film version with Alastair Sim which was released in 1950. In their personal lives Rutherford finally married Stringer Davis in 1945 after a fifteen-year courtship, while Sim was honoured by being appointed Rector of Edinburgh University in 1948. At his installation in April 1949 he gave the rectoral address on 'The Philosophy of Folly' to a tremendous reception from the students who attended.

The early 1950s represent a peak of stardom for Sim and Rutherford. Sim appeared in one successful film after another, including *Laughter in Paradise* (1951), *Scrooge* (1951), *Folly To Be Wise* (1952) and *An Inspector Calls* (1954), won the British Cinema Exhibitors popularity poll in 1950, was awarded a CBE (1953) and again honoured by Edinburgh University with a doctorate (1954). And yet this paled into insignificance for him with the death of James Bridie in 1951. Clearly depressed, he told R. Quilter Vincent: 'It was my association with James Bridie that kept me interested in the theatre, after Jimmy's death I had no desire to continue...all the fun was gone; it was then that I realised it was not acting I cared about, or plays for that matter, but acting in and producing his plays'. [17] Accordingly, after his last Bridie play, *Mr Gillie* (1950), also televised, he abandoned the stage for five years. Margaret Rutherford was similarly inundated with work at this period, completing no less than four films alone in 1952, including a memorable Miss Prism in Asquith's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1952), to say nothing of her theatrical successes as Lady Wishfort in Congreve's *Way of the World* (1953) (again directed by Gielgud) and the White Queen in *Alice Through the Looking Glass* (1953/4) as well as a poetry-reading tour of Norway and Denmark. However the starring roles created for her in the cinema - *Miss Robin Hood* (1952) and *Aunt*

Clara (1954) - were disappointing, sabotaged by poor scripts and lacklustre direction; and Frank Baker's play *Miss Hargreaves* (1952), also televised, in 1950, opened to a lukewarm critical response. Rutherford and her husband were also deeply affected by the premature death of Ivor Novello, in 1951, who had become a great personal friend.

The net result of the uncertain direction of the industry in the early fifties was a sense of stasis and stagnation by the middle of the decade. For Sim and Rutherford this meant appearing in lesser sequels - *Mad About Men* (1954) and *Blue Murder at St. Trinian's* (1957) - and films like *An Alligator Named Daisy* (1955) with its unconvincing mix of genres. Even when Rutherford was cast in a satisfying role like that of Mrs Fazackerlee in *The Smallest Show on Earth* (1957), about a young couple's inheritance of a flea-bit cinema, the tendency of the narrative was to look over its shoulder.

The turning point for the industry is reckoned to be the emergence of new wave films like *Room at the Top* (1958) and *Look Back in Anger* (1959), and although they make an important contribution to British cinema they do not represent it as a whole. Sim and Rutherford, for instance, played no part in the new wave, but instead found work in international films like *The Millionairess* (1960) (Sim) and *The V.I.P.s* (1963) (Rutherford) and on television, although the seismic cultural and social upheavals of the time cannot fail to have had an impact on their professional lives.

By the beginning of the 1960s both were moving in new directions. On one hand Sim continued to promote Bridie's work, which was rapidly going out of fashion, reviving *Mr Bolfray* at the Aldwych in 1956 and appearing in television productions of *Mr Gillie* (1960) and *The Anatomist* (1961); on the other, he began to cultivate new friendships with writers like William Golding and Michael Gilbert who reinvigorated his interest in the theatre. Unfortunately this had the effect of diminishing his reliance on the cinema, as starring roles like Hawkins the assassin in *The Green Man* (1956) gave way to guest appearances in films such as *Left Right and Centre* (1959), his final performance for Frank Launder and Sidney Gilliat. *The Millionairess* (1960) proved to be his last feature film until 1972.

Margaret Rutherford too began to rely on guest appearances in films, like the animal-loving Mrs Dooley in Norman Wisdom's *Just My Luck* (1957), the aristocratic Aunt Dolly in the

Boulting brothers' satire *I'm All Right Jack* (1959) and a hilarious turn as Lady Vivian opposite Danny Kaye in *On the Double* (1961). Perhaps this lower profile mattered less to her as she still managed to sustain a varied theatre career which embraced tours to Australia (1957/8), Malta (1960) and a run in New York (1960). However she was starting to repeat herself, appearing in productions of *The Way of the World* (1956, as Lady Wishfort), *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1957, as Lady Bracknell) and *The Happiest Days of Your Life* (1957/8, as Miss Whitchurch). A new play at the Globe in May 1961, *Dazzling Prospect*, resuscitated the even older characterisation of Bijou Furze (*Spring Meeting*) from the 1930s! Clearly her career needed a fresh impetus. Talking to David Jacobs in January 1962 she remarked: 'I seem to see a vista of work that I very much like the look of and in which I can make my own way'.

[18] Further questioning revealed that she was thinking of a new production of *The School for Scandal*, as Mrs Candour, again directed by Gielgud. At this point in her life she could hardly have imagined that her most recently completed film, *Murder She Said* (1961), which she mentions, would lead to a second wave of stardom and collaborations with Orson Welles and Charles Chaplin. This new-found popularity was cemented by the second Miss Marple film, *Murder at the Gallop* (1963), and her scene-stealing Duchess of Brighton in *The V.I.P.s* (1963) for which she won a deserved Best Supporting Actress Oscar. Citing both films in her award for Film Actress of 1963, Variety Club Chief Barker David Jones described her as 'a very hot...delightful and wonderful property', to which she could only reply that 'I've never felt so excited since my wedding day. [laughter] And believe me it's almost too much for an old lady'.

[19] MGM, who financed both films, had a most unlikely new asset, who, at the height of her fame (1963/4), was their highest earning British star. She was rewarded by appearances on American television as a guest on Johnny Carson's *Tonight Show* (1963) and as co-presenter of a documentary *The Stately Ghosts of England* (1964), and honoured at home with an OBE (1961) and DBE (1967). She had met Orson Welles during the filming of *The V.I.P.s* and shot her scenes as Mistress Quickly in the winter of 1964 for his celebrated version of Falstaff's rise and fall in *Chimes at Midnight* (1966). By all accounts the relationship was a happy one despite a somewhat chaotic shooting schedule in Spain. She much admired Chaplin too, and was thrilled to work with him on his final film *A Countess From Hong Kong* (1967), her cameo

as bedridden passenger Miss Gaulswallow one of the few highlights of that depressingly unfunny romantic comedy. Her voice and likeness were also used to effect in a children's animation feature as the eponymous heroine of *The Wacky World Of Mother Goose* (1967). But time was running out for her as poor health and old age took their toll. At theatre performances a doctor was frequently in attendance, and while completing her final film *Arabella* (1967) she slipped and broke a hip, gamely returning to the studio from her hospital bed to finish the dubbing. On the stage she was happy to play Mrs Heidelberg opposite Alastair Sim's Lord Ogleby in a Chichester Festival production of *The Clandestine Marriage* (1966), but was less sure about her final performance as Mrs Malaprop in *The Rivals* (1966) with Ralph Richardson. To Gwen Robyns she confided: 'Right through the production I was haunted with the thought that I would dry up. My memory was not as good as it had been and if I couldn't remember what Mrs Malaprop had to say then I just made up the words'. [20] She was apprehensive of the reviews but need not have worried as her contribution was well received by audiences and critics alike. Keith Baxter, who worked with her on *Chimes at Midnight*, remembered: 'She gave an unforgettable performance, not shirking the pantomime-dame aspects of the character, but mining the role for all its romance'. [21] If she had regretfully given up the stage she was still hopeful of future film roles. As late as 1969 there were plans for character cameos in *Song of Norway* (1970) and *The Virgin and the Gypsy* (1970), but illness intervened once again. In her latter years she found time and inclination to dictate an autobiography, to Gwen Robyns, and lived to celebrate her 80th birthday in 1972, the year of her death. Having set aside his career to devote himself to supporting his wife, Stringer Davis was inconsolable without her and died a few months later.

In the early sixties Alastair Sim's theatre career enjoyed mixed success. New collaborations with Michael Gilbert - *The Bargain* (1961), and *Windfall* (1963) - and William Trevor - *The Elephant's Foot* (1965) - were liked, as was his revival of Captain Hook in *Peter Pan* at the Scala Theatre (1963, 1964, 1968). However, neither his Prospero in *The Tempest* (1962) nor Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* (1964) was much admired. David Shipman calls them 'misfires', and yet it was in older classics that Sim re-established his reputation. [22] His Colonel Tallboys in Shaw's *Too True To Be Good* (1965) at the Edinburgh

Festival was well received enough to transfer to the Strand Theatre. Critics and audiences were even more enthusiastic about his performance as Lord Ogleby opposite Rutherford's Mrs Heidelberg in *The Clandestine Marriage* (1966) and especially his Mr Posket in Pinero's *The Magistrate* (1969) (both Chichester Festival productions) which enjoyed rapturous reviews. Indeed the stagey adaptation of Peter Barnes' play *The Ruling Class* into the film of the same name is perhaps some indication of where Sim's heart lay when he was finally persuaded to return to the big screen in 1972.

The British industry had blossomed into a kind of renaissance during his absence, but by the early seventies the injection of American money, which had sustained production during the sixties, was less forthcoming during a worsening economic climate. In truth, neither of Sim's other film performances of the 1970s, in *Royal Flash* (1975) and *Escape From the Dark* (1976), represent his best work, and his own screen renaissance was more fuelled by television. He had no particular fondness for the medium, but returned to it repeatedly in his later years because of the quality of the material he was offered. He became most familiar to the viewing public as Mr Justice Swallow in three series of A.P. Herbert's *Misleading Cases* (1967, 1968, 1971) with its sophisticated verbal banter, although his wonderfully rich characterisations of General Suffolk in William Trevor's *The General's Day* (1972) and Father Perfect in *The Prodigal Daughter* (1975) were even more impressive. Throat cancer was diagnosed in 1975, but Sim remained determined to work if he could. His final performance as The Earl in Clive Donner's excellent BBCTV film *Rogue Male* (1976) (shown posthumously) marked an appropriately eccentric farewell.

Both actors have retained a certain profile since their deaths which has ensured that their cinematic and televisual legacy has continued to be discussed and savoured. Television documentaries about Sim appeared in 1983, 1993 and 1997, and the NFT has held retrospectives of his work in 1997, 2000 (a tribute) and 2002. In addition, Naomi Sim released an account of her life with Sim, *Dance and Skylark: Fifty Years with Alastair Sim*, which was published by Bloomsbury in 1987.

A 1980 newspaper article revealed the family link between Rutherford, Tony Benn and the family tragedy. [See note 2] This information, which was unearthed by Debretts, was exploited

in a biography of the politician, and in Dawn Langley Simmons' rather self-serving biography - *Margaret Rutherford - A Blithe Spirit*, published by Arthur Barker Ltd. in 1983. On the occasion of Rutherford's centenary (1992) Gwen Robyns expanded on the circumstances surrounding her contribution to the actress's ghost-written autobiography in an article for the *Independent on Sunday*, while Jeffrey Richards, Patrick Newley, Anwar Brett and Geoffrey Macnab have written appreciations of her work. [23] The NFT mounted a retrospective of her films in October 2000. But perhaps the oddest tribute to the actress was a dreamlike dramatised portrait, broadcast by Channel 4, *For One Night Only* (5/10/93), in which she was portrayed by Timothy Spall! Thankfully terrestrial and other television channels regularly screen the real thing, and the best films of both actors are continually issued and reissued on video and DVD.

A measure of their successful integration into the public psyche can be gauged by two instances when their respective images were missed to the extent that it was imagined that they were still alive. In 1982 elderly actress Fabia Drake was mistaken for Rutherford (ten years after her death!) at a memorial gathering for Kenneth More; and recently Sir John Mortimer recalled to Nicky Campbell (Radio 5 Live, 15/11/02) that he had originally wanted to cast Alastair Sim as Rumpole (!) but 'couldn't because he was, unfortunately, dead'!

Aside from the sheer quantity of work undertaken by both actors, it seems to me that one of the most significant aspects of this biographical survey is the predominance of the theatre in their professional lives; and it is this facet I should now like to examine in the wider context of the complex interrelationship between the theatre and the cinema peculiar to the British scene.

Notes

1. BFI Pressbook.
2. Robyns, G. and Rutherford, M. (1972) *Margaret Rutherford: an autobiography as told to Gwen Robyns*, W.H. Allen, p. 9. Rutherford's first biographer Eric Keown ((1955) *Margaret Rutherford*, Rockliff) glosses over her early life and nothing more was known about it until an article appeared - Collier, S. 'The Strange Case of Benn's Missing Link', *The Daily Mail*, 30/6/80, page number not given in BFI Press Cuttings - which discloses the family link with Rutherford's first cousin Tony Benn and details of the murder tragedy. There are more revelations in Alfred Browne's Tony Benn - *The Making of a Politician*, published by W.H. Allen in 1983 and Dawn Langley Simmons' biography *Margaret Rutherford - A Blithe Spirit*, published by Arthur Barker Ltd. later the same year. It seems only fair to add that lately Tony Benn has cast doubt over whether Rutherford knew about the tragedy of her father at all; he also questions the reliability of anything said by Dawn Langley Simmons about the actress. See Benn's comments in full quoted in Macnab, G. 'A quivering lip and a blithe British sp[i]rit', *Independent Review*, 29/9/00, p. 11.
3. Robyns, G. and Rutherford, M. (1972), pp. 10-11. More recently Tony Benn told Geoffrey Macnab that the essence of many of Rutherford's performances lay in her study of Irene Benn, his great-aunt, and 'Auntie Tweeny' to the family, whose mannerisms found their way into some of the actress's most notable characterisations on stage and screen. See Macnab, G. 29/9/00, p. 11.
4. Anderson, D. 'Tea and Crumpets with Margaret Rutherford', *Theatre Arts*, 38/1, Jan. 1954, p. 74.
5. James Agate, quoted in Keown, E. (1955), p. 24.
6. Ibid, p. 24.
7. Alastair Sim interviewed by Sam Heppner in 'Alastair SIM is the Name', *Film Weekly*, 15/388, 21/3/36, p. 29.
8. Sim, N. (1987) *Dance and Skylark: Fifty Years with Alastair Sim*, Bloomsbury, p. 78.
9. Heppner, S. 'Alastair SIM is the Name', *Film Weekly*, 15/388, 21/3/36, p. 29.

10. Sim, N. (1987), p. 74.
11. Ibid, p. 89.
12. Robyns, G. and Rutherford, M. (1972), p. 82.
13. Keown, E. (1955), p. 26.
14. Heppner, S., 21/3/36, p. 29.
15. Margaret Rutherford and her future husband Stringer Davis also unofficially adopted several children. The exception was the legal adoption of Gordon Langley Simmons in 1961. To their credit, and despite failing health and financial difficulties, they supported their son in his journey to become 'Dawn', marry a black husband and give birth to a daughter, as if it was nothing out of the ordinary.
16. When questioned on the subject of Cole, Sim replied vaguely: 'I don't try to guide anyone'. Quilter Vincent, R. 'Mr Sim Lowers His Guard', *ABC Film Review*, 3/12, Dec. 1953, p. 5. Brian McFarlane describes Sim as a 'continuing influence' on Cole's career, and Cole himself comments that 'although I can't say he actually coached me, you can't work with someone like that without learning something'. McFarlane, B. (ed.) (1992) *Sixty Voices: Celebrities Recall the Golden Age of British Cinema*, BFI, pp. 59, 60.
17. Quilter Vincent, R., Dec. 1953, p. 5.
18. [producer/director uncredited] *Wednesday Magazine* (interview with David Jacobs), BBCTV, 31/1/62.
19. Colley, R. (prod.) *Variety Club Awards for 1963*, BBCTV, 20/3/64.
20. Robyns, G. and Rutherford, M. (1972), p. 201.
21. Baxter, K. (1998) *My Sentiments Exactly*, Oberon Books, p. 193.
22. Shipman, D. (1980) *The Great Movie Stars: The International Years*, Angus and Robertson, p. 551.
23. Robyns, G. 'Darkness at Teatime', *Independent on Sunday*, 10/5/92, pp. 3-4. Richards, J. 'Cinema's Tweedy Glory', *The Daily Telegraph*, 13/4/90, p. 16; Newley, P. 'Heydays: Nothing Like a Dame', *The Stage*, 9/1/97, p. 11; Brett, A. 'Margaret Rutherford', *Film Review*, 596, Aug. 2000, p. 113; Macnab, G. 'A quivering lip and a blithe British sp[irit]', *Independent Review*, 29/9/00, p. 11.

Alastair Sim, Margaret Rutherford: cinema and theatre in the British context

No study of Margaret Rutherford and Alastair Sim's film appearances should underestimate the significance of their work in the theatre. Indeed their performances in both serve to highlight the interdependence of one medium upon the other, a characteristic specially true of the British scene. Similar tendencies are marked in other cinematic cultures, but the peculiarities of the British system reveal an almost uniquely intense relationship whose reverberations are still evident today.

I shall discuss the general interaction of British cinema and theatre from an historical perspective, examine the different acting requirements of each, and survey particular films which best illustrate the contest, if indeed there is one, between adaptations of theatre and the creation of original screenplays. Has the British theatre establishment actually restricted the writing of original material for cinema, and does it matter, especially if the results are equally satisfying? In other words, can either be effective in the British context? Are Rutherford and Sim allowed to be as 'theatrical' in an adaptation as they can be 'filmic' in a script designed specifically for the cinema - or does it actually restrain them; and does the acting challenge of cinema inform its older 'sister' or impede it? [1] To answer these and other questions I shall evaluate a selection of the extensive literature on the subject, incorporate the views of actors (including Sim and Rutherford) and others who have observed the ways in which the industry operates, and use the films themselves as exemplars of the ebb and flow between two institutions which could hardly fail to take notice of one another.

Before examining the particular contributions of Sim and Rutherford, it is perhaps useful to determine the most evident differences between the two art forms which give them their individuality. Writing in 1946, Frank Shelley believes that the experience of going to the cinema is more superficial than the rituals of the theatre with its sense of audience anticipation/participation, the dressing for the occasion, and the use of an interval which breaks up the action and gives both actors and spectators a rest. He also draws attention to the minutiae of theatrical courtesies and conventions whereby actors establish a kind of psychic reciprocity with their audience which in turn emphasizes the communion and sheer

fun, not to say uniqueness, of theatre as a live event. He concludes that 'there is not enough challenge or attack about the film as we know it, and that, compared with a theatre audience, a film audience remains, even at the best performances, detached'. [2] What his comments illustrate above all (apart from the fact that virtually every point he makes can be disputed) is the author's almost instinctive bias against cinema. [3] This is more surprising in the context of a newly confident post-war British film industry but does confirm the on-going centrality of the theatrical experience in the cultural life of the nation. However, Shelley is more than curious about the future possibilities of cinema which he rather naively describes as a distillation of painting, music, ballet and stage-acting unified by a blending of the visual, aural, kinetic and psychological under the watchful eye of a poetic camera. Roger Manvell, in his 1979 study, provides a sharper definition of film as 'the projection of a recorded performance that has been...perfected apart from the audience [which] offers a minutely observed, technically perfected, and detailed rendering of the drama...[and] only flaws in technical projection can lower the standard of performance'. [4] This is closer to the truth, although it ignores the probability that constraints of time and finance might often result in the knowing inclusion of less than ideal performances and technical shortcomings in the finished film. He acknowledges the stage play as a branch of literature which is only realised when it is performed in the theatre, while a film script is likened to 'a description of a painting instead of a painting itself'. [5] Again, like Shelley, Manvell's remarks could be interpreted as foregrounding the importance of theatre over cinema by virtue of its lengthier performance traditions alone, although his concept of the 'acting area' concedes that films enjoy a greater flexibility when it comes to selecting environment or location, its photographic essence liberating the screenplay from the confines of the stage.

Both authors are also led to discuss the role of the newer medium of television. Manvell considers the hybrid of early television drama which retains the immediacy of performance whilst exhibiting many of the features of film if not its scale. Once the live television play is substituted by pre-recorded drama the balance shifts more towards the standards of film production. In 1946 Frank Shelley's experience of television is necessarily more primitive: he views the upstart medium as a compromise between stage and screen which tries to embody

the best features of both. While he admires its 'dramatic continuity', he regrets the loss of 'photographic vivacity', finding television performances at the same time 'lifeless and dreamlike', the unvarying lighting contributing towards a 'peculiar monotony'. [6]

From the vantage point of the late 1970s Roger Manvell also considers the differing roles of the director in cinema and theatre in a retrospective glance back to the *auteur* debates of the fifties and sixties. But his talk of the film director as master stylist and coordinator of the production reveals a basic deficiency of the *auteurist* specification of the director, who, however distinctive, does not work alone but in conjunction/collaboration with others. The original theory could be said to have over-promoted the director's role, at the same time undervaluing the contributions of the writer, technicians and actors - hence the present study. Manvell does at least admit the modification of the film director's *auteur* status, especially when he or she is involved in adapting a well-known novel or stage play, foregrounding the importance of the writer.

He is also alive to the economic considerations imperative for the survival of each medium. He notes, for example, the greater financial commitment required for a film than a play, and it is for this reason alone that so many top box office films are adaptations of already well-known literary classics - one immediately thinks today of the 'Lord of the Rings' phenomenon. Financial success in the theatre, he believes, is dependent on the length of the run, the gradual wiping out of the initial capital costs, like set building, rehearsal overheads, publicity etc. and regular running costs, while a film is dependent on international distribution, rental to TV, and nowadays video/DVD rental and sales, which particularly aids less commercial ventures.

Of course, what the British director has always lacked is the budget granted his Hollywood counterpart, and while Frank Shelley acknowledges the contributions of the likes of Carol Reed, Anthony Asquith, David Lean and others, his critique that they are deficient in the 'intense imaginative sweep, the unity, the total authority' of the Americans seems harsh, especially in this context. [7] His conclusion that ultimately film must seek its own way and not borrow from the theatre is more discerning, but appears to have fallen on largely deaf ears, at least as far as the British industry is concerned.

While Sim and Rutherford were still fledgling theatre actors in the 1920s, this film industry, of which they would soon become a part, was in a far from healthy condition. It was not just that it simply required government intervention to protect and encourage British cinema against the hegemony of Hollywood - hence the welcome 'Quota Act' of 1927 - but, more pertinently, it needed a fresh attitude of mind. Michael Balcon commented:

In the twenties we were to a great extent mentally 'stagebound'. We looked to the theatre for much of our screen material and our early films would certainly now be called 'stagey'. It was no doubt wrong of us to seek to bask in the reflected glory of people like Noel Coward; we followed trends and did not try to make them. It was doubly a mistake to lean on stage plays because we were making silent films, so the plays were deprived of their very essence, the words! [8]

He goes on to point out that the use of successful stage plays did not always pay off - both Coward's *Easy Virtue* (1927) (directed by Hitchcock) and *The Vortex* (1928) (directed by Adrian Brunel) failed at the box office. However, in the era of sound, from another perspective - and excepting the wealth of new stars, like George Formby, who emerged from the music hall - it was the theatre which provided most of the rest, including Sim and Rutherford. They were both fortunate to begin their working lives in the mid-1930s, entering a film industry that, despite periodic slumps, was rapidly gaining in self-confidence and expertise, and which, by the mid-1940s, was clearly an international player. Well might Dilys Powell remark, in 1947, that British cinema 'has long supplanted the theatre' as the 'chief urban entertainment'. [9] And yet that hard-won self-confidence receded by the early 1950s when some older, lazier habits of the thirties returned, like the automatic adaptation of stage successes, and it seemed that the close bond between theatre and cinema was reaffirmed for good. It was only a certain renaissance in the following decade which produced films like *A Hard Day's Night* (1964), *if...* (1968), *Blowup* (1966) and *Performance* (1970) that Alexander Walker praised for 'an authentic aesthetic freshness that hasn't been drained off from the theatrical production or the

printed word', before the industry collapsed again in the early 1970s when American finance was no longer forthcoming. [10] By the time of British cinema's next rebirth in the early 1980s, and the return of theatrical adaptations, both Sim and Rutherford were long dead.

But the links between the two art forms have always amounted to much more than the adaptation of theatre-derived material for the cinema. In Britain, in the early silent days, as Geoff Brown observes: 'Films offered stage talent tempting possibilities for wider audiences and greater income...The stage, in turn, offered the cinema pre-sold publicity, cultural prestige, and a magic gateway to ecstatic patriotic reviews'. [11] Brown also notes that unlike the U.S.A., where the centres of film (Hollywood) and theatre production (Broadway) are far apart geographically, most British film studios like Elstree, Ealing, Denham and Shepperton are within easy reach of the West End, which meant that a measure of interplay between them was more likely. Indeed cinema looked to the theatre for acting expertise and also found that it could provide already created characters and plots. There was thus little inducement for writers to contribute new cinematic material, especially as they were often poorly paid and had little say in how their work was used. Could it also be that they were somewhat overawed by the weight of theatrical tradition - hence the dutiful reliance on Shakespeare, statically filmed, and albeit in abbreviated form, before the coming of sound? Even then screenwriters were subject to the whims of directors and the scepticism of actors. However, the theatre was not always allowed to have things all its own way and by the 1930s was under considerable pressure: not only had the talkies arrived, creaming off some of its best players and buildings (to construct the new 'dream palaces'), but the BBC was fast developing the novelty of radio drama, while the general economic climate meant that the notion of bold and challenging new scripts was rejected in favour of something far cosier and middle-brow, plays which would at least attract audiences back to the stage. Esther McCracken's comedy *Quiet Wedding* (in which Margaret Rutherford plays a small role in the film version) is a good example of this type of late thirties undemanding entertainment.

In the forties, at last, an established classic of the theatre like Shakespeare's *Henry V* is given new life by Laurence Olivier and did not have to be publicised as an emblem of cultural prestige (as in the previous decade) but stands up convincingly on its own merits as a British

war film. The opening out of the second half of the screenplay in particular demonstrates that it is possible to marry cinematic verve with the best in theatrical performance traditions. It is also due to the circumstances of war that a writer, actor and director like Noel Coward was able to produce an original work of cinema like *In Which We Serve* (1942) whilst retaining many aspects of his own theatrical personality in his portrayal of the captain of the *Torrin*. However, David Lean deserves much of the credit for the film's more cinematic qualities. Geoff Brown regrets that Coward's subsequent films (directed by Lean) draw on already existing material from theatre plays and do not deal directly with the war, and yet *Brief Encounter* (1945) addresses the once forbidden topic of adultery, a theme with which many women especially could identify at a time of lengthy separations from their husbands, while *Blithe Spirit* (1945) (which was such an important vehicle on stage and screen for Rutherford), despite its surface wit, is actually more redolent of a darker meditation on death and the afterlife. [12] But where Lean brilliantly disguises the stage origin of *Brief Encounter*, Noel Coward's dogmatic insistence on his director's faithfulness to the stage play is surely instrumental in reducing the cinematic appeal of *Blithe Spirit*, despite the efforts of the director and his crew. It is hardly surprising therefore that the irreconcilable tensions between its theatrical and filmic elements, to say nothing of its endless production problems, was a contributory factor in causing the finely balanced collaborative team of Coward and Lean to fall apart. By the time of Asquith's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1952) there is no pretence at disguising the origins of the script, and cinematic conventions are always subservient to the structure and verbal felicities of Wilde's play. It is thus unsurprising that the film is now remembered as a classic on the strength of its performances, and it seems likely that Asquith's unapologetic theatricality, evident in his adaptation and the resulting characterisations, made stage stars like Rutherford and Edith Evans feel particularly at ease. The director's treatments were admired at the time, although, as Denis Forman observes: 'one cannot help hoping that he will make more films from original scripts, for in his own style he surely still has some delicious things to give us'. [13] Forman's hopes went unrealised for the most part as many of Asquith's later films concentrate on increasingly stodgy adaptations, like his versions of Shaw in *The Doctor's Dilemma* (1958) and *The Millionairess* (1960), both

featuring Alastair Sim. This last film saw Sim abandon the cinema for over a decade, and on his return in the 1970s he chose to appear in Peter Medak's bloated screen version of Peter Barnes' play *The Ruling Class* (1972), almost as if nothing in British cinema had changed in twelve years.

After their forties and fifties heyday, Sim and Rutherford were probably too associated with the establishment to take an active role in the so-called new wave of British cinema, initiated by *Room at the Top* (1958) and *Look Back in Anger* (1959), and consequently took no part in it. Despite the welcome these films received for their new breed of working class anti-heroes and their relative outspokenness about attitudes to sex, many have questioned their more supposedly 'revolutionary' qualities. Peter Graham hails their photography and the general standard of the performances but is rather more doubtful if a renaissance has actually taken place. [14] Geoff Brown concurs, comparing director Tony Richardson to a reborn Basil Dean, for his fondness for turning plays into films, and his 'childlike faith in location shooting as a means of obscuring the material's theatrical origins'. [15] Brown also reminds us that another of the stars of the new wave, Lindsay Anderson, director of *This Sporting Life* (1963), had worked more in the theatre than the cinema, and that by the end of the decade much British cinema deriving from the theatre was content for the camera to record rather than interpret. While Sim decided to retreat back to the stage during the sixties, Rutherford enjoyed her greatest success in the cinema largely due to a character (Miss Marple) who originates not from the theatre, nor is she a new cinematic creation, but is sourced directly from literature.

In a 1954 interview with *Picturegoer*, Angela Best notes that Margaret Rutherford had no particular preference for film over theatre acting. Indeed Rutherford remarks: 'I like to change from one to another. But I don't approve of long runs in the theatre. I like a nice change of routine'. [16] Best goes on to suggest that Rutherford's screen characterisations are so individual that the actress must have often written her own dialogue. Rutherford agrees: 'Again and again I have played about with dialogue...I have put things in my own language, the language that I feel is right when I'm playing the part. And action, too, for both are dependent on the other'. [17] To her biographer, Gwen Robyns, Rutherford confides that had she not been so consumed by acting she might well have become a writer because of her enduring

fascination with words and their appropriation in literature. She also confirms her need to alternate between plays and films, declaring: 'I have always thought of the stage as my true career and would never have wanted to play in films full time. The stage, I feel, is the mother of it all'. [18] And yet, as if torn between them, she continues:

There is something exhilarating about film-making because although the technique differs so much from the stage it has an intimate magic of its own. Unlike a play, in which you can grow into a part during rehearsals, in a film your reactions and emotions must be instantaneous. You must be precise and economical in your expressions remembering that fleeting changes of light and shade on your features are visible to everyone and not merely to the first row of the stalls. [19]

She also acknowledges the importance of the director and others in creating the uniqueness of a cinematic performance, although she believes that its lustrous effect on the screen is often elusive. She remains grateful for her training in elocution which taught her, amongst other things, to modulate the dynamics of her voice. She enjoys the different 'rhythm' of film work even if she misses the contact with a live audience. Her compensation is a new connection with the camera crew and extras with whom she finds a level of communication almost more important than with her co-stars.

Unlike Sim, Rutherford was the better qualified to offer her observations on film and theatre in Britain and America having divided her working life between the two. Although she became an international star in the 1960s, she only made one film in Hollywood - *On the Double* (1961), starring Danny Kaye. During its production she was impressed by 'the extreme professionalism' of a crew who seemed 'to communicate by telepathy', the effect of which made her scene 'flow into order'. [20] One can only guess at the more ad hoc nature of film-making she was used to at home! However, during a 1963 visit to the U.S.A. to promote *The Mouse on the Moon* (1963), she was less enthusiastic about the 'Hollywood hokum publicity'. [21] She was also a regular visitor to the American stage where she became

all too aware of the power and influence of first night critics especially in New York, whose comments could close a production before the public had had a chance to make up its own mind. But despite the mutual affection between Rutherford and her American audiences, from the 1940s onwards, she was always more comfortable at home, both personally and professionally. After a bout of depression in 1966, she returned to work in the British theatre for the penultimate time, as Mrs Heidelberg (opposite Alastair Sim's Lord Ogleby) at the Chichester Festival production of *The Clandestine Marriage*. For her it was 'just the kind of therapy that I needed...The very air of a theatre seems to revitalise me'. [22]

Sim might well have endorsed such sentiments although it is improbable that he viewed the business of acting in the theatre as quite so mystical and inexplicable an experience. Like Rutherford, he found it difficult to state a preference for stage or screen. Naomi Sim believes that although he always enjoyed filming, the theatre was more important to him, particularly after discovering James Bridie's work in which he acted and directed with almost missionary fervour. [23]

In the 1930s Sim was only just beginning to make his mark as a film actor and any idea of stardom was less pressing to him than just earning his living. [24] In the wake of his elevation from the ranks of character actors to a featured star, commentators were only too ready to attribute his success in the cinema to his theatrical training. [25] However, Sim's love of theatre was severely dented by Bridie's death in 1951. Naomi Sim considers that their friend was 'the source of all the most interesting work that Alastair had ever done and he was irreplaceable'. [26] And it is evident that Sim, when interviewed for the final time during the filming of *An Inspector Calls* (1954) in December 1953, was still deeply depressed both personally and professionally. [27] He affirms that he will continue to make films but only 'parts in pictures that are not likely to do harm...[and] films that are not misleading, or will not create false values', suggesting, at the summit of his achievement in the cinema, a certain disenchantment with the industry. [28] Maybe this stemmed in part from the relative lack of opportunity he had as a major British star to bring Bridie's work before a wider (cinema-going) audience. True, Bridie co-scripted Hitchcock's *Stage Fright* (1950) in which Sim gives such a naturally relaxed performance as Commodore Gill; and Sim was surely instrumental in urging

the screen adaptation of Bridie's wartime stage play *It Depends What You Mean as Folly To Be Wise* (1952), in which he perfectly captures the essence of the good-natured, bumbling army chaplain, Captain Paris. But neither film displays the coherence and consistency of great cinema, and Sim was forced to turn his attention to other media to promote Bridie's work, reviving *Mr Bolfry* on the stage in 1956 and *Mr Gillie* on television in 1950 and 1960. After a television production of *The Anatomist* (1961), Sim gave up, perhaps because Bridie's work was rapidly going out of fashion, but also because his own 'therapy' was to cultivate the friendship of new writers like William Golding, Michael Gilbert and William Trevor who all provided him with roles that reawakened his theatrical sensibility.

Unlike Rutherford, Sim had a less than happy relationship with the U.S.A.. He made no films there and his experience was confined to a performance as The Cardinal in Clifford Bax's play *The Venetian* at the Masque Theatre, New York (October-December 1931). Naomi Sim, in her biography, records that:

He hated America - the rush and bustle, the loudness, the need of so many of the men to appear tough in case they were thought to be weaklings - all these things made him ill at ease and his letters were filled with longing to be home...He never went back, no matter what the financial inducement, and it was sad in a way because in time Americans became particularly appreciative of his work. [29]

If both actors found it difficult to say whether they preferred the cinema to the theatre, they held rather different views about the newest medium - television. When Sim returned for the third series of *Misleading Cases* (1971) he told producer John Howard Davies that he was attracted by the material itself rather than the medium. [30] By contrast Rutherford could tell an interviewer as late as 1966 that television represented a 'new phase of work' for her, adding that it was 'always rather terrifying you know'. [31] This is more surprising when one realises that she had already appeared in five small screen plays, guest-starred for Frankie Howerd and been interviewed by Johnny Carson in America. Her last television contribution is

a week of reading Beatrix Potter stories for children on *Jackanory* (1966), although this does not survive in the BBC archives. The programmes that are still available reveal the actress, when interviewed, to be nervous and uneasy despite the respect and obvious affection of the interviewers. The exception is her contribution to the *Variety Club Awards For 1963* (1964). Accepting her award she is genuine, sincere and humorous, but it soon becomes clear that she is unaware of the cameras and turns her vote of thanks to the Variety Club into a performance - not for nothing is it sometimes referred to as her 'Grande Dame' speech. By comparison, it is television which provided Sim with an Indian summer of opportunities, from his Justice Swallow in *Misleading Cases* (1967, 1968, 1971) and Amos Starkadder in *Cold Comfort Farm* (1968) to two well-received plays, *The General's Day* (1972) and *The Prodigal Daughter* (1975), as well as a fine valedictory performance as The Earl in Clive Donner's BBC film *Rogue Male* (1976).

It seems appropriate at this point to discuss Sim's role as a theatre director, a status not experienced or sought by Rutherford. Unlike her, Sim started directing early in his career, appearing in and producing amateur theatre and later the more sophisticated verse-dramas which were to bring him to the attention of the professionals in the business. He hoped that this recognition would convince the London impresarios that he was ready to become a professional theatre director, but he had to wait until the Bridie years (the 1940s) before he realised this ambition. In her final television interview Naomi Sim states that: 'he had always wanted to be a director more than anything else', which is worth bearing in mind when we tend to think of him solely as an actor, and in her biography she expands on her husband's method for directing stage plays, their working together and his preparation for a film role. [32] For example, she records that as an actor Sim 'could never settle to the serious learning of lines until he saw exactly how the director was going to set up the scene and what his own moves were going to be', and how she would only be admitted to view the rushes of the previous day, with the director's permission, if Sim was pleased with his performance. [33] Of course, he never actually directed a film, although he came close on a couple of occasions. In *Scrooge* (1951) Sim worked harmoniously with director Brian Desmond Hurst, apart from one instance, when his suggestion that a scene with Kathleen Harrison be relocated, was firmly

rejected. Hurst seems to have reasserted his authority, although Rona Anderson, who plays Alice, has said that she was only directed by Sim. [34] Perhaps this accounts for the shortcomings of a film whose direction and performances seem curiously at odds, and why it attracted decidedly mixed reviews at the time. It is possible to argue - see below, page 155 - for instance, that Hurst's abrupt transitions between scenes interrupt the flow of certain performances (including Sim's) and the tendency of the director to open out the narrative away from Scrooge himself has the effect of undermining the impact of Sim's central characterisation. For example, by repositioning Kathleen Harrison's main scene with Sim on the stairs, rather than up in his bedroom, Hurst draws the viewer's attention to her point-of-view instead of Sim's. Potentially it is possible that the final cut might have been improved by Sim's co-direction, and certainly his most convincing and memorable performances register on the screen when he seems to have been allowed more leeway by producers and directors. Many of these performances are in films produced by the Launder and Gilliat team, indeed, their initial plan for *The Green Man* (1956) was for Sim to co-direct the film with Robert Day. However, Sim withdrew over casting disagreements, and the inexperienced Day was partnered with Basil Dearden to direct the film in collaboration with Launder and Gilliat. Again, both Naomi Sim and George Cole recall incidents where Sim 'directed' certain scenes, although whether this amounted to merely rehearsing the actors or something more technical they do not say. [35] Unsurprisingly, with four (nearly five!) directors at the helm, the finished film is uneven stylistically, although Sim's assassin, Hawkins, remains one of his most compelling screen creations. When Sim temporarily abandoned the cinema in 1960, it was the theatre that offered him the chance to direct plays by Michael Gilbert and William Trevor, and it was only the relative failure of the latter's *The Elephant's Foot* (1965) which saw him abandon this aspect of his art to concentrate on acting alone, a decision which soon bore fruit with the revival of his career first on stage, then on television and finally, as a much loved and respected senior character star, in the cinema.

Perhaps the reason Sim and Rutherford say relatively little about the craft of acting, never mind the differences between cinema and theatre, is that it was taken less seriously amongst

actors of their generation. Sim in particular was confronted by a continuing dilemma whereby his natural inclination as a teacher and encourager of his younger colleagues in the profession was set against a stubborn refusal to court any kind of publicity, so that the very idea of pontificating to the press about the business of acting was anathema to him. Charles Hamblett's innocent inquiry in a 1950 *Picturegoer* interview about the reasons for his screen success is met with: 'Laddie, I'll no give away trade secrets. I'm a Scotsman with a living to make'. [36] Indeed, Sim seems keen not only to avoid any measure of self-analysis but to demystify the whole process of performing, whatever the medium. His studio biography for *Laughter in Paradise* (1951) includes the thought that: 'we are all actors...and we are acting all the time', a throwaway line to be sure, but hardly a denial that he took his own work anything but seriously. [37] Thankfully others of his and Rutherford's contemporaries and successors in the business have been more expansive, and their comments and observations, based upon practical experience, form a useful counterbalance to the weight of critical theorising.

Bert Cardullo et al. in their 1998 survey consider that British actors do not always view the stage and screen as opposites, sense the realities of the cinema's commercial imperative, and, along with the Americans, remain less theoretical and idealistic than most Europeans. [38] Writing in 1937, when Sim and Rutherford were new to the industry, Robert Donat accurately identifies 'a certain snobbery among stage actors where filming is concerned; they look upon it as a rather boring, well-paid joke'. [39] Laurence Olivier concurs, recalling his first visit to Hollywood in 1930, when he was 'very snooty about moving pictures. I went for the money...and the chance of fame'; and despite the opportunities granted to him in British films of the thirties by Alexander Korda and others:

I still despised the medium; I felt unhappy in it, and was using most of my energy trying to build strong performances on the stage in the evenings, after shooting all day in the studios. Korda's English crews and electricians, too, thought films were inconsiderable because they were to do with an ephemeral and untrustworthy thing called entertainment. They had not learnt respect for the medium. [40]

By contrast Donat feels he had to work harder to master the intricacies of the film acting. Of these, the most important was the camera's uncompromising and unflattering presence versus the live response of a theatre audience. He also found that watching the rushes was useful, affording the actor the opportunity to strive continually to perfect a performance. The ultimate, for him, was to deliver the best work possible by a combination of honesty, integrity and truth. Ten years on, Eric Portman recognises the value of concentration for the film actor, admits that even a poor performance can be 'rescued' by a skilful editor, and decides it is neither looks nor the voice that make a film star, but personality. However, he concludes by emphasizing the benefits of stage training which he believes is of greater value than work as a film extra. [41]

The notion of being a film star, of course, did not appeal to many British actors, including Alastair Sim. Michael Redgrave, in a summer school lecture to the BFI at the Edinburgh Festival in 1954, actually refers to it as an 'aversion' which amounted to 'nausea'. [42] In his address he asserts the primacy of his stage credentials and concludes that a lapse of judgment led him into films, and one senses the complete absence of a film star culture in British cinema, along with the lingering shame associated with working in the industry. His advice to younger actors is to select from a range of resources, value spontaneity and learn from other actors and directors. And yet he seems unconvinced, frustrated at having to play scenes with actors new to him and uncertain of the impression he is actually making on the screen. It is precisely this asset which American actor Michael Pate believes every performer should develop, 'the ability to "see" himself on the screen as others see him...a difficult task but one very necessary for proper self-criticism'. [43] The art of acting in films, he believes, is based largely upon observation and a kind of mystical appreciation of the skill and magic of the great performers of the past - he names Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn. He also makes the connection between the need for an actor to practise his or her craft in the context of the economics of the film business. For instance, he rightly points out that, unlike the theatre's 'continuous stream of thought, speech and action', film is composed of many short scenes, shot out of sequence, and thus demanding a high level of concentration and sheer

professionalism. [44]

Claire Bloom's 1982 autobiography demonstrates that little about British attitudes seems to have changed. She describes performances in films as 'instamatic acting', is dismissive of the 'Method', despite, or perhaps, because of the fact that her first husband (Rod Steiger) was trained under that system, and affirms, as did Rutherford: 'the stage, where, to my mind, it still counts most. That's where I started, that's where the work I wanted to do was being done [and]...there's no actress in England of any importance who hasn't made her name on the stage, whose career doesn't continue on the stage, even if she does film or television'. [45] On this last point she disagrees with Donat's assessment in 1937, that few were successful in both media, indicating that maybe there has been a change in this instance. Bloom does concede though the importance of a director in films who can guide you through a performance, moment by moment, in collaboration with an editor, something impossible on the stage.

Laurence Olivier expresses similar reservations about 'Method' acting, but admits that the razor sharp focus of film work taught him a greater sincerity when he returned to the stage. But, despite the range and breadth of media in which modern actors work, his true allegiance is still to the theatre. He concludes:

much as I love these media...they cannot truly show what it is like to have been there. Once printed they will never change...There will never be the smell or the adrenalin on celluloid. The real moment will have gone. Film is the director's medium, television the writer's, but the theatre is the actor's. When the actor is on stage, it is he and he alone who drives the moment.

[46]

Even if one accepts, as Olivier appears to, the auteurist function of a film director, one can surely argue that despite the passing of what he calls 'the real moment', the significance of film is that it preserves performances which in the theatre linger on only in reviews and the increasingly unreliable memories of audiences who were present at a particular production.

Michael Caine's 1990 manual adopts a more even-handed and internationalist approach. Indeed, despite his theatre training and early television experience, his loyalty might seem to rest with the cinema where he has achieved his greatest success, when in fact he just regards it as different, even complementary, to the stage. His stance as a performer is refreshingly 'unactorish', a description which can also be applied to his commentary. [47] He stresses the need for concentration and truthfulness in performance, and rather than the more intrusive camera presence described by Robert Donat (see above), he believes that the best strategy for the actor is to imagine that it 'just happens to be there'. [48] He notes that the continuing demands of technological change have a significant effect on audience expectations; also, that the modern actor should be aware of the importance of assimilating the struggles of real people who try hard not to show their feelings. Above all, acting on the screen is less a business of performing, rather of just being, with the close-up as the most crucial cinematic device for revealing subtleties of thought and emotion. He compares both types of acting to a medical operation, and where the theatre would use a scalpel, the cinema a laser, emphasizing that although, in certain instances, the scale of film performance is smaller, its intensity may be as powerful. He also underlines the importance of the actor's reaction and his/her need to listen to fellow performers, especially in close-up. And yet, in spite of this, he remains sympathetic to the theatre actor for whom it can be difficult to accept that because of the way movies are made (with their scenes filmed out of order and sometimes necessitating the physical absence of some of the cast, etc.), other actors performances are no longer his/her concern. Because of this discipline is all important, especially when an actor has the terror of delivering only one line. And Caine sums up film acting in one word - relaxation.

Ian Richardson provides an interesting contrast to Caine, but whether he is typical of modern British actors is difficult to assess, compounded by the fact that his interviewer - Carole Zucker, an American - is not without her own prejudices, value judgments and stereotypes when it comes to comparing the attributes of each country's cinema and stage performers. For example, in her preamble she characterises the British (for Americans) as 'the great stage actors' and Americans (for the British) as 'the ones who act truly from the

guts', adding that British performers present 'vigour, authority, complexity and emotional depth'. [49] Surely it can be argued that there is a no less distinguished roster of great American stage performers who possess some, if not all, the qualities she identifies as intrinsically British. She also accuses American actors of 'behaviourism', and yet there must be many who give credible performances without recourse to this trait, not to say British actors who adopt it. In addition, she believes that British actors are more adaptable when it comes to performing in different media, and yet there are as many instances of Americans who successfully cross over from one to the other as there are British actors who doggedly rely on one medium to earn their living; and as we know already, while Sim expressed little preference as to particular media, Rutherford disliked television to the extent that one cannot imagine her settling down to a lengthy stint in a situation comedy, for instance.

However, Ian Richardson's subsequent comments provide a useful summary of the debate so far. He defends the restraint, control and technical polish of Stanislavsky, the need for truthfulness, and particularly his own exacting voice training, against the 'Method'. He describes the latter as probably what most talented actors might do anyway but believes: 'What is wrong with it is that it ignores the technical tools such as projection and clarity of diction, and however truthfully you may be feeling something, if nobody can hear or understand what you're saying, it's a total waste of time'. [50] (One is reminded of early objections to Marlon Brando's screen performances.) Richardson's 'truth' stems primarily from his observation of the essence of character, body language and so on, and he thinks this should be revealed most expressively on the screen through the eyes. He dislikes dictatorial directors, preferring instead those who collaborate with the actors. A salient difference from the Americans is the notion of British performers as 'jobbing actors' who will take on any role, however small. The problem for Americans, he believes, is that they are less likely to accept more interesting work when it is inevitably poorer paid. Interestingly, he notes that although British stars are not paid the equal of their American counterparts, supporting actors actually receive better financial rewards. However, he disapproves of the quantity of the Hollywood movie's budget currently reserved for the stars as it means less for everyone else involved in the production. He concludes by remarking that there are many ever-changing styles of

acting, and characterises the English as 'understated and depend[ent] heavily on nuance and irony', something of which there is a corresponding lack in the American tradition. [51]

As a classical actor it is interesting that Richardson can simultaneously enthuse about a founder of the modernist school like Stanislavsky which perhaps suggests that a fusion of the best elements of both might be beneficial for some actors, where traditional performance skills and the observation of others can function in tandem with the ability to live the character one is portraying to the fullest extent. Others disagree, viewing the classical (represented by the Diderot/Coquelin theory) and modern (elaborated by Stanislavsky, Pudovkin and Brecht) as a direct opposition, which Richard Dyer has described as 'acting from the outside in: acting from the inside out'. [52] However, the repertory system on which both Sim and Rutherford cut their teeth is dominated almost entirely by the precepts of the former, characterised by a precision and attention to detail, a motivation based on a relevance to the plot, an emphasis upon articulate vocal skills, and often a knowing separation of the actor from their role - something especially true of character acting. Lawrence Shaffer has commented:

In the finest character acting...the audience is still vaguely aware that strings are being pulled, that the actor has concocted special traits for his role. Effort also shows when an actor tends to impose certain facial and vocal mannerisms...[which] are evidence of strain and stress on the acting apparatus. The actor is not 'with it' but straining to 'do it'. Identification and involvement are at an ebb. [53]

This seems largely true of Sim and Rutherford's acting style although one may question the idea that their sense of identification and involvement are at an ebb when they demonstrate such a commitment to the projection of roles in which they are indisputably playing versions of themselves. Shaffer's remarks are also made with the benefit of hindsight and the development of the 'Method'.

In 1946, Frank Shelley lists the virtues of stage acting in order of importance. They are: characterisation, audibility, timing, tidiness (of movement, gesture and position), 'lift' (or spirit),

attack, pace/tempo, response (to other performances) and invention (varying tone, gesture, position and 'business'). Some are self-explanatory; others, like 'lift' or attack, so elusive that only a demonstration could possibly reveal their true nature. He believes though that only characterisation, tidiness, response and invention are important for the screen actor. Other attributes are now the province of the director and his crew. For him the essential difference between the two is marked by a subtler fluidity on the screen as opposed to the suddenness of movement on the stage; the stage 'attack' seeking to dominate the attention, the screen appearance to hypnotise and seduce its audience. For this reason he considers screen acting the more 'intellectual', which from a British point of view highlights a likely difficulty for a critic of his generation with his anti-intellectual bias, and perhaps explains a certain predisposition against cinema inherent in his book. [54] By the time of Michael Billington's *The Modern Actor*, Hamish Hamilton, (1973), there is a far greater awareness of theoretical concerns, including the growth of various myths surrounding the process of screen acting. One of these, he suggests, is that it remains a mystery to all but those already participating in the industry, especially actors arriving from the stage. This is disproved by the number of theatre-trained actors on the screen. One is also conscious of the author's scepticism of the then current trend for *auteurs* and director's cinema, mainly because it appears to relegate the business of acting to just 'a small part of the total aesthetic design', but also, more crucially, that it interferes with the delicate balance between actor, writer and director, which Billington regards as sacrosanct if the final result is to emerge at all satisfactorily. [55] And it is this relationship that is so important in the cinematic experience of both Sim and Rutherford. Where would Sim be without the writing-directing-producing partnership of Launder and Gilliat, or Rutherford without directors like Asquith, Lean and George Pollock, and writers like Coward and Terence Rattigan? In turn, where would they be without the variety and individuality represented by character actors of Sim and Rutherford's calibre?

When one actually examines the films of both actors, it soon becomes evident that certain preconceptions are proved false. For example, one's general impression is that most of their work is based upon original theatre plays. In fact, only 17 of Sim's 55 films derive from the theatre, and only 13 of Rutherford's 45. There is also a sense that both performers were

continually appearing in film versions of their own stage work; this is also untrue, with Rutherford and Sim reprising only four each of their theatre roles. Their other films may be usefully divided into those which derive from literature or some other source (Sim, 29; Rutherford, 16) and original screenplays (Rutherford, 16; Sim, a mere 9).

This last statistic depressingly confirms the scarcity of original material accepted for British films during much of the period when both actors were active in the industry. But the handful of new scripts not emanating from plays or literature from their thirties films does not always guarantee a satisfactory outcome. Ingram D'Abbes and Fenn Sherie's screenplay for *Big Fella* (1937) is primarily a vehicle for Paul Robeson, but some of the minor roles are considerably underwritten, including Rutherford's nanny; apparently her five previous screen roles, to say nothing of her theatre work, counted for little here, a miscalculation by the writers, the editor (who clearly cuts one of her two scenes) and the director. However, A.R. Rawlinson's farcical comedy *Missing Believed Married* (1937) gives Rutherford more of a chance which she grasps with gusto as hectoring aristocrat Lady Parke, even though the overall effect of the film is an unevenness of tone and style. Clearly the intention of the writer was to feature the new comedy partnership of Julien Vedey and Wally Patch as street traders who look after a beautiful heiress (Hazel Terry) after a street brawl. Their characters are realistic and convincing in themselves, but, as a critical notice of the time observes: 'they receive little help from the story and less from the director. There is far too much verbal haggling and reliance on painfully obvious theatrical tricks'. [56]

Alastair Sim is luckier with the collaborative team on *This Man is News* (1938). Not only does the film exhibit some visual style (like the glittering titles and numerous wipes), but it is less inhibited when it comes to depicting a suspenseful scene cinematically. Particularly gratifying for Sim is the fact that his character role carries equal dramatic weight with the leads (Barry Barnes and Valerie Hobson), and the liberal use of humour is never allowed to derail the narrative's final solution of the mystery. Roger MacDougall, Allan MacKinnon and Basil Dearden wrote the script in close consultation with director David MacDonald and the successful result, a sort of English 'Thin Man', led to a sequel with the same team (including the three principal actors, but minus Dearden), *This Man in Paris* (1939), and a follow-up, *Law*

and Disorder (1940). MacDougall also penned Sim's effective if hammy wartime short, *Nero* (1940), and his stage play was the basis for *Escapade* (1955). And the only other original work for the cinema in which Sim participated at the time was a second wartime short, *Her Father's Daughter* (1941), whose credits tell us that Donald Bull was responsible for the story, script and commentary. Bull skilfully furnishes an amusing vehicle for Sim in this 8-minute drama which mixes a fictional scenario with an instructional voice-over to encourage women to train as engineers - a small scale example of genre coalescence characteristic of the period.

The two films which precede Rutherford's stardom in *Blithe Spirit* (1945), are roles newly created for the cinema, pageant organiser and local do-gooder Rowena Ventnor in *The Demi-Paradise* (1943) and eccentric aristocrat Lady Beauclerk in *English Without Tears* (1944). Both show her to advantage and despite reviews of the day that single out her performances, she evidently responds well as part of an ensemble cast. This is revealed in scenes of public declamation and those of a more everyday nature. Indeed, her first appearance in *The Demi-Paradise*, when she meets Ann (Penelope Dudley-Ward) and a bemused Ivan (Laurence Olivier) and insists they accept a flower for 'Daisy Day' - remarking 'Give a mite to save a mite' - is a perfect illustration of her effectiveness in the briefest timespan - about fifteen seconds. By contrast, the two pageants allow her a certain prominence in busy crowd scenes, dressed in appropriately regal costumes, exhorting her fellow performers and waving her arms around like a slightly deranged traffic policeman. Similarly, Rutherford's Lady Beauclerk in *English Without Tears* is presented with the challenge of an address to the League of Nations where she speaks out robustly against the eating of birds - 'This practice must cease forthwith!' - to incomprehension and murmurings of discontent around the hall which she mistakes for interest. Taking a moment for her audience to absorb her words, she sips a glass of water, muttering with disdain to no-one in particular: 'yesterdays!', a telling example of the actress's ability to convey moments of private intimacy in the most public space. A more homely, but equally memorable, sequence occurs later in the same film when an innocuous little man (Ivor Barnard) brings gas masks to her house. At first she is resistant to them, not understanding their purpose, but when he insists they will be useful especially if

war comes, she sits down expectantly - 'well, this is all very theatrical' - and asks his name. When he tells her it is 'Quill' she is amused by the avian connotation and consents to having her gas mask strapped on, but, as she wrestles with it soon complains that she cannot breathe. It is a shame that director Harold French did not make more of this comic moment as the fade at the end of the scene seems premature. Anatole de Grunwald wrote the screenplays for both films, the second with Terence Rattigan. However neither their adaptation of Rattigan's already dated play *When the Sun Shines* (1947) nor De Grunwald's later attempt at a multi-faceted narrative, *Innocents in Paris* (1953), matches the quality of their previous work. In the second, the richness and warmth of the earlier films is replaced by a more facile descent into easy stereotypes and feeble attempts at humour. Despite this Rutherford's artist and Sim's government official still shine - in separate scenes - whether the former is found bantering with customs men or sketching her subjects against the backdrop of the French capital, or the latter is discovered displaying all manner of facial contortions as he mixes his drinks with a Russian counterpart. Both actors' performances seem to rise above the mediocre material they are offered. Rutherford, in particular, was evidently memorable enough for Rattigan to resuscitate and reuse situations and dialogue from the film when he came to write the screenplay for *The V.I.P.s* (1963). [57]

After *Blithe Spirit* and *Green for Danger* (1946), Rutherford and Sim's key films, before their 1950s heyday, are surely *Hue and Cry* (1947) and *Passport to Pimlico* (1949). The most extraordinary feature of these consensually agreeable Ealing comedies is the unforgettable impact both stars make in the minimum of scenes. Indeed Sim's slightly sinister writer in the former and Rutherford's unconventional history professor in the latter might be described as cameos were it not for their striking dramatic power and their crucial importance to each plot. Both actors are rewarded with a billing which belies the amount of time they actually appear on the screen. Credit is due not only to their performances but to the craftsmanship of screenwriter T.E.B. Clarke, as meticulous in his treatment of the smaller roles as he is in tackling the starrier parts. Sim is sometimes criticised for overacting in *Hue and Cry*, although quite how one underplays an eccentric and reclusive author is difficult to resolve, especially for an actor who participates in three scenes. However, Clarke warmed to Sim's

'magnificent...overplaying' and others have drawn attention to the effectiveness of the lighting and composition which give the actor's scenes their own peculiar resonance. [58] Denis Forman believes that both films work due to a combination of story, setting - the bomb-damaged post-war London locations in particular - and their 'robust yet high fantasy'. [59] Sim apart, Charles Barr is less impressed by *Hue and Cry*, finding it unchallenging for audiences and lacking the spontaneity which a great director might have realised using the same material. He thinks it pleasantly lightweight where *Passport to Pimlico* is more interesting and complex, 'a more considered adult sequel to *Hue and Cry*'. [60] He also notes that the entry to both fantasies is a document (a comic in the first film, a parchment in the second) and each adventure is set in motion by the eccentric characters of Sim and Rutherford. An additional fascination, at least as far as the present study is concerned, is that Rutherford was offered the part of Professor Hatton-Jones only after Sim had turned it down. One can only speculate on what Sim might have brought to the role, although the happy substitution of Rutherford apparently caused T.E.B. Clarke few problems. He commented later that the 'change of sex necessitated the changing of just one single word!' [61]

It is odd to realise that at the peak of his stardom in the early fifties Alastair Sim only appeared in three original screenplays. Had James Bridie lived longer no doubt Sim might have urged him to write more for the cinema. Aside from *Innocents in Paris* (see above), Sim makes the most of another multi-narrative film, *Laughter in Paradise* (1951), its uneven script allowing him opportunities to steal the film away from the other storylines. But it could be argued that his most effective performance of the three occurs in Frank Launder's gentle satire, *Lady Godiva Rides Again* (1951), a cameo so casually effective and probably inserted into the film at a late stage, hence the absence of an on-screen credit, that it seems to emphasize the enormous faith of the director in the actor. And yet it remains puzzling that, despite Sim's long association with Launder and Gilliat, from the 1930s to the 1950s, they never wrote any other original material with him in mind. In his book on the pair, Geoff Brown gives an impression of their freely alternating between original scripts and adaptations with no loss in quality. But however much certain roles were inevitably earmarked for Sim, the bulk of their work with him consists of adaptations. They first met him in 1938 when Launder was

script editor on *Alf's Button Afloat* (1938), its screenplay already the shared labour of three writers who had opened out W.A. Darlington's successful stage farce. They then collaborated on the second and third of the 'Inspector Hornleigh' series in 1939 before the intervention of the war temporarily halted the connection with Sim. This was successfully resumed in *Waterloo Road* (1944) with Sim's avuncular if patriarchal Doctor Montgomery, a kind of chorus figure benignly observing the younger protagonists of the drama, written and directed by Gilliat from a story by Val Valentine. However, it was their next film, *Green for Danger* (1946) which cemented the creative partnership between actor and the directors/writers/producers. Of course, it nearly did not happen, as Robert Morley was the studio's first choice for the unusual Inspector Cockrill, but it is surely Sim's interpretation of the flawed detective which brings the character, and consequently the film, to life. The script was written by Gilliat and Claud Guernsey and marked a significant improvement on the original novel by Christianna Brand which had been obtained at a large sum by Rank's story department. The team experimented with the next film roles for Sim by casting him as a slightly unconvincing Irish priest in *Captain Boycott* (1947) and a rather repugnant fake medium in *London Belongs To Me* (1948), both adaptations of novels. With their version of John Dighton's theatre farce *The Happiest Days of Your Life* (1950), they struck the right note, not only obtaining the services of Rutherford from the stage production but a brilliant cast including actors like Joyce Grenfell and Richard Wattis in the smaller roles. Terry Staples has noted that when Launder and Dighton adapted the play they

had two main aims. One was to work out a version that was well-suited to the medium of film and took advantage of the film's differences from a stage performance. The other main aim was to enlarge the role of Wetherby Pond, so that the part became big enough for Alastair Sim to accept. In the stage version, the Pond character had had far less to do, and was completely overshadowed by Miss Whitchurch [Rutherford]. As a result, the film script became so different from the stage script that only two lines are the same in both. [62]

The film has much in common with the later St. Trinian's series, not least the title sequence drawings of Ronald Searle whose work was the inspiration for Launder, Gilliat and Valentine's script for *The Belles of St. Trinian's* (1954) in which Sim effortlessly contributes the dual characterisations of headmistress Millicent Fritton and her bookmaker brother Clarence. However, Launder and Dighton's attempt to repeat the success of *The Happiest Days of Your Life* in *Folly To be Wise* (1952) is only intermittently achieved. While Sim's befuddled army chaplain is almost universally admired, the transference of Bridie's play to the screen is found disappointing for its lack of action and slack construction. The *Motion Picture Herald* observes that 'somewhere along the way someone forgot that this was an adaptation of a play, not the play itself', and the *Manchester Guardian* comments that Launder and Gilliat's 'success has depended less on their own mastery of filmcraft than on Mr. Bridie's original comedy and on the cast'. [63] This is all the more surprising in view of Gilliat's comments to Geoff Brown about the stifling effect of old notions of theatre which continued to impose themselves on British cinema in the 1930s and afterwards. [64] The opportunity to make something more cinematic out of the play is simply not taken and yet the film is still valuable for Sim's enunciation of Bridie's witticisms, even if the original is not generally regarded as one of the author's finest pieces of work; and by 1952 satires about the wartime 'Brainstrust' were considered rather out of date anyway.

The collaboration reaches its apex in two very different films. Sim's Scottish laird in *Geordie* (1955) may not be the principal role, but he is utterly at home in the part and his experience tells opposite Bill Travers' portrayal of the eponymous character. Launder and Gilliat's script is an adaptation of David Walker's novel and does not lack charm, although most critics would willingly exchange its whimsy for a more cynical edge. The result is that the depiction of Highland life emerges as self-conscious and unreal, and it is left to Sim to provide humour and authenticity. In *The Green Man* (1956) Sim's professional assassin, Hawkins, is placed at the centre of the action and the actor's performance does not disappoint. The character derives from a stage play (*Meet a Body*) by Launder and Gilliat, upon which they based their screenplay, and the part was clearly expanded with Sim in mind.

However, despite his success in the role, it is ironically its extension from the original play that lessens its impact overall, and one is left with a feeling of an uneasy compromise between farce and drama, the popular and the sophisticated, which does not wholly convince. But with two directors, Robert Day and Basil Dearden, along with suggestions and contributions from the writers/producers and the star, it is perhaps unfair to blame the film's shortcomings entirely on its screenplay. Sim's appearance in *Blue Murder at St. Trinian's* (1957) is disappointingly brief, while his impoverished aristocrat, Lord Wilcot, in *Left Right and Centre* (1959), although delightful, is undermined by the cosiness of Gilliat's script which seems too pleased with itself for a satire on politics and the media, both of which would soon be more effortlessly and savagely lampooned by *Beyond the Fringe* and *TW3*.

Geoff Brown has summed up the achievement of Launder and Gilliat as the provision of 'intelligent entertainment films - films which would neither insult the audience nor prove so forbidding that no one would venture inside the cinema'. [65] Unfortunately this description also hints at the reasons for their downfall. By the late 1950s their rather cosy style seemed too eager to please and had evidently failed to keep up with a rapidly changing world, especially in view of the emergence of the British new wave. [66] In retrospect, Sim's decision to abandon the cinema for over a decade seems a wise move especially in the light of his former colleagues' disastrous projects of the 1960s, like *Joey Boy* (1965).

In spite of notable collaborations with directors like Asquith and Pollock, Margaret Rutherford never really found a regular team of scriptwriters until the Miss Marple scripts of the 1960s, largely penned by David Pursall and Jack Seddon, who would write specifically for her even though their source was always the character created by Agatha Christie. Unlike Sim, who appeared in no original cinematic scripts after 1953, Rutherford starred in ten, and although few are worthy of her talents, her class tells when pitted against those written as vehicles for new comics of the day like Norman Wisdom in *Trouble in Store* (1953) and *Just My Luck* (1957) and Frankie Howerd in *The Runaway Bus* (1954). Her most memorable performances are in specially written cameos like petshop owner Prudence Croquet in *An Alligator Named Daisy* (1955) or bedridden passenger Miss Gaulswallow in Chaplin's *A Countess From Hong Kong* (1967), but these are regrettably sabotaged by unconvincing

genre mixes and lame direction. All too rarely is there a part for her which is matched by an aesthetic excellence which permeates the film as a whole, and the reason a multi-scene cameo like The Duchess of Brighton in *The V.I.P.s* (1963) works so brilliantly is that it provides much-needed comic relief from the tedious histrionics of Richard Burton, Elizabeth Taylor and Louis Jourdan.

Of the adaptations, by far the largest proportion derive from novels and stories. Alastair Sim's early films demonstrate both how effectively a novelist's work can be represented on the screen, especially his roles in Edgar Wallace's *The Squeaker*, itself a version of a stage play in which Sim had starred, and *The Terror*, and how poorly, in John Baxter's script and direction of J.B. Priestley's *Let the People Sing*. Many of Sim's mature performances are based on literature, including parts in films as different as *Green for Danger*, *Stage Fright* (1950), *Scrooge* (1951), *Geordie* and *School for Scoundrels* (1960), although his outstanding double characterisation in *The Belles of St. Trinian's* originates from the drawings of Ronald Searle.

None of Rutherford's films which derive from literature are notable before William Rose and John Eldridge's script for *The Smallest Show on Earth* (1957), based on a story by Rose, and Frank Harvey and John Boulting's version of Alan Hackney's novel for their splendidly satirical *I'm All Right Jack* (1959). Her role in the latter, as the aristocratic Aunt Dolly, is small but perfectly pitched, particularly in the scenes with Irene Handl where the two women find common ground despite their coming from opposite ends of the social scale, while her no-nonsense cashier, Mrs Fazackerlee, in the former allows her to express a more complex range of emotions from belligerence to nostalgia - a combination of an effective screenplay and Rutherford's own characterful performance. Once she is granted the starring role in the Miss Marple films there is little doubt that it is her particular interpretation of the part which determines the flavour of the scripts.

Rutherford's Miss Marple injects some emotion and humour into the part, something notably lacking in Agatha Christie's literary original. David Pursall and Jack Seddon position the character at the centre of the action, toughening up her personality in the process and sharpening her wit. This is admirably demonstrated when, arriving at Ackenthorpe Hall in

Murder She Said (1961) to take up her position as a maid, she first confronts her brusque, bedridden employer, Mr Ackenthorpe (James Robertson Justice). He comments: 'A plainer Jane I've never set eyes on in me life'. She replies: 'Well we can't all be young and handsome, can we Mr Ackenthorpe?' Irritated, he returns: 'There is one thing I cannot tolerate and that is impertinence!' She responds: 'Well, we should get on admirably. [pause] Neither can I!' Leslie Halliwell considers Rutherford miscast in the role, although this is a minority view, while others like Jerry Vermilye believe that Christie herself had Rutherford in mind for the part, which is quite untrue. [67] In fact Rutherford was far from Christie's ideal Miss Marple, although the author warmed to the actress when they met on the set, and later not only dedicated a novel (*The Mirror Crack'd*) to her but also authorised her heirs to use Rutherford's likeness on the covers of future editions of the novels right into the 1980s. [68] However, Christie had less time for the writers, telling a *Sunday Times* interviewer in 1966: 'I kept off films for years because I thought they'd give me too many heartaches. Then I sold the rights to MGM, hoping they'd use them for television. But they chose films. It was too awful! They did things like taking a Poirot book and putting Miss Marple in it! And all the climaxes were so poor, you could see them coming!' [69] Her biographer, Charles Osborne, is also critical of the scriptwriters' tamperings with Christie's novels; he and others are convinced that without Rutherford's 'resourceful, eccentric and engaging' performance the films would not have achieved such a popular success. [70] This criticism may well have caused MGM to ask James Cavanagh to write the script for the second in the series, *Murder at the Gallop* (1963), which although better received, was still found wanting. [71] When the final film, *Murder Ahoy!* (1964), failed at the box office Christie could barely contain her vitriol, calling it 'one of the silliest things you ever saw! It got very bad reviews, I'm delighted to say'. [72] (Interestingly some contemporary criticism of the films is content to lay the blame for unconvincing characters, dialogue and plot firmly at Christie's door. See Note 70.) But if Pursall, Seddon and Cavanagh's rather tame adaptations and George Pollock's disappointing direction increasingly undermine the films, it is a tribute to Rutherford's steadfast professionalism that her own performance remains consistently delightful, carrying the narrative each time, whatever the burden. [73]

Of the adaptations of stage plays, most yield good performances by Rutherford and Sim, although the standard of transformation into cinematic language is variable. For example, Sim makes considerably more of W.A. Darlington's farce *Alf's Button Afloat* than it probably deserves although he is much more impressive in the *Inspector Hornleigh* series of films which originate from a radio play by Hans Priwin. Sim's acting range moves from little more than theatrical mugging in the earlier film to a script which allows him to develop a believable character (Sergeant Bingham) over the course of three stories. *The Happiest Days of Your Life* is an outstanding transference from the stage play, with Sim's role enlarged and the dialogue changed almost entirely. [74] There is little here that suggests theatre actors playing to the gallery, and although most of the action takes place at Nutbourne College, its occasional opening out beyond the grounds of the school and cutting between scenes allows a more filmic sensibility to dominate the narrative. This, in turn, appears to inspire the actors to produce moments of light and shade particular to the cinema which the theatre version, lacking the ability to highlight facial expressions via the close-up (for instance), might easily miss. This is exemplified by Sim and Rutherford's first on-screen encounter. Wetherby Pond (Sim) races into his office and approaches the camera which swoops into his face to reveal his consternation at finding Miss Whitchurch (Rutherford) using his phone and running down his school to the Ministry of Education. He angrily wrestles the telephone receiver from her grasp and temporarily regains control of the situation by informing her that she was actually speaking to the junior assistant caretaker (a cut to a tiny cameo by George Cole), and that the Ministry is closed, this last statement spoken right into her face as she recoils from him. However, she retaliates and refuses to remove her school from his premises. He attempts to leave the room only to be met by other staff from St. Swithins who block his path. In a selflessly effective acting gesture Sim then cowers in a corner of his study, his character seemingly powerless to halt the onward rush of events, as we cut to the outside of the building where hordes of girl pupils arrive, and his own carefully chosen kitchen staff depart in protest. At once a potentially straightforward theatrical confrontation is rendered cinematic by the varied use of zooms, close-up and medium shots, cutaways from the main action of the scene, and music on the soundtrack.

Others of Sim's films, like *Cottage To Let* (1941), *Folly To Be Wise*, *An Inspector Calls* (1954) and *The Green Man* offer more mixed results, despite the actor's best efforts as a performer. One is conscious, for example, in *Cottage To Let* of the artificiality of the studio sets whose external scenes seem especially suffocating for a story set in Scotland; *Folly To Be Wise*'s most memorable scene of Sim losing control of his 'Brains Trust' panel is wonderfully and wittily performed but its hilarity is weakened by a determinedly theatrical set which lacks any real cinematic vivacity; similarly, Sim's bogus policeman in *An Inspector Calls* provides a much needed foil to the theatrical stereotypes offered by the other actors portraying an aristocratic family - common to the generic murder mystery - complacent and self-righteous mother and father, loyal daughter, rebellious son - whom he tries to link to the death of a young girl, their individual cinematic flashbacks notwithstanding.

Other films featuring Sim elicit memorable characterisations, like those in *The Doctor's Dilemma* (1958), *The Millionairess* (1960) and *The Ruling Class* (1972), which are contained within otherwise frustratingly flawed screenplays, all granting him potentially satisfying roles which are then swamped less by the other performances than the sheer lack of cinematic invention.

Rutherford tends to shine best in films adapted from her own stage performances - *Spring Meeting* (1941), *Blithe Spirit*, *The Happiest Days of Your Life* and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1952) - although it is hard to ignore the effectiveness of roles as different as Nurse Caryl in *Miranda* (1948), scripted by Peter Blackmore with additional dialogue by Denis Waldock, from the former's play, and Mistress Quickly in *Chimes at Midnight* (1966), in Orson Welles' ingenious distillation of Shakespeare and Holinshed. This last characterisation presents Rutherford with the challenge of a relatively insubstantial role which was quickly committed to celluloid. In spite of the disparity of acting styles on display, from the very classically-inclined John Gielgud to the *Nouvelle Vague* sensibilities of Jeanne Moreau, and brief screen time (totalling under twenty minutes), she manages to convey a rounded character (in every sense!), whether chasing Falstaff (Welles) around the inn ('You owe me money, Sir John'), laughing at his impressions of the king ('He doth it as like one of these harletry players as ever I have seen') or reminiscing touchingly about his last hours (his body

'cold as any stone'). This is all the more remarkable in the context of Welles' intensely cinematic deep focus visuals which complement rather than distract from the actors' performances, the immediacy of the results achieved by often rehearsing the company on camera. Keith Baxter, who plays Prince Hal, has observed that: 'Welles took great pains to smash any idea that there was some mystique about acting for the camera. He never postured as The Great Director'. [75]

Some of the most interesting adaptations are films which take the theatre as their subject matter/setting. Films as diverse as Sim's *Stage Fright* and *Folly To Be Wise*, and Rutherford's *Curtain Up* (1952) and *Murder Most Foul* (1964) often reveal a fascinating interplay between the two media, in which both stars seem completely at home, even if the totality of the cinematic experience is not always what it might have been. It is perhaps no accident that the most satisfactory of these (*Stage Fright* and *Murder Most Foul*) are unhampered by the writers' attempts to wrest them away from the theatrical moorings of the stage plays from which the others clearly derive, but still hardly represent great cinema, and 'live' as repositories for particular performances. *Stage Fright* sets up a number of oppositions which allow Hitchcock the opportunity to fully explore his theatrical metaphor. Thus there are distinctions between the perceived 'honesty' of the countryside, where we first encounter Sim as the Commodore, and the deviousness of city life, character actors (like Sim and Thorndike) and stars (like Dietrich), American, European and British acting styles, British and Hollywood aesthetics - Michael Walker has called the film 'a Hollywood British movie', characters playing parts (like Jane Wyman's maid, Doris) versus 'real life', and, above all, theatrical motifs and setting vying with the sensibility of the film medium. [76] Although Eve (Jane Wyman) is often considered to be the nemesis of Charlotte (Marlene Dietrich), this opposition could equally apply to Eve's father as portrayed by Sim. The contrast between them is singled out in more than one review at the time of the film's release. Of Dietrich's first scene *The Times'* critic comments: 'it is apparent that Miss Dietrich does not believe in her lines and...that Mr Alfred Hitchcock does not believe in his technique', whereas 'when Eve's father, the eccentric Commodore, makes his appearance the film changes its course and...ceases to be a Hitchcock exercise in dramatic suspense and becomes instead a

diverting comedy brilliantly served by its supporting cast'. [77] This might explain Francois Truffaut's objection to Sim's performance whose character seems to have altered the original tenor of a film over which Hitchcock had evidently lost some control. [78] In an unusual move, the director had invited Dietrich to write some of her own dialogue, but the actress's breathy theatrical emoting is no match for the relaxed naturalism and wit of Sim's character whose lines were most likely provided by James Bridie. Dietrich is not always aided by Hitchcock's technique either. For example, when she is shown in close-up whilst changing her dress in Jonathan's (Richard Todd) flat, her face is artificially superimposed on to the rest of the shot, and such moments do little to inspire belief in her character, unlike Sim's Commodore who, from the first, is vivid and authentic. Truffaut is so concerned by aspects of narrative and style that he misses the excellence of the character performances and their humour. He disparages the film as 'one of those little British crime movies in the Agatha Christie tradition' and there is little chance that he would have appreciated Rutherford's Miss Marple or the very British notion of murder as a joke which is so characteristic of the series in which the actress appears (and in much of Hitchcock's work too). [79]

This jokiness is evident from the start of *Murder Most Foul* when the policeman (Terry Scott) discovers the first body. Like *Stage Fright*, the film also pokes fun at the theatrical profession whilst retaining an affection for it, as witnessed in the final disastrous performance of the amateur dramatic company which Miss Marple joins to further her murder investigations. *Murder Most Foul* also abounds in representations of different levels of theatricality. Thus we move from the 'theatre' of the courtroom to the haphazard production of a murder mystery at the church hall presided over by Mr Stringer (Stringer Davis), to the semi-professional company where much of the action takes place. Several of the murders are appropriately theatrical - one dies (literally) on the stage, while another perishes to the accompaniment of a melodramatic thunderstorm. In addition, the names of some of the characters are knowingly absurd - the impresario, Driffold Cosgood (Ron Moody), looks and sounds almost Victorian. Miss Marple, whose name he mispronounces as 'marble', also poses (acts) as a collector of jumble and an actress. The latter allows Rutherford to display her rhetorical skills in an extraordinarily bloodthirsty audition piece (*The Shooting of Dan*

McGrew) and to play 'lady detective', the Honourable Penelope Brown, in the production of *Out of the Stewpot*, thereby presenting an actress (Rutherford) playing a detective (Miss Marple), posing as an actress portraying a detective! But George Pollock (the director) and his technicians do not always persuade us that their film technique is superior to that of the theatre which they are so determined to mock. A particularly glaring example occurs following the scene when Miss Marple decides to 'act' by joining the troupe, when, standing chatting to Mr Stringer outside the theatre, there is a sudden, albeit brief, change of shot, interspersing a clumsy and needless back projection. [80] By contrast, the simple use of music, sound effects (the thunderstorm) and Rutherford's unique facial expressions (largely without dialogue) as she creeps around a darkened boarding house prior to the murder of Dorothy (Annette Kerr), are purely and effectively cinematic. The last laugh, as it were, and an acknowledgement that the real contest is perhaps not between theatre and cinema at all, happens in the film's final scene when Miss Marple and Mr Stringer come to visit the temporarily invalidated inspector (Charles Tingwell) and Cosgood in hospital to the strains of the theme from the then-popular television series *Doctor Kildare*.

Examining the films of Sim and Rutherford there is little doubt about the huge impact of cinema (and, to a lesser extent, television) on their professional lives as stage actors. Not only did they have to learn new acting techniques and ways of working mid-way through their careers, but the results up on the screen quickly increased their prestige and popularity at home and abroad. And whatever their personal responses to each medium, they both came to realise that adaptability and flexibility were not only desirable but pragmatic when it came to extending their craft into later life. Maybe it is for this reason that they can appear as effectively in cinematic adaptations of stage plays like *The Happiest Days of Your Life* or play characters from literature like Scrooge or Miss Marple as they can be totally convincing in works of original invention for the screen, like *Hue and Cry* or *Passport to Pimlico*. Compared to their American counterparts, working in the British industry was not always as rewarding as it might have been, had budgets resembled those of Hollywood, or screenwriters like *Lauder* and *Gilliat* been accorded the same importance as those in the U.S.A.. However, these

handicaps rarely affect Sim and Rutherford's performances - except when excised by an injudicious editor; indeed, the relative austerity of the industry may well have had the effect of toughening up their professionalism. Whether they are required to be as explosively theatrical as is Rutherford in Asquith's adaptation of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* or as deftly ironic as is Sim in his specially written cameo for Launder and Gilliat's *Lady Godiva Rides Again*, their appearances, however brief, attain a consistently high standard. What soon becomes clear is that Laurence Olivier (and others) notion of (British) cinema as a director's medium (see above, page 38) can be challenged by the contributions of both actors, on and off-screen. Sim's near-forays into direction, in *Scrooge* and *The Green Man*, question how much can actually be credited to the director and the perceived status of the actor as subservient to the director's will, while Rutherford's insistence on Terence Rattigan's rewriting her part in *The V.I.P.s* or that small roles be found for her husband in many of her films, are not isolated instances and perhaps illustrate the measures for self-protection actors needed to take in order to preserve their personal and professional integrity. One may argue that the British film industry is more suggestive of an actors' cinema whose quirky originality has sustained it despite the variable quality of the final product; or perhaps the corresponding lack of authority and control demonstrated by many British directors is specifically related to their disappointingly uneven output. However, there are so many other contributory factors to the production process of a film that it would be unfair to lay the burden of blame on directors alone. Naturally producers, writers, cameramen, composers, actors and a host of others are all responsible for the success or failure of a particular film, but it does seem that in the British cinema it is so often the actor on whom the whole project seems to rest. It is probably for this reason that when Sim and Rutherford became rather unlikely stars of the cinema they still very much identified with the theatre as their first love. After all, it was a medium where the growth of their reputations was gradual and largely undamaged by temporary failure. On the screen, by contrast, they were suddenly only as good as their most recent film, and this, perhaps, made both of them rather more cautious, even reluctant, stars, especially having observed praise and blame heaped upon other principal actors in whose films they had appeared for years as character actors.

The significance of the theatre is encapsulated in Rutherford's designation of it as 'the mother of it all', as if it might have actually given birth to the cinema, rather than Geoff Brown's 'sister' of the stage, although her thoughts on both media continued to be remarkably even-handed. [81] She tells Gwen Robyns: 'I like to alternate a play and a film - just like having a delicious pudding after a substantial meat course', and: 'one reason I enjoy filming [is that] it puts you on your mettle. It is also a different rhythm from the theatre'. [82] For Rutherford, and, one suspects, for Sim too, the practicalities of working as an actor came to override individual prejudices and preferences.

Notes

1. Geoff Brown uses the term 'sister' in his chapter "Sister of the Stage" - British Film and British Theatre' in Barr, C. (ed.) (1986) *All Our Yesterdays*, BFI, pp. 143-167. It derives from a quotation by Sir John Hare, first manager of the Garrick Theatre, who declared that: 'The Film is the Sister of the Stage'. Ibid, p.144. By 'theatrical' I am thinking of enlarged gestures and greater vocal projection, by comparison with a 'filmic' sensibility where the opposite often applies - less is more.
2. Shelley, F. (1946) *Stage and Screen*, Pendulum Publications, p. 15.
3. For example, many longer films also have intervals; in addition, the sense of anticipation/participation can surely be as keen in the cinema as in the theatre.
4. Manvell, R. (1979) *Theater and Film: a comparative study of the two forms of dramatic art, and of the problems of adaptation of stage plays into films*, Associated University Presses, pp. 24-25.
5. Ibid, p. 25.
6. Shelley, F. (1946), pp. 37-38.
7. Ibid, p. 41.
8. Balcon, M. (1969) *Michael Balcon presents...A Lifetime of Films*, Hutchinson, p. 27. The so-called 'Quota Act' was actually the Cinematographic Films Act.
9. Powell, D. (1947) *Films Since 1939*, Longmans, Green and Co., p. 7.
10. Walker, A. (1974) *Hollywood England: The British Film Industry in the Sixties*, Harrap, p. 463.
11. Brown, G. in Barr, C. (ed.) (1986), pp. 144-5.
12. Ibid, p. 158.
13. Forman, D. (1952) *Films 1945-50*, Longmans, Green and Co., p. 38.
14. Graham, P. (1963) *The Abortive Renaissance: Why are British films so bad?*, Axle Spokes, pp. 1-11.
15. Brown, G. in Barr, C. (ed.) (1986), p. 161.
16. Best, A. 'Dowager Duchess of Laughs', *Picturegoer*, 28/1020, 20/11/54, p. 17.

17. Ibid.
18. Robyns, G. and Rutherford, M. (1972) *Margaret Rutherford: an autobiography as told to Gwen Robyns*, W.H. Allen, p. 80.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid, p. 168.
21. Ibid, p. 187.
22. Ibid, p. 199.
23. In her husband's biography Naomi Sim states that 'although Alastair always had a lot of fun when he was filming, I think the theatre mattered most to him'. Sim, N. (1987) *Dance and Skylark: Fifty Years with Alastair Sim*, Bloombury, p. 98.
24. For Sim's first impressions of cinema acting see page 13.
25. After the success of *The Happiest Days of Your Life* (1950) Charles Hamblett, in a portrait of the star, comments: 'It cannot be stressed too emphatically that Sim owes much of his film success to his immaculate stage technique. His sense of timing is uncanny'. Hamblett, C. 'Mr Sim Has a Secret', *Picturegoer*, 20/813, 2/12/50, p. 13.
26. Sim, N. (1987), p. 130.
27. See page 16 for Sim's attitude to the theatre in the wake of Bridie's death.
28. Quilter Vincent, R. 'Mr Sim Lowers His Guard', *ABC Film Review*, 3/12, Dec 1953, p. 5.
29. Sim, N. (1987), p. 85.
30. Cowley, E. 'It's Mr Haddock, up to his neck in some fishy business', *The Sun*, 30/7/71. (BFI Press Cuttings)
31. [producer/director uncredited] *Late Night Line-Up* (interview with Michael Dean), BBCTV, 12/2/66.
32. Fisher, J. (prod.) *Heroes of Comedy: Alastair Sim*, Channel 4, 30/4/97. In her biography Naomi Sim reveals that 'Alastair's method of direction was very different from that of most other directors working in the theatre. The majority like to start by 'blocking' the play, that is to say going slowly through from start to finish giving everyone their moves and probable business. Only then do they start again at the beginning and progress once more through the whole play. Alastair, who would have been studying and planning the play for weeks or

months beforehand and knew it backwards, would take the first people to appear on stage, whether there were two of them or more, and rehearse them, and only them, until he was satisfied that they were happy and fully understood who they were, what they were doing, and their relationship to each other. Only then would he go on to the next people and do the same with them. If he had a three-act play and four weeks for rehearsal, he would plan to have finished one act each week and the fourth week would be spent running the entire play'. Sim, N. (1987), p. 140.

33. Ibid, p. 143.

34. In his autobiography, Brian Desmond Hurst describes Sim as his 'first choice for the part and absolutely perfect casting...He was such a disciplined artist and fine actor that he was a delight to work with'. Of the scene in question, he comments: 'Alastair said to me: "Wouldn't it be better if this scene were played up in my bedroom?" I replied: "No, Alastair. You've just had a long scene up there. This is Kathleen Harrison's scene and she's going to have it". He put on his Scottish face and I put on my Ulster face but I had my way and it remained Kathleen's best scene'. Hurst, B.D. (1986) *Brian Desmond Hurst: An Autobiography*, unpublished, pp. 148-9. Interviewed in July 1994, Rona Anderson, who played Alice, told Brian McFarlane: 'all of my scenes were with George Cole, who played Scrooge as a young man. I have to tell you, I was never directed by Brian Desmond Hurst; Alastair Sim directed the scenes between George Cole and me'. McFarlane, B. (1997) *An Autobiography of British Cinema*, Methuen, p. 19.

35. To Brian McFarlane, George Cole recalled: 'although I can't say he actually coached me, you can't work with someone like that without learning something. He was a most wonderful comedy actor, with incredible timing. He was also extremely generous with other actors, providing they were pulling their weight. He once said to me during a scene from *The Green Man*, "If that's all you're going to do, then I'll just have to take over the scene". I realised then I hadn't really looked at the scene and wasn't doing nearly as much as I could with it'. McFarlane, B. (1992) *Sixty Voices: Celebrities Recall the Golden Age of British Cinema*, BFI, p. 60. Remembering a favourite scene, possibly the same one to which George Cole refers, Naomi Sim quotes her husband saying to Cole: 'Forget about lines. Just do your damndest

to get to the phone and say whatever you would say in the circumstances and I will do the same and manage to prevent you'. She considers the result 'a beautifully choreographed little dance'. Sim, N. (1987), pp. 133-4.

36. Hamblett, C., 2/12/50, p. 13.

37. BFI Press Cuttings.

38. Cardullo, B. et al. (eds.) (1998) *Playing To The Camera: Film Actors Discuss Their Craft*, Yale University, p. 85.

39. Ibid, p. 89.

40. Olivier, L. (1986) *On Acting*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, pp. 175, 177.

41. Cardullo, B. et al. (eds.) (1998), pp. 89-98.

42. Redgrave, M. (1958) *Mask or Face: Reflections in an Actor's Mirror*, Heinemann, p. 121.

43. Pate, M. (1970) *The Film Actor: Acting For Motion Pictures and Television*, Yoseloff, p. 17.

44. Ibid, p. 23.

45. Bloom, C. (1982) *Limelight and After: The Education of an Actress*, Penguin, p. 158.

46. Olivier, L. (1986), pp. 245-6.

47. Shipman, D. (1980) *The Great Movie Stars: The International Years*, Angus and Robertson, p. 88.

48. Caine, M. (1990) *Acting in Film: An Actor's Take on Movie Making*, Applause, p. 3.

49. Zucker, C. 'An Interview with Ian Richardson: Making Friends with the Camera' in Lovell, A. and Kramer, P. (eds.) (1999) *Screen Acting*, Routledge, p. 152.

50. Ibid, p. 155.

51. Ibid, p. 164.

52. Dyer, R. (1979) *Stars*, BFI, p. 150.

53. Lawrence Shaffer in Ibid, p. 160.

54. Shelley, F. (1946), pp. 17-18. I am thinking here of an anti-intellectualism characteristic of British life where more academic theorists are often regarded with suspicion rather than admiration and respect. Would the esteemed André Bazin, for instance, have exerted the same influence upon the British film industry (had he been based here) as he clearly did in

France? I think not.

55. Billington, M. (1973) *The Modern Actor*, Hamish Hamilton Ltd, p. 117.

56. Review of *Missing Believed Married* (1937) in *Kine Weekly*, 247/1589, 30/9/37, p. 39.

57. I have in mind particularly Rutherford's scenes as a nervous air traveller. When the stewardess asks her to fasten her seatbelt Rutherford replies: 'I haven't brought one with me!', a line which appears (almost unaltered) in the later film.

58. Clarke, T.E.B. (1974) *This Is Where I Came In*, Michael Joseph, p. 156. Tim Palleine considers that the effect of the first scene, where the boys first encounter Sim's reclusive author, is achieved by 'exaggeratedly mock-sinister lighting and composition'. Palleine, T. 'A Song and Dance at the Local: Thoughts on Ealing' in Murphy, R. (ed.) (1997) *The British Cinema Book*, BFI, p. 117.

59. Forman, D. (1952), p. 22.

60. Barr, C. (1977) *Ealing Studios*, Cameron and Taylor/David and Charles, p. 95.

61. Clarke, T.E.B. (1974), p. 161.

62. Terry Staples' *NFT Programme Notes* in the BFI Pressbook for the film.

63. *The Motion Picture Herald*, 193/11, 12/12/53, p. 2102; *The Manchester Guardian*, 6/12/52. (BFI Press Cuttings)

64. Gilliat tells Brown that 'it took an awfully long time to change from this horrible drawing-room conception of British theatre which impinged itself on the British Film'. Brown, G. (1977) *Lauder and Gilliat*, BFI, p. 3.

65. *Ibid*, p. 17.

66. In recent years there has emerged a more revisionist view of British films and filmmakers of the 1950s. Bruce Babington, for instance, suggests 'changing ways of seeing' certain less prominent films by Lauder and Gilliat; he also believes their body of work as a whole is 'large and various enough to lead to distinct differences of interpretation and evaluation', stressing its 'richness and variety' and importance 'at the hub of British film over a long period...films which half a century later not only continue to intrigue and satisfy the analyst but are also constantly revived and viewed with pleasure on the great repertory of television'. See Babington, B. (2002) *Lauder and Gilliat*, Manchester University Press, pp. 207-9.

67. Walker, J. (ed.) (2002) *Halliwel's Film and Video Guide 2002*, Harper Collins, p. 566.
- Vermilye, J. (1990) 'Margaret Rutherford', *Films in Review*, 41/10, Oct. 1990, p. 459.
68. Christie is initially reputed to have said: 'To me she's always looked like a bloodhound'. See Osborne, C. (1982) *The Life and Crimes of Agatha Christie*, Michael O'Mara Books, p. 172. No doubt the rather more prim and detached characterisation of Joan Hickson (familiar from the 1980s television series) might have found greater favour with Christie, but by then the author was dead. It is difficult to imagine Hickson's Miss Marple uttering some of the more spirited exchanges given to Rutherford by her scriptwriters.
69. Haining, P. (1990) *Agatha Christie: Murder in Four Acts*, Virgin Books, p. 39.
70. Osborne, C. (1982), p. 184. Alexander Walker commented: 'Without Margaret Rutherford, *Murder She Said* would just be the Christie cardboard characters serving up...deathless dialogue'. (undated and uncredited in the BFI Press Cuttings)
71. Charles Osborne considers that the plot is turned into 'a pointless jumble'. Osborne, C. (1982), p. 172. *The Monthly Film Bulletin* complains of 'circumlocutory dialogue, musty humour and a lethargic style of cutting' which makes the film 'unnecessarily leaden-paced'; *The Daily Express* finds the film 'routine', *The Evening News* 'old fashioned', while *The Guardian* regrets the stereotyping of the lesser characters. *The Monthly Film Bulletin*, 230/4, 24/7/63, p. 859; Leonard Mosley in *The Daily Express*, 8/5/63; Felix Barker in *The Evening News*, 9/5/63; Ian Wright in *The Guardian*, 10/5/63. (BFI Press Cuttings) However, others think the 'plot expertly handled' (*Kine Weekly*, 552/2901, 9/5/63, p. 9), the film 'well-constructed' and the direction 'leisurely but controlled' (*The Hollywood Reporter*, 176/6, 8/7/63, p. 3). *Variety* calls it an 'unpretentious whodunit', its production 'smooth' (*Variety*, 8/5/63); their reviewer, incidentally, also credits Pursall and Seddon as co-writers, but this information, if accurate, is not acknowledged on-screen.
72. Agatha Christie, from *The Sunday Times* interview (February 1966), quoted in Osborne, C. (1982), p. 203.
73. It is somewhat ironic that Christie sold the rights of her work to MGM for a considerable sum only to see the subsequent (and largely commercially successful) series made quickly and cheaply. Rutherford became MGM's highest-earning British star, which may in turn have

placed extra pressure on her to deliver a convincing performance. However Christie's comments are surely ambivalent: although she is uncertain about Rutherford's suitability for the part and critical of the writers' adaptations, she was also quite happy, once the films were popular at the box office, to make use of the symbol of their success (Rutherford's image) as an endorsement to promote future editions of her books.

74. For a fuller comparison of the film with the original play by John Dighton see Babington, B. (2002) *Lauder and Gilliat*, Manchester University Press, pp. 154-6.

75. Baxter, K. (1998) *My Sentiments Exactly*, Oberon Books, p. 93.

76. Walker, M. 'The Stolen Raincoat and the Bloodstained Dress: *Young and Innocent* and *Stage Fright*' in Allen, R. and Gonzales, S.I. (1999) *Alfred Hitchcock Centenary Essays*, BFI, p. 196.

77. *The Times*, 29/5/50. (BFI Press Cuttings)

78. Truffaut tells Hitchcock: 'I didn't care for Alastair Sim in the role of Jane Wyman's colourful father. I objected to the actor as well as the character'. Instead of defending Sim, Hitchcock replies: 'Here again is the trouble with shooting a film in England. They all tell you, "He's one of our best actors; you've got to have him in your picture"'. Truffaut, F. (1984) *Hitchcock by Truffaut*, Paladin, p. 276. Truffaut's objections should be set in the context of almost universal praise for Sim's performance.

79. *Ibid*, p. 274.

80. In comparison, how effortlessly ironic is Hitchcock's use of back projection in the almost contemporary *Marnie* (1964).

81. Robyns, G. and Rutherford, M. (1972), p. 80; Geoff Brown, see note 1.

82. Robyns, G. and Rutherford, M. (1972), pp. 80, 81.

Britishness and Eccentricity in the work of Alastair Sim and Margaret Rutherford

If the interconnections between Sim and Rutherford's cinematic and theatrical experiences are significant to a proper understanding of their work as a whole then their Britishness and eccentricity define their very essence as two of the most prominent character actors of their generation. Of course conceptions of Britishness and eccentricity are not easy to define, nor can they always be considered in isolation as there are so many links that seem to bond them together.

Before attempting to discuss them separately, as far as is possible, and then to tackle their appropriation in Sim and Rutherford's films, a number of questions need to be addressed: Are the two inextricably linked, and how are these qualities manifest in the films? Is it as important to draw attention to the nuances of Britishness (Englishness/Scottishness) in the films as it is to represent Sim and Rutherford's characters, or the circumstances of production, for instance? Is eccentricity an essential component of British cinema or a mere adjunct of it; indeed is eccentricity an entirely English phenomenon as some believe or does it prosper elsewhere, in Scotland, for instance; is eccentricity necessary to Sim and Rutherford's professionalism or can it be an excuse for overacting? Perhaps it can be viewed, therefore, as both asset and limitation, or even a contradictory state of being whereby some eccentric actors are said to function better in groups while others are more effective alone. Ultimately, if we accept the importance of eccentricity in the work of Sim and Rutherford, there is surely a contradiction between the formal straitjacket of British cinema restricted by financial, commercial and cultural pressures, and a natural impulse in both actors which was given little opportunity or encouragement to flourish in anything as remotely interesting or even experimental cinematically as the ebullient eccentricity of their personalities might suggest it could. Or was the British cinema of their day only too keen to showcase their exuberance and that of others to the extent that the overriding ethos was eventually governed almost exclusively by eccentric character actors alone?

The key to understanding Britishness in particular can be found in the work of many writers and critics who have attempted to define it over time. Interestingly, it is often those from

abroad who have isolated its most characteristic aspects. In the section headed 'Character' in his essay on 'English Traits' Emerson (in 1856) expounds on his impressions of Englishness, often using it as a synonym for Britishness. He notes the perception of the English as 'reputed morose' who 'believe that where there is no enjoyment of life there can be no vigor and art in speech or thought', but considers this gloom has been foisted on to them by the French; however he thinks 'The Englishman finds no relief from reflection, except in reflection' and his (or her) 'well-known courage is entirely attributable to their disgust of life'; despite this he finds them 'cheerful and contented' (especially as compared to Americans) but that 'they hide virtues under vices, or the semblance of them'; he concludes that they can be described as both 'sour, splenetic and stubborn - and as mild, sweet and sensible' and have 'great range and variety of character'. [1] His remarks are representative of the inherent contradictions in and perceptions of the English character and perhaps indicate a likely backdrop for the cultivation of eccentricity. E.M. Forster considers that a problem arises from the fact that it is difficult to understand the English nature which although 'apparently imperturbable and even' is also 'incomplete in a way that is particularly annoying to the foreign observer'; he continues: 'It has a bad surface - self-complacent, unsympathetic, and reserved. There is plenty of emotion further down, but it never gets used'. [2] Another 'foreign observer' George Santayana, a Spaniard teaching at Oxford in the period from before the First World War until the mid-1920s, is much more of an anglophile. He is impressed by Britain not for its system of government, commerce or aristocracy, but for its countryside and poets, and finds sobriety, justness, greenness and richness within 'a distinctive society'; his statement that 'at first all gates seemed shut and bristling with incommunication' curiously anticipates Ivan's (Laurence Olivier) reaction in *The Demi-Paradise* (1943) as another foreigner (a Soviet engineer) on his first visit to Britain; however Santayana is soon won over by England as 'the home of decent happiness and a quiet pleasure in being oneself' and qualities of self-reliance, self-confidence and modesty; most famously he remarks that 'what governs the Englishman is his inner atmosphere, the weather in his soul' which he goes on to define, somewhat ambiguously, as 'a mass of dumb instincts and allegiances, the love of a certain quality of life...pregnant with many a stubborn assertion and rejection'. [3] The very contradictions he describes seem to be

a significant factor of his anglophilia.

Liberal humanist Sir Ernest Barker, who wrote extensively on Britishness and nationhood, has wider concerns. He discusses how Britain functions as both a single entity and multi-nation state, and the unifying factors of common religious belief, language and will. He rejects the idea of a nation's character deriving from differences of geography or climate but interestingly contrasts country and city life. He warns against both the idealisation of the countryside as well as the perceived artifice of the city. Seemingly both have their place. He believes 'a nation loses vitality when it loses contact with the soil', while personality 'can only be formed in society' and 'character can only be built in the stream of the world'. [4] National character is also influenced by density and distribution of population, sex, age and class, as well as by the individual nations within the whole. He also notes the position of women in society as another major influence. Written in the aftermath of the terrible devastation of World War One, he is well aware of a nation with a higher proportion of women to men in the population, and that, thanks to female suffrage, it is now very much a nation of men and women. Discussing the sense of the development of a national spirit he wonders if a country can actually have a personality. Unsurprisingly 'John Bull' is invoked but Barker admits that this may not be at all representational and he settles for the idea of British society as 'an interplay of individual minds'. [5] The key word here is 'individual' as Barker strongly associates the connection between individual growth and that of a national character, citing the importance of the interaction between temperament, disposition and character. Temperament he defines as the nation's 'racial blend, acting under the influence of its physical environment', disposition as 'the sum of instincts which may be varied from time to time by the density of its population and the nature of its occupations', and character as 'the sum of acquired tendencies built up by [a nation's] leaders in every sphere of its activity, with the consent and co-operation...of the general community'. [6] Barker continues by establishing the close connection between religion and the life of the nation, especially in Scotland. When he states that 'it was the kirk which made Scotland one...and it was by the kirk that Scotland was stamped with a permanent national character' one is irresistably reminded of Sim's stern minister in *Wedding Group* (1936). [7] Barker notes the differing English and Scottish views of

the state, with Scotland strongly influenced by Calvinism and England by two reformations which produced Anglicanism and Nonconformity, the first the province of the aristocracy, the second a more middle-class preserve, reflected politically in the Tory and Whig parties respectively. Even in 1927, and despite its lesser influence over education and discipline, the author believes that the Church of England is still a force that shapes the nation in conjunction with two strains of Nonconformism, Puritanism and Wesleyanism. Puritanism was the basis for 'religious individualism' which presented a different representation of England to the Continent; instead of Church, King, Land and Loyalty, this was 'the England of chapel and counting-house, the factory and self-help'; it was also the source of the self-control and self-discipline so admired by foreigners like George Santayana (see above); Barker notes that, in addition, Puritanism presented the notion of 'spiritual solitude' (a state of being much prized by some eccentrics) whose virtues aided colonisation and but whose defects he describes as 'a lonely selfishness' at the expense of 'the just claims of society'. [8] He also discusses, at length, the Puritan work ethic. By contrast, he acknowledges the social influence of Wesleyanism and its ability to draw the classes together. However he regrets its intolerance of the older Puritanism. Finally, he doubts the future influence of the church as a whole and believes it will be transferred to the teacher. In this, of course, he is only partially correct and can have had little idea of the extent and scope that the media would attain in the second half of the century.

Barker is also particularly exercised by English language, literature, thought and education. The language is a mixture of the Teutonic and Latin - we might add others now like Sanskrit, computer language etc. - which affects our literature and, in turn, our way of life. He characterises this as 'an individualism of style, which corroborates a passion for individuality fostered in the national character by many other causes, [and] flows naturally from the rich supply of our vocabulary', its subtlety quite distinct from the 'nationalist regimentation' of Germany or the 'academic control' of France; he indicates too a tendency for 'the study and description of human character...in our literature' and that for other nations we are 'a people of "characters" [who]...readily cherish...those who are characters'. [9] He applies this to an education system which encourages teachers to develop their pupils' talents, teachers best

represented by those of 'distinctive personality and definite character', sometimes "characters" in themselves, and perhaps how we might imagine Sim and Rutherford - both teachers - in the classroom, who 'have sought to encourage...the growth of individuality', at its most extreme as manifest in eccentricity. [10]

Barker concludes his survey by noting the growth of the influence of internationalism on our character and he takes a generally benevolent view of empire which he believes needs to observe its responsibilities. With hindsight, and in the light of subsequent events, his rather idealistic faith in the League of Nations as a positive force in the development of national character now seems a little misplaced. Understandably, a 1941 collection of essays issued under the aegis of the British Council, is more overtly patriotic in tone. [11] The Earl of Derby's foreword stresses the British contribution to parliamentary government and the judiciary as well as education as a moulding force of the British character. He also notes the place of social services and sport in national life - topics not covered by Barker.

Barker does mention and represent the position of women in British society in passing, but the British Council book actually includes a chapter on 'The Englishwoman' (written by a woman, Cicely Hamilton). In her introduction she notes the propensity of the British nation as a whole to exude 'a power possessed by no other race to kindle both affection and annoyance' and she discusses women's lives in terms of politics, the family, employment, schools, professions, clubs and war work. [12] However her most interesting remarks are reserved for a section devoted to the unmarried woman, a status mainly due, she believes, to the uneven gender balance in the population. But her statement that old ideas about the unwed spinster (or archetypal 'old maid') as a figure of fun are a thing of the past is surely disproved by the fact that actresses like Margaret Rutherford were still portraying them so authentically on the screen in films like *Beauty and the Barge* (1937) (Mrs Baldwin) and *Spring Meeting* (1941) (Aunt Bijou). Of course one could concede that it is a moot point whether we laugh at or with these characters (or both at once).

Stanley Baldwin's corresponding chapter on 'The Englishman' records a mix of impressions which include a powerful individualism. Perhaps due to the pressures of wartime he is keen to resolve a somewhat contradictory portrait of a nation into something more

unified. He notes the importance (to him) of being an islander, of geography/environment, of what he calls 'the spiritual environment', the qualities of compromise, tolerance, conduct, duty, considerateness, freedom of speech, and a sense of humour. [13] He also talks of the need for co-operation (difficult for the individualistic Englishman) and friendliness (despite the Englishman's innate stubbornness). Jeffrey Richards places Baldwin politically at the opposite pole to George Orwell, and evident in much of Orwell's writing of the time is a greater sense of social injustice and unresolvable contradictions. [14] For instance, in his 1941 essay 'The Lion and the Unicorn', he draws attention to the ambivalent British attitude towards the Empire, which might well be at the root of national contradictions and even partially account for the growth of eccentricity in the 19th century; he also raises the question of 'two nations, the rich and the poor'. [15] Like other commentators of the day he freely interchanges the terms 'England' and 'Britain' while omitting to mention Wales or Scotland (let alone Northern Ireland). He also notes 'the privateness of English life' and seems glad that 'the liberty of the individual is still believed in...to have a home of your own...to choose your own amusements instead of having them chosen for you from above'. [16] Three years on, and Orwell, in his essay 'The English People', remains as outspoken but perhaps more conciliatory in the light of his experiences of the war. For example, he considers that by 1940 'it became clear that in Britain national solidarity is stronger than class antagonism' and yet 'nearly all the generalisations that are made about England base themselves on the property-owning class and ignore the other forty-five million'; and in a pre-multiculturalist society he notes that 'the chances of war brought to England...hundreds of thousands of foreigners...and forced them into intimate contact with ordinary people'. [17] Most significantly he continues to question whether it is possible to determine English character, or nations as individuals, and whether there is a continuity between the England of the past and the present.

J.B. Priestley offers a more utopian vision of England and the English delivered originally as a radio talk to boost morale at the darkest moments of the war. In *This Land of Ours* he rhapsodises about the wonder of the English spring and links it to the ongoing conflict as a symbol of what the country is fighting for. For him the countryside represents the nation's lifeblood, and he continues the rural analogy by depicting political, social and intellectual life in

Britain as a metaphorical tree. The English are 'an instinctive and intuitive people' but 'we often behave irrationally and so bewilder our friends just as we baffle our enemies'. [18] Priestley believes that our greatest gift to civilisation is liberalism, as evidenced in political and social life, literature and everyday living, and is 'produced by an odd mix of peoples living their own kind of life on a misty island...a people who have been allowed by circumstances - and also by their own passion for liberty - to develop in their own way'; his conclusion that 'ordinary English folk have an instinctive trust in the moral order of the universe, have a deep respect for all that is fundamentally personal to other people, and are moved by goodwill [which]...runs like a golden thread, glinting with humour and poetry, through the fabric of our history' seems excessively patriotic and sentimental in retrospect although it also emphasizes a certain consensuality which was to linger on for some time in the post-war era. [19]

To illustrate this lingering consensus a certain view of the 1950s is encapsulated in the revue *At the Drop of a Hat* by Michael Flanders and Donald Swann, captured live for Parlophone in 1957. [20] The two men emerge as very English and comfortable with it, their politeness and wit overriding a cosy, middle-class, pre-satirical view of the world. Thus they parody the consumer society (in *A Song of Reproduction* - about the delights of high-fidelity sound, and *Design for Living*, or "keeping up with the Joneses"), sing about the weather (*Song of the Weather*), food and war (*The Reluctant Cannibal*), the perils of drink (*Madeira, M'Dear?*) and songs about animals (the gnu and hippopotamus). When Flanders asks the audience to join in the final chorus of the latter there are still echoes of the community singing characteristic of wartime. As an encore the duo playfully mock the Lord Chamberlain's censorship regulations little imagining how these would be flouted and then disappear in the following decade. The show was hugely successful internationally, especially in Switzerland, Canada and the U.S.A., and led to a sequel, *At the Drop of Another Hat*, issued on record in 1964. [21] As Flanders is the first to acknowledge, it is evident that his own country has changed considerably. He notes the emergence of satire (a nod to *Beyond the Fringe* and *TW3*) whose purpose is 'to strip off the veneer of comforting illusion and cosy half-truth. And our job...is to put it back again!'. [22] Flanders and Swann obviously have no need or intention to compete with the celebrated satirists of their day and so we are offered the customary

parodies which at least seem to have a more international flavour than before. Thus there are musings on the consumer society (*Sounding Brass*), the rituals of bull fighting (*Los Olivados*), scientists (*First and Second Law*) and foreigners (*In the Desert* - sung in Russian, and *All Gall* - 'France and England, they don't mix'). Flanders also offers his thoughts on the wonders of air travel in the modern world (*By Air*). By contrast the most poignant moment of all is the genuinely touching *Slow Train* about the vanishing world of branch lines and small stations ('they've all passed out of our lives'); Flanders rightly calls it a serious song which is undoubtedly underpinned by the unnamed Doctor Beeching's controversial axing of much of British Rail. [23] There follows the defiant *Song of Patriotic Prejudice* about the need for England to have a national song. After all, reasons Flanders, the Scots, Welsh and Irish all have one, as do the Americans and Germans. The recurring refrain is 'The English, the English, the English are best!/ wouldn't give tuppence for all of the rest', as other nations are gently mocked. [24] The English, naturally, are just 'misunderstood'. Flanders talks of 'playing the game' which is meant affectionately but would probably be regarded as non-politically correct now. They conclude with the *Hippo* song, updated and still humorous, but perhaps rather old-fashioned in a 1964 of the Beatles and mods and rockers. Of course, in the context of this survey, it should be remembered that 1964 was also the period of Margaret Rutherford's greatest international success.

It is possible that at least some of the Flanders and Swann songs were inspired, subconsciously perhaps, by an anxiety at the crumbling of imperial power. They also seem to look forward to the post-Thatcherite, post-Empire insecurities of many commentators of the late 1990s who attempt to redefine Britishness. [25] Oddly, at least two studies of Britishness in the 1980s appear to be curiously unaware of multiculturalism. [26] However, the new Britain, often defined in terms that question Englishness, is one Sim and Rutherford would hardly recognise. For instance, Jeremy Paxman in 1999 talks of the end of Empire, the disintegration of the United Kingdom due to devolution, the possibility of European integration and the unstoppable momentum of international business aided by new technology (like the internet) and unrestricted by land borders. [27] He opens his preface: 'Being English used to be so easy. They were one of the most easily identified peoples on earth, recognized by their

language, their manners, their clothes and the fact that they drank tea by the bucketload'; he also mentions, in passing, 'stiff upper lips, sensible shoes or tweedy manner' (the very image of Rutherford's Miss Marple) as something amusing nowadays, and concludes that having finished his research he still finds the English 'elusive to the last'. [28]

At the height of her fame in the 1960s, Rutherford is anything but elusive. A reviewer for *Time* magazine thinks her 'so British that by comparison...even John Bull himself seems the son of a miscegenetic marriage. She is the fresh-air fiend in sensible shoes who parries with her nose and charges with her chin', a description which also incorporates her eccentricity. [29] The Rev. Malcolm Boyd enthuses about 'that indomitable face of British granite' and, clearly taken with her portrayal of Miss Marple, continues: 'I can see her in her English village kitchen. She is baking hot cookies for tea while ruminating about a murder'. [30] Elsewhere she is described as 'essentially English' and a 'British institution', the interchangeability of 'English' and 'British' apparently unproblematic to most writers attempting to seek her essence. Alastair Sim is similarly categorised as 'British' and 'Scottish', although his ambivalent relationship to Scotland and his own Scottishness changes over time. On the one hand he detests his father and the harshness of some of his early experiences and those in the business prepared to accept stereotypical Scottish roles; on the other he has a lifelong affection for Edinburgh, cemented by his appointment as Rector of the university in 1948, and is ultimately a proud Scot, finally accepting a Scottish role again - as The Laird in *Geordie* (1955) - after so many stereotyped representations in the 1930s and a complete avoidance of them in the 1940s, experimenting with a Czech professor, an Irish priest and an English doctor. Commenting on his performance in a now-forgotten play, *The Gusher* (1937), Naomi Sim remarks wearily: 'Alastair played yet another comic Scotsman...it seems that if you wanted a comic Scotsman you got Alastair Sim, but then why would you want a comic Scotsman?'. [31] When he was originally offered the role of Joseph Macroon in *Whisky Galore!* (1948) he 'turned it down with the tart comment that he "could never bear professional Scotsmen"'. [32] Jeffrey Richards has considered this dilemma for Scots depicted in British films. He accepts that character stereotypes and so-called 'tartanry' can have a limiting effect on Scottish actors who wish to tackle the realities of Scottish life but concludes that 'this view

takes no account of the popularity of the films. People evidently preferred myth to reality...They went because they loved the films, because a repertory of Scottish character actors...symbolised the nation for them and stars like...Alastair Sim represented the nation in British films'. [33]

I have already noted Sir Ernest Barker's discussion of Puritans who believe in 'spiritual solitude' as a virtue and its application to eccentrics who are often prone to solitude/isolation; and I have recorded his belief in an education system which encourages the growth of individuality, with eccentricity as its most extreme consequence. [34] However eccentricity is still much referenced in present-day discussions of Britishness/Englishness. Jeremy Paxman suggests religious differences between Catholicism and the Church of England as another origin of eccentricity in England in particular. [35] Andrew Marr believes that the BBC has done much to promote the image of an eccentric Britain in its comedy programmes (he mentions *The Goons* and *The League of Gentlemen*); one might add that many BBC (and ITV et al.) presenters (including Marr himself who has been the subject of impersonation on more than one occasion) have contributed to the impression of 'an island of eccentrics'. [36] As part of the *Think of England* series, broadcast in 2000, Damien Johnson wonders if Great British eccentrics still exist - and, upon investigation, he decides they do. [37] While John Baxendale, discussing J.B. Priestley in 2001, presents a rather negative image of 'marginal eccentrics' as representative of the decay of Old England. [38] Contributing to the *Straw Poll Debate, Englishness Has Had Its Day*, historian Christopher Lee believes there is now a sense that even to declare one's Englishness marks one out as eccentric; this view is rather corroborated by an e-mail contributor to the 'talkback' section of the same programme - Peter Mercer's definition of Englishness as 'humour, tolerance, resilience, adaptability, love of language and often an expertise that they like to keep to themselves' is both a neat encapsulation of several key aspects of Englishness and a suggestion of inherent eccentricity. [39] Among recent studies of Britishness only Andrew Marr's is alive to the importance of the British film industry, and despite his observations (above) about the influence of radio and television, he considers that 'because we tend to share films, talk about

them more afterwards and find their catchphrases, stars and issues recurring in our papers and broadcast material afterwards, it could be argued that film still matters as much. Films ripple, as television doesn't'. [40] Jeffrey Richards has noted how differently eccentricity is represented in British films, from the 'hidden strengths' of the British traveller abroad in *The Lady Vanishes* (1938) to its blossoming acceptance by a foreigner as 'benign and lovable' in *The Demi-Paradise*. [41]

A standard dictionary definition portrays the eccentric as 'out of the usual course: not conforming to common rules: odd', and eccentricity itself as 'singularity of conduct: oddness', also describing character parts as those 'portraying an unusual or eccentric personality type'; in addition, Roget's Thesaurus links eccentricity and character under the umbrella term of 'unconformity', and, of special significance for Margaret Rutherford in view of her buried family history, it also lists the adjective under 'insanity', 'madman', 'caprice' and 'imbecility. folly'. [42] John Stuart Mill strongly believes in eccentricity as a counterbalance to the tyranny of conformity and it is thus to be encouraged. In his essay *On Liberty* (sub-section, *Of Individuality*) of 1859 he declares that 'eccentricity has always abounded when and where strength of character has abounded; and the amount of eccentricity in a society has generally been proportional to the amount of genius, mental vigour and moral courage it contained. That so few now dare to be eccentric marks the chief danger of the time'. [43] In his preface to a 19th century book about English eccentrics, the author, Timbs, considers that although eccentrics may seem odd the characteristic is often to be found in persons of good character. He does acknowledge a darker side but thinks that in general terms it is better not to judge on first impressions. [44] George Santayana also suggests an English duality. He detects 'a mystical oddity' tainted by a Puritanism which 'rendered them acrid and fussy and eccentric and sad'; and yet he also paints the nation as a 'paradise of individuality, eccentricity, heresy, anomalies, hobbies and humours'. [45] Edith Sitwell, a renowned eccentric herself, often addressed the subject. Her 1933 work on English eccentrics is written in an appropriately eccentric style and language and makes a number of compelling and controversial observations. On one hand Sitwell views eccentricity as an 'antidote against melancholy' while asserting that it is especially prevalent in the English 'because of that peculiar and

satisfactory knowledge of infallibility that is the hallmark and birthright of the British nation', an indication perhaps of an imperial arrogance characteristic of a complacent upper class; she also characterises it as 'the Ordinary carried to a high degree of pictorial perfection', but is at the same time critical of those who might interpret the least contorted gesture as eccentricity. [46] In her posthumously published autobiography she aligns eccentricity to genius (as had Mill before her), now referring to it as 'aristocracy of the mind and of behaviour', utterly repudiating its common associations with madness and full of admiration for those 'entirely unafraid of and uninfluenced by the opinions and vagaries of the crowd'; she discusses the authors H.G. Wells and John Galsworthy as examples of 'super-ordinary eccentrics' and remains determined to defend herself as an indissoluble union of aristocrat and artist. [47] She does at least question whether eccentricity can be reduced simply to recurringly ordinary obsessions or a certain obstinacy in her temperament.

More than one commentator has noted a degree of eccentricity in the portrayal of detectives, something common to the work of both Sim and Rutherford. Cicely Hamilton believes that Edgar Allan Poe was the originator of a particular sort of detective who she typifies as 'men with unusual personalities and sometimes with queer habits or tastes', and is a character who continues to have a wide appeal amongst the reading public; her examples include Edgar Wallace's Mr Reeder, Margery Allingham's Albert Campion, Agatha Christie's Poirot, Anthony Weymouth's Inspector Treadgold and Dorothy L. Sayers' Lord Peter Wimsey, a list which includes a significant proportion of female authors even if she omits to mention probably the most familiar female sleuth in the form of Miss Marple. [48] Slavoj Žižek, in his introduction to Jacques Lacan as applied to popular culture, is keen to distinguish between the rise of the modern novel (of Christie and Sayers) in the 1920s and the older detective story (of Conan Doyle and G.K. Chesterton), and yet makes the point that both suffer from the same formal problem of 'the impossibility of telling a story in a linear, consistent way, of rendering the "realistic" continuity of events'; in other words, it is up to the detective to reconstruct a linear narrative version of events, even after the story is supposedly over once the audience is aware of the identity of the murderer. [49] Of course filmed detective novels and stories do not always conform to this pattern. For instance, Rutherford's Miss Marple frequently steals

the detective's thunder by usurping his explanation with one of her own, while Alastair Sim's Inspector Cockrill in *Green for Danger* (1946) subverts convention by rendering his solution suspect and fallible. Žižek also draws a distinction between the 'classical' and 'hard-boiled' detective whereby the former always maintains a certain distance from the events of the story while the latter becomes actively involved. He argues that it is not merely a question of associating the classical detective with intellect and the hard-boiled with physical involvement but rather their degree of engagement in the story. For him the classical detective 'maintains an eccentric position throughout;...excluded from the exchanges that take place among the group of suspects constituted by the corpse. It is precisely on the basis of this exteriority...that the homology between the detective and the analyst is founded'. [50] Žižek contrasts the classical detective who happily accepts payment for services rendered and the ethical cynicism of the hard-boiled type who will often disdain monetary reward. Interestingly Rutherford's Miss Marple is a kind of eccentric hybrid. She is rarely remunerated, nor is she sufficiently disengaged from the group of suspects as her nominally classical status might suggest, and although involved with them she is never tainted by events and remains above reproach. Her Miss Marple can be seen as an eccentric outsider (and is certainly often viewed in this way by some suspects), but is as often embraced by the group, if differently by its various members, be they a family, a drama group or a ship's company. Similarly, Alastair Sim's characterisations, especially in *Green for Danger* and *An Inspector Calls* (1954), continually challenge our perception of the classical detective by his 'flirting' with the group while never quite joining it, his eccentricity used as a device to fascinate and foil the suspects and the audience.

When Pierre Maillaud wrote his 1945 book *The English Way* he had lived in the country a mere fourteen years; he knew little English upon his arrival but this in no way impairs the perceptive analysis of another foreign observer. He views eccentricity as a transgressive social activity characterised by 'individuals who do not challenge the social order but choose to break away from conformity by singular pursuits and harmless oddities'. [51] He believes that eccentrics are on the decline due to the pressure to succumb to uniformity, but in 1945 could it perhaps be argued that they were not as plentiful because the effect of wartime

restraints had tamed their behaviour and their pursuits in the cause of greater social homogeneity? Possibly. However, what remains undeniable is the profusion of eccentrics, headed by Sim and Rutherford, filling British cinema screens at the time of writing. For Maillaud, eccentrics are 'the last knights of that moderate, innocuous anarchy without which civilized life soon becomes overpowering'; significantly, he feels English eccentrics (as opposed to others) are not dependent on financial advantage, and are therefore classless, and, lacking exhibitionism, can flourish without the need for an audience; echoing Sitwell, he places their 'sheer harmless individualism' at the opposite end to 'the communal bridge'; he goes on:

There is usually a distinct touch of the quixotic about him and his enterprises. The genuine eccentric does not attempt to defy society and its laws. He pays the unavoidable tribute to social order and then finds refuge and consolation in doing what the law and even the world permits, but in a way and according to rites of his own. There is nothing calculated in this. It springs from inspiration. The eccentrics were a great English asset...who ever heard of an eccentric Prussian? [52]

Earlier Maillaud acknowledges the possibility of foreign eccentrics (before denying it) and is also prone to refer to them as masculine only - he can surely not have been unaware of social and literary figures like Edith Sitwell or actors like Rutherford. Perhaps he is merely guilty of paternalist omission.

The consensual post-war atmosphere in *The Character of England*, edited by Sir Ernest Barker in 1947, is far more disposed towards celebrating eccentricity as something still very much alive. Richard Law stresses its importance as part of the country's prominent individualism, with eccentricity as 'natural to the Englishman' within the context of an Englishness that is as much about 'variety, as well as freedom'. [53] He references Maillaud and compares France, which thinks in terms of nation and family, and England, which believes in the interplay of society and the individual. He views English Literature (and by

extension films?) as a reflection of English individuality, variety and eccentricity, its individualism a preference against working as a team. Like Maillaud he also allows for a more classless eccentricity than the stereotype, of mainly upper class noblemen, might sometimes suggest, but also believes that it is necessarily qualified or mediated by the bounds of law and social acceptability. James Sutherland is also concerned with literature and notes that it is coloured by the 'strange intellectual and emotional isolation of the Englishman'. [54] One is reminded of the duality of Sim and Rutherford's representations of authors and academics of the post-war period in *Hue and Cry* (1947) (Felix H. Wilkinson) and *Passport to Pimlico* (1949) (Professor Hatton-Jones), as characters both interacting with the community and set apart from it. Sutherland presents a diverse list of authors as examples whose only point of contact is a heightened individuality, and for whom the dictum of the ancient Greeks, 'know thyself', might be rewritten as 'be thyself'. [55] Vita Sackville-West is alive to the contradictions inherent in eccentricity when she remarks that 'the English, in spite of being perhaps the most eccentric race on earth, entertain the greatest horror of eccentricity', while Rebecca West believes that it can amount to a degeneration of individuality especially when 'elevated into heroism' abroad. [56] Summing up, Sir Ernest Barker considers that eccentricity is a constant thread through the English character, but it is full of unexplained and inexplicable contradictions. He believes that these are usually noticed most by foreigners (like Santayana), although he advises against the profusion of too many eccentrics who might render the trait too commonplace. However their presence in literature as 'characters' or 'cranks' convinces him of the reality of eccentricity behind the rumour. He believes too that a self-sufficient individualism produces an assertive eccentricity which can emerge as egocentricity and concludes: 'it remains a puzzle to most of us that the country of 'good form' and plodding habit should also be counted a country of rebellion against conventions and canons'. [57]

By the 1950s Nancy Mitford senses it is time to bemoan the death of the eccentric aristocrat, while her friend Evelyn Waugh is resigned to accepting that eccentricity is now the province of psychology and is therefore, by implication, classless. [58] Their comments are responses to a study of linguistic class distinction by Professor Alan Ross of Birmingham

University whose 1954 article initiated a lively debate which became condensed and simplified into U (as in upper class, denoting correct, proper, legitimate) versus non-U (as in incorrect, not proper, not legitimate). Professor Ross's intention was not meant to be reproof or judgmental but merely a factual analysis. However many did not interpret his study in this way, hence the combative nature of the subsequent debate. But what remains interesting now is the book's subtext, which reveals the anxiety of an establishment in the face of an uncertain future, with decline of the aristocracy and the corresponding demise of the Empire, signalled particularly in 1956, the year of the book, by the Suez crisis. At the same time the working class were becoming more culturally visible (in films and Rock 'n Roll especially), articulate and socially aware. Several of the films in which Sim and Rutherford appear seem to reflect the impressions of Mitford and Waugh, like *Castle in the Air* (1952), with its impoverished aristocrat, and *The Green Man* (1956), whose principal character, Hawkins (Sim), is an assassin who wants to eliminate members of the establishment. However the use of comedy and the deployment of Sim and Rutherford's empathetic eccentrics serve to mediate the harsher aspects of each narrative.

After the seismic social shifts of the sixties where natural eccentricity had to compete with a fashionable, youthful hedonism, views of eccentricity in the 1970s tend to revert to more conventional stereotypes. For instance, J.B. Priestley, writing in 1973, reduces the characteristic to a male preserve which finds expression in the pursuit of hobbies and 'hobby-horses'. [59] At least he does not confine himself to the upper classes, although this is the impression given by the selection of personalities in Bridgeman and Drury's book of 1975, despite their assertion that the assembled characters derive 'from different ages and backgrounds'. [60] Of the fifteen eccentrics discussed over half are of aristocratic origin. There are no actors, and more surprisingly, in a book co-authored by two women, only four female eccentrics are included.

If the current anxiety and uncertainty about the nature of British identity seems likely to continue for some time, our much-discussed eccentricity is still celebrated less problematically. The traditional image of the British eccentric may be on the decline, as some argue, but the character trait is surely very much part of our national life in the 21st century,

even if some of its standard bearers are unexpected. A salient example is the boxer Chris Eubank, who as a black man brilliantly and bizarrely subverts the traditional white upper class eccentric by his appropriation of their speech, mannerisms, habits and dress. [61]

Returning to the connections between eccentricity and performance (see above, pp. 77-78), Elizabeth Burns records that the flouting of performance conventions can denote both 'deviance', and, at the other end of the scale, a more acceptable eccentricity. [62] Her remarks are made in the context of a study which demonstrates the subtle interweaving of theatrical convention and their echo in the reality of social life. She believes that in the 'modern' drama of Pinter and Orton the customary 'hero has made way for the ordinary or eccentric man'; her coupling not only recalls Sitwell's 'Ordinary in excelsis' (see above, p. 77) but also serves to remind one of a whole era of peculiarly British cinema which does not rely solely on the stereotypes of leading Hollywood players nor those from the Rank Charm School! I mean, of course, those peopled by eccentric leading actors like Sim and Rutherford. Co-incidentally, the recent NFT centenary tribute to Sim (in 2000) billed him as 'an ordinary man', a designation apparently at variance with his performances in both cinema and theatre. Burns also notes the importance and influence of Sigmund Freud, especially as reflected in writers like Henry James, Joseph Conrad and Thomas Hardy, who became 'more concerned with people in social groups and the ways in which they react to and against the conventions of the group, than with the 'great' or eccentric individual'. [63] However, despite the upheavals in English novels and poetry, Burns thinks the conventions of English drama were slower to change due to a strong theatrical tradition whose middle-class audiences were resistant to social and intellectual innovation, and therefore it was only after World War Two that new kinds of drama emerged. The result, for actors like Sim and Rutherford, was a prolonging and preservation of their eccentric status within the acting profession.

The difficulty for leftist critics is that not only are the depersonalisation techniques of someone like Bertolt Brecht little suited to the ebullient repertory-trained British actor, but the very presence of such eccentrics in a cast potentially undermines the collective experience of theatre and cinema. For commentators like John Hess (in his response to Truffaut's *politique des auteurs*) individuality - read eccentricity as a heightened form of individuality - is invalid as

it seeks to deny social and political concerns and reestablish older ideas of art outside/in opposition to society. [64] As heightened individuals, eccentrics are therefore particularly problematic. If they underplay their part or have a small role an audience feels cheated; if they overplay an audience is left unconvinced. In addition eccentrics tend to be represented as people outside so-called 'normal' life and are thus conceived by writers and directors as more fantastical figures, and are therefore potentially less believable.

Raymond Durgnat couples the British love of eccentrics with their sense of humour, and considers that they are typified in the cinema by Sim and Rutherford, whose characters are 'usually upper class in origin...and either of independent means or firmly ensconced in authority...[and] usually variations on old-fashioned father and aunt figures and the eccentricity isn't eccentricity at all, but the old upper-class way of speaking out boldly and rudely'. [65] For Rutherford, this is undeniably true of Lady Parke in *Missing Believed Married* (1937) or even Miss Whitchurch in *The Happiest Days of Your Life* (1950), but less so of Madame Arcati in *Blithe Spirit* (1945) or Nurse Cary in *Miranda* (1948). Alastair Sim may often caricature figures in authority like Mr McForrest in *Her Father's Daughter* (1941) and Wetherby Pond in *The Happiest Days of Your Life* (1950), but more often his portrayals like the assassin, Hawkins, in *The Green Man* (1956) or Hawtrey Murington, the film producer, in *Lady Godiva Rides Again* (1951), if still eccentric, are refreshingly ordinary at the same time.

Maurice Sellar also highlights the work of Sim and Rutherford as prominent British eccentrics. He draws attention to their elusiveness and (like others) links their eccentricities to genius. [66] He considers too that 'the creation of classic eccentrics owes more to the skill of observation than to any other attribute' and that as played by character actors like Sim and Rutherford they 'extend their performances way beyond the scope of their roles, adding an extra indefinable dimension to all that they do and say'; for British cinema they are 'a breed apart' who have 'an intangible unique quality that marks them out as 'different'...transcending the script, the camerawork or even the most inspired director'. [67]

The joy of Rutherford's particular brand of eccentricity is her seeming unawareness of it and the duality of her appearing to exist in her own world at the same time as she interacts with other actors, her best performances enlivened by the presence of other eccentrics, like

Sim and Joyce Grenfell in *The Happiest Days of Your Life* or Robert Morley in *Murder at the Gallop* (1963). More than one critic regrets her insignificance to the plot in many of her films despite the richness she brings to the narrative; and because of the imperative for her to be eccentric producers and casting agents often miss a pathos that lies behind her comic portraits. Her first biographer Eric Keown, discussing her stage Madame Arcati, thinks that 'most of her comic effects spring not from calculated distortion but from the eager warmth with which she embraces eccentricity'; and of her malicious aristocrat in Anouilh's *Ring Around the Moon* he considers her 'ability to sting may seem a surprising weapon but as she employs it, it is never ugly. It governs much of her best comedy, lending it astringency and holding the balance of eccentricity'. [68] In other words, she knew how to control a natural trait in order to enhance a performance, keeping it in check whenever necessary. Indeed, Rutherford herself talks of 'the eccentricity that I later developed into my own special technique'. [69] She also had the sense to realise that she was not an instinctive comedian, always playing her comedy seriously. However, at different times, she accepted and rejected the linking of her public eccentricity as the logical outcome of her private life. When questioned on the subject she was always remarkably candid. To Michael Dean, who asks about the 'myth' of her eccentricity, she replies: 'I don't mind being thought eccentric, because I like to be a person by myself, you know, with my own kind of ways - I mustn't say distinctive, but, a little bit odd, I don't mind being'. [70] And to her biographer Gwen Robyns, who asks her if she is eccentric, she responds: 'I hope I am an individual. I suppose an eccentric is a super individual. Perhaps an eccentric is just off-centre - ex centric. But that contradicts a belief of mine that we have got to be centrifugal - diversified', the final thought a clear indication that she is well aware of the dualities within her own nature. [71] She goes on to regret her typecasting, but concludes that 'there is more latitude in eccentrics. They are always honest [true to themselves?] and have their own quality of madness. In the final assessment I think they will be the Saints'. [72] With characteristic singularity she ends her autobiography not, as one might expect, with some lines by a friend like Walter de la Mare, but with lyrics by Paul Simon which conclude that 'flowers never bend with the rainfall', a sentiment underlined by a remark (apparently by the director John Boulting) that she represents the original flower child! [73]

To an early interviewer Alastair Sim considers he has had 'an odd sort of life', and a *Picturegoer* profile of 1950 talks of his 'mad-hatter' parts, both euphemisms, it might be safe to assume, for eccentricity. [74] Maurice Sellar is keen to stress the importance of Sim as a Scottish eccentric who proves 'conclusively that eccentricity in entertainers is not an English prerogative', while Caughie and Rockett note that he 'seldom disguises his Scottish accent: it is simply another feature which he draws on to colour, and perhaps explain, his eccentricity'. [75] In this he is well matched, especially in his stage work, by the strong element of fantasy to be found in the writing of friend and fellow Scot, James Bridie. Like Margaret Rutherford, Sim's mannerisms and behaviour are often compared to animals (Terence Pettigrew refers to him as 'at times like a turkey startled by bright sunlight'), and although less disposed to discussing himself and his art, particularly in his later years, his friends and those who worked with him have left some penetrating appraisals of the man and his essence. [76] Ian McKellen, who acted with Sim in the theatre, describes him as 'a tall man, [with a] shambling, strange face - not beautiful...He was eccentric. He was funny and at odds with the world'; he goes on to characterise him as

a solo star performer. The mark of his talent wasn't to work in a group. It was rather to work on his own, and although he was a star, he was extremely modest...if you wanted to categorise him - if he were categorising himself, perhaps he would recognise himself as being one of those great eccentrics who straddle time and just says "I am what I am, and, like it or not, here I am". [77]

McKellen believes Sim was 'utterly baffled by the world' and suspicious of those in authority, which is a reason why he often played figures of the establishment 'and showed them to be fools', suggesting perhaps that Sim's eccentricity was a necessary counterbalance to his intolerance of those in positions of power; McKellen concludes that 'the banner that he was waving was for freedom and for individuality and for greatness of human spirit and refusal to be constrained or bound down by greater forces'. [78]

Like his other great eccentric colleague, Margaret Rutherford, there is a sense of inevitability that Sim's performances are accommodated most successfully in the company of other eccentric actors and situations. In a roughly chronological overview of their work I hope to illustrate the different levels of eccentricity which are displayed by both actors within the context of the Britishness of the films (and some television programmes) in which they appear.

Margaret Rutherford's early films of 1936-7 are hardly representative of her acting style, and although she is asked to portray a range of characters one senses a certain awkwardness before the cameras which barely reveals the quirkiness and heightened individuality of what we know of her stage performances. Some characters are too insubstantial to make much of an impression, like her nanny in *Big Fella* (1937), or the housekeeper in *Talk of the Devil* (1936); in others her natural exuberance is inhibited by the claustrophobic studio sets, and there are roles, like Maggie Carberry in *Catch as Catch Can* (1937), which, although interesting, find her, if not miscast, then slightly ill at ease. If her Mrs Baldwin in *Beauty in the Barge* (1937) is more familiar territory, it is blemished by an unconvincing Cockney accent. However the film's Britishness makes it of more than incidental interest. The film's publicity uses the terms 'English' and 'British' interchangeably, as do some commentators (see above, p. 67), calling the humour 'essentially English' whilst enthusing about 'the delightful British landscapes and riverside backgrounds', proof, perhaps, in the era of the 'quota quickie' that location shooting was not the norm; one headline actually declares that the film is 'co-starring England' and there is a noticeable emphasis on Englishness for those abroad (in the dominions) who are perhaps nostalgic for home; thus 'the picture has had the advantage of being able to secure pictures of England as those exiles, away in far flung outposts of Empire like to imagine it', hence the profusion of 'quaint little fishing villages' and 'lovely little country inns and cottages'; more knowingly, and as if aware of the creation of artifice on the screen, the description continues: 'We, living in England, know it better as a damp, drizzly land of arterial roads and ugly bungalows', although the director has chosen to depict 'the summery England we all like to dream about'. [79] Beside the scenery

the performances are almost of secondary importance, although it is interesting that the film is sold on Gordon Harker's major character part rather than the inexperienced romantic leads, something less likely in the general run of Hollywood movies of the time. (Wallace Beery is probably Harker's closest American counterpart.) Rutherford at least sneaks into the publicity pictures and makes enough of her part to be noticed by reviewers. However, the farcical dialogue and magnificently outsized characterisation of her Lady Parke in *Missing Believed Married* (1937) probably suits her better, even if the script is marred by racist overtones. For instance, she calls the Italian Emilio (Emilio Cargher) with whom her granddaughter, Hermione (Hazel Terry), is planning to elope, 'that foreigner'. She also opines to Mavis (Sheila Young), a concerned friend of Hermione's, who tries to speak Italian: 'No decent English woman should ever attempt a foreign accent!'. And to her apologetic solicitor Mr Horton (Charles Paton) she commands: 'Don't shrug...it's very unEnglish'. Or is this merely a parody of aristocratic superiority born of a culture of British colonialism which is very sure of itself?

By contrast, Alastair Sim's films of the 1930s, by their sheer number alone (24), allow him to explore a wider range of characterisations. His Sergeant Mackay in *Riverside Murder* (1935) (his first film) mixes a wicked sense of humour with a certain underlying menace. The edge in his voice and pugnacious expression present his eccentricities credibly in the context of the witty dialogue he is allowed. He is undeniably the eccentric outsider, especially as he is so often shown as a commentator on the action rather than a participator in it, and however much he attempts to integrate with his fellow actors he remains distinctive, towering physically over his boss, the inspector (Basil Sydney), his unlikely detective setting him apart. Significant too is the fact of his persuading the studio to change the original Cockney character into a Scot with a broad accent. At this stage in his career he was happy to play the part for laughs even when his defining Scottishness is mocked, when, at one point, an inquisitive female reporter (Judy Gunn) is handcuffed to the bannisters. He laughs at her predicament and she responds with the most wounding remark she can conjure: 'You haggis!'. In the next two films Sim's eccentricities of speech and behaviour already see him pitted against others of similar ilk, thus in *A Fire Has Been Arranged* (1935) he shares many scenes with the clowning of Flanagan and Allen, and in *The Private Secretary* (1935) he has a

delightful if brief moment in the company of his first eccentric woman, Miss Ashford (Sydney Fairbrother), a representation of the archetypally dotty maiden aunt. Of the latter production *Film Weekly* describes Sim as 'the only "odd man"' of the cast who is 'engagingly ghoulish as a sanctimonious and shady medium'. [80] Both films also show him as unproblematically English for the first time, although the two that follow, *Late Extra* (1935) and *Troubled Waters* (1936), begin to typecast him as Scottish even down to his name, which is, rather predictably, 'Mac'. Much better is Sim's stern minister Angus Graham in *Wedding Group* (1936), a film partly set in a Scottish village and directed with period realism by fellow Scots, Campbell Gullan and Alex Bryce, although the reviewer for *The Monthly Film Bulletin* takes exception to 'an element of caricature in the portrayal of a service in the kirk'. [81] Alex Bryce also directs Sim in *The Big Noise* (1936) which prematurely promotes him to star status and marks a temporary reversion to English roles and a sequence of curiously unfocussed films. Without adequate scripting or direction, Sim's response, although invariably entertaining, is often to mug for the camera, overexaggerating the characterisation, his familiar mannerisms almost taking on a life of their own. In *The Big Noise* and *The Mysterious Mr Davis* (1936) the boundaries between mere eccentricity and overacting are continually breached. In the latter he is cast as 'The Lunatic' (nominally Theodore G. Wilcox), an insane ex-city banker, a role which was casually inserted into the film at the last minute. It marks his most eccentric portrayal so far and appears to offer him an almost free hand resulting in the use of a whole battery of devices to create an utterly singular and unsettling character. With his hair standing up on either side of his bald pate he laughs his crazy laugh and when asked who he is declares, with an exaggerated grin and staring eyes: 'Don't look now, but I am Davis!'. The most bizarre moment of all occurs when he disrupts a business meeting by bursting through a frieze depicting a Greek god, a large plaster on his forehead and smiling manically; he also carries a small bomb and demands a million pounds. Unsurprisingly the meeting dissolves into uproar! His overemphasis may also arise from a lack of confidence in the material, but he would soon realise that his best course as an actor was to steer between a role like the devious Drayton in *Keep Your Seats Please* (1936) who is easily integrated into the fabric of the narrative and parts like 'The Lunatic' which are so outlandish that they claim all the film's

interest without any real justification. Accordingly his next role as the Interpreter in *The Man in the Mirror* (1936) complements Edward Everett Horton's star performance, providing a diversion from the main focus of attention - Horton's divided and competing selves - by exhibiting two characterisations of his own. The more absurd of the two is his fraudulent interpreter with his fake gobbledygook, darkened skin, moustache and turban. However when he is allowed to drop the pretence and return to his more familiar screen persona his natural eccentricity is revealed more tellingly.

Gangway (1937) is the first of three films in which Sim appears with Jessie Matthews; the others are *Sailing Along* (1938) and *Climbing High* (1939). Sim's roles as an undercover detective, a painter of abstracts and a Communist (respectively) function in relation to the star in much the same fashion as do Edward Everett Horton and Eric Blore's parts in the Astaire/Rogers musicals, that is as welcome comic relief. Sim has scope for eccentric flights of fancy which are entirely believable within the framework of each breathless narrative. However, even if the characters are well-conceived, they do not always emerge as relevant or necessary to the scenario. Additionally, Sim's performances are not enhanced by the films' aping of Hollywood models and other American stereotypes. For instance, in *Gangway*, *Variety* is critical of the 'gangster stuff as interpreted by British minds [which] will get some offbeat laughs in the U.S.. Effort to imitate the American idiom of handling such matter shoots far too wide'; similarly, the wisecracking dialogue of *Sailing Along* feels unidiomatic in a British film, while, as Robert Moss observes, *Climbing High* is 'a screwball comedy that was obviously prepared from American recipes' and has a script which 'scoops up a number of devices from the screwball genre and inserts them into English settings'. [82]

In *The Squeaker* (1937) Sim plays a Scottish reporter, and has the chance to refine an already successful stage performance. He is a distinct bonus, particularly in a more serious-minded narrative. And yet here he is portraying another 'comic Scotsman' (see above, p. 74) with more to come in the 'This Man' and Inspector Hornleigh series. *The Monthly Film Bulletin's* critic refers to him as a 'Scotch' (!) reporter while another commentary talks of the inclusion of 'some gormless English humour' within a 'standard thirties British' production. [83] To add to the cross-cultural confusion, co-star Tamara Desni is critiqued by *Variety* for

alternating between 'good English and some sort of a broken continental accent', to say nothing of William Howard, a Hollywood director 'imported to polish up the British screen, [who] seems to have had a bad time without his old technical crew'. [84] One could argue that perhaps Sim might have been more discriminating in the choice of parts he accepted, especially as he was now in such demand, although it seems that his hectic work rate was dictated more by the pressures of earning a living.

By contrast, *The Terror* (1938) is noticeably directed, by Richard Bird, a stage and screen actor, with a flair and sophistication unusual for the period, and certain touches raise the film to a new level in British cinema, reflecting a growing technical and intellectual confidence in the medium. In passing, there is an impressive use of montage centring the film in its own time, a freedom of camera movement and an intelligent varying of shot selection. Like *The Man in the Mirror*, Sim portrays two roles, Soapy Marks, a member of a criminal gang, and the Reverend Ernest Partridge (in disguise). Again, purely in terms of performance, his moody criminal is the more convincing in his natural and eccentric changes of pace than the fake gentility of his fawning priest.

Alf's Button Afloat (1938) is yet another Depression-era wish-fulfilment fantasy, a very British farce, frantic and surreal, although interestingly *The Motion Picture Herald* comments that 'when it comes to crazy comedy Britain can go one crazier than its American contemporaries. Better team work and more hilarious clowning have not been seen in a British comedy'. [85] And despite the fact of Sim 'playing with the most eccentric bunch of comedians ever brought together in Britain' his own inherent eccentricities outshine the overplayed music-hall routines of the six-strong Crazy Gang. [86] The very fact that Sim's scenes as the Genie often had to be shot apart from the other actors, for technical reasons, additionally creates a certain artificial distance from them which only emphasizes Sim's subtler display of quirky speech and behaviour.

The 'This Man' films, which include *This Man is News* (1938), *This Man in Paris* (1939) and the related *Law and Disorder* (1940), unlike the Jessie Matthews films (above), prove that aping the Hollywood model - here the 'Thin Man' films of William Powell and Myrna Loy - can sometimes work to advantage. Rachael Low calls the first entry in the series 'a byword

for what a British film should be', and others have described it as, variously, 'an English 'Thin Man'', 'typically British', and possessing 'a snap and sparkle regrettably rare in British films'. [87] Aubrey Flanagan, for *The Motion Picture Herald*, considers that it 'exchanges the crispness of American wisecrack for the more facetious and less subtle English wit' and that 'its extra British appeal may be limited by the derivative nature of the material'. [88] He seems most impressed that the production is made for \$75,000 rather than the \$200,000 he expected. However most critics are fulsome in their praise of Sim's Scottish journalist Lochlan McGregor (once again, 'Mac'). *Film Weekly* talks of 'another of his unctuous Scots characterisations' and notes also that 'Scots played a big part in the production of this picture', referring to two of the three writers (MacDougall and Mackinnon) and the director David MacDonald. [89] The second film in the series relocates the main characters to Paris, and again Sim's Scottish editor is a highlight, although the caricature of the Scot in Paris is a little overdone, exemplified by the plaque adorning Mac's lodgings that reads: 'Pension Ecossois (The Wee Scots Hoose), Specialites de la maison - Le Porridge, L'Haggis. Prop. Mdme. Collette MacKintosh', a shot which is underlined on the soundtrack by bagpipe music. The third film adopts the same comedy-thriller formula and transfers the action to the legal world where Sim's 'Scottish' humour is found both 'lugubrious' and 'canny'. [90] For Sim the major gain in all three films is that for once his eccentric behaviour is not side-lined but allowed to be centre-stage and share equal importance with the romantic leads. By the second film there is a distinct sense that his eccentricity is almost carrying the film and yet he remains very much part of the team at the same time.

In the Inspector Hornleigh films, which comprise *Inspector Hornleigh* (1939), *Inspector Hornleigh on Holiday* (1939) and *Inspector Hornleigh Goes To It* (1941), it is debatable whether Sim's blundering Scottish Sergeant Bingham, who is prone to turn up in all kinds of unlikely situations, reveals his eccentricity as naturally in plots which seem imposed upon him rather than evolving as the logical outcome of his character. One is also struck by the much more British/English feel of these films compared to the 'This Man' series, a quality which on occasion works against them, reducing their international appeal, not least because of the free use of accents and dialects, including the Cockney of Gordon Harker's inspector and the

Scottish repartee of Sim's sergeant. In an appraisal, Graham Greene applauds 'good English cinema' whose films 'have lost their tasteless semitic opulence and are becoming English'. [91] For all his praise he fails to identify the less than flattering image of Scottishness continually imposed on Sim by what the film's pressbook describes as 'Gordon Harker's superior scornful wit'. [92] Harker refers to Sim's character as descending from a 'savage race', his chief superintendent warns him of putting his trust in 'a simple Scot', and while Sim and Harker are in the company of the Greek Kavanos (Steve Geray) Harker deliberately undermines his colleague with: 'He's a foreigner, sir, like you!'. The third in the series is notably more topical as the pair join the army in their search for a fifth columnist, and it is significant that Hornleigh's jibes about Bingham's Scottish identity have all but disappeared, the fact of war producing a certain consensualising effect on their relationship.

Quiet Wedding (1940) and *Spring Meeting* (1941), in which Margaret Rutherford appears, are perhaps rather unlikely films to emerge at a time of war and at the height of the worst of the bombing, and yet both were welcomed by audiences and critics as inescapably British distractions. Reactions on both sides of the Atlantic reflect this impression. Aubrey Flanagan of *The Motion Picture Herald* calls *Quiet Wedding* 'first class escapism from the sombre mood of the times' and 'a witty infectious example of the English laughing at themselves'; he concludes that 'the film will be an immense success in war-time Britain. Elsewhere it will be relished as are few of its local contemporaries'. [93] *The Times* finds the film 'blessedly and triumphantly English', while Louis MacNeice writing in *The Spectator* thinks it 'a very English and very refreshing phenomenon...it has a lightness, a deftness and celerity which most British peacetime films have notoriously lacked; it also has nothing whatsoever to do with war', and 'this blend of nostalgia and burlesque is just what people want for their escape-entertainment. And why shouldn't we have some escape-entertainment?' [94] William Whitebait in *The New Statesman* considers the film 'delightedly and authentically English' and that it has 'what nearly all English films lack, a style as well as a material of its own'; *Kine Weekly* praises the film's opening 'typically and refreshingly English cricket scene' and the later 'local court scene which brilliantly describes the ingratiating and truly native stupidity of the bench'. [95] Rutherford may appear 21st on the rolling credits but she contributes

memorably to the court scenes whether conferring with the befuddled older magistrate or delivering her judgment. *Spring Meeting* may be set in Ireland, but this does not prevent it being categorised at the time as 'typically British light entertainment' and 'an agreeable antidote to the current grimness of living'. [96] Rutherford's eccentric Aunt Bijou, dressed in a black hat with a white flower, a feather boa over dowdy apparel and carrying a bottle, who likes to bet on the horses, is singled out for special commendation. This most English of actresses copes well with the brogue, having already played the part on the stage, and contributes to what *Kine Weekly* describes as 'the happy, ingratiating eccentricities of the Irish temperament'. [97]

By the time of *Yellow Canary* (1943) one is more aware of a film specifically geared to the war effort. The opening scenes could hardly be more patriotic, as symbols of Britishness are invoked, including the chimes of Big Ben, A.R.P. wardens quoting Shakespeare and a comedian delivering humourous verse during an air raid, an example of the so-called bull-dog spirit. Rutherford, pictured first at the Liverpool docks and then on board ship, is not portrayed against the more archetypally British backdrops with which she would later be associated, but from the outset complains and jokes in equal British measure, her natural effervescence under control in a relatively small role. However, in the subsequent *The Demi-Paradise* (1943) she is first depicted as an English eccentric in the context of a dissection of Englishness which the narrative invites. Her invigorating eccentricity, here unusually prominent, seems to emanate naturally from her as an essential aspect of her Britishness. Indeed this is emphasized by a publicity still of the time which shows Rutherford in the company of a bull-dog, a literal and figurative encapsulation of the bull-dog spirit - at once very British and very eccentric. Ivan's (Laurence Olivier) final speech, as a Soviet engineer visiting Britain during wartime, attempts to define British national identity, which emerges with a favourable view of eccentricity as one of its most salient aspects. How indeed could he fail to respond to Rutherford's pageant, Joyce Grenfell and the real life appearance of cellist Beatrice Harrison playing outside to the birds during a raid? Gavin Lambert is less convinced by 'some rather obvious contrivance and exaggeration' in a film which hovers 'between satire and caricature', although Rutherford's inherent singularity is surely more believable than the rather studied

humour of Leslie Henson (a sort of British Victor Borge). [98] On his second visit to the country Ivan affects enjoyment of Henson's burlesquing of Rachmaninov but the appeal of the act remains baffling to him. Other critics are less enamoured of Asquith's view of Englishness. Lambert notes that the script was written by a Russian (Anatole de Grunwald) and wonders if 'this accounts for a certain 'over-English' quality in its view of England and the English, like an outsider trying too hard to domicile himself'; Aldgate and Richards see the film as projecting 'the traditional image of the nation as a class-bound, hierarchically structured society'. [99]

English Without Tears (1944), directed by Harold French, in which Rutherford portrays aristocrat Lady Christobel Beauclerk, is another examination of the English by comparison with those from the continent of Europe, and is described by one critic as 'caricaturing with tolerant incisiveness the classes of English people who used to impress or exasperate most foreigners and amuse or exasperate their fellow countrymen'. [100] The war may contrast the English as 'diffident, friendly, calm [and] conceited' but at least Rutherford's eccentric character shifts her pre-war concern for migratory birds to the needs of allied refugees by opening up her home to them. Her key scene is a hilariously misunderstood speech at the League of Nations which allows the director to use Rutherford's forceful interpretation of the character as a way of parodying an institution in which the world has lost faith. [101]

Sim's first two films of the war are Ministry of Information shorts to encourage the conservation of fuel, and to persuade women to train as engineers. *Nero* (1940) features the odd juxtaposition of a fictional encounter between Nero (Sim) and a schoolboy (George Cole), and the factual reference to the emperor's wasteful burning of Rome - a metaphor for the wartime need to save resources. In *Her Father's Daughter* (1941) fictional and documentary elements are successfully blended to meet the needs of Britain at war, and especially those factories short of labour. Sim plays a blinkered Scottish managing director who opposes the employment of women in his factory. Apart from the final Inspector Hornleigh film, it marks the last Scot he would play in the cinema until the mid-1950s, even if in his mostly English roles he never quite loses the vocal inflection of his native Edinburgh. In the previous film, as Philip Kemp has written, Sim 'hams outrageously' and probably for the last time on celluloid. [102]

The brevity of his performance makes it hard to determine if his overplaying amounts to eccentricity or overacting, or could his overemphasis be deliberate in the context of a propagandist Ministry of Information short? Sim, as Mr McForrest, has more scope in *Her Father's Daughter* but his exaggerated opposition to using women in his factory is so vehemently dogmatic that, despite an impressive display of moods, gestures and facial expressions, it remains difficult to glimpse his natural eccentricity behind this larger than life caricature.

In *Cottage To Let* (1941) Sim's Charles Dimble is revealed to be a British agent. The story is set in Scotland, but William Whitebait considers that this 'doesn't affect the genuineness of [Asquith's] Englishry'; indeed, it is a production that 'could have been made only in English studios'. [103] For Geoff Brown this is a difficulty as 'the film makes no great effort to create a convincing Scottish setting'; he is also critical of a plot that 'lurches crazily from eccentric character comedy to wartime dering-do and Hitchcockian suspense'. [104] If Sim's performance seems more muted than usual it might be due to a new concentration on playing his roles as real people rather than caricatures. If he underplays here he is at least more credible as a character and seems comfortable in the presence of other eccentrics like the delightfully dithery Jeanne de Casalis.

Let the People Sing (1942) also finds Sim cast with other eccentrics, and if he allowed the young George Cole to steal his thunder in *Cottage To Let* then he is clearly upstaged here by Fred Emney's drunken nobleman. He is also rather too evidently J.B. Priestley's mouthpiece, and his make-up (including a prosthetic beard), dubious Czech accent and sermonising mask any hint of his intrinsic eccentricity. His final speech about the British character and the need for the community to act is well meant but sabotaged by its preachy tone, emphasized by its delivery in a courtroom (substituting for a church) and made ineffectual by director John Baxter's unflattering use of the close-up. How different is Olivier's consensual equivalent in *The Demi-Paradise* which works so well as a climactic moment of that film's narrative.

Made in 1944, with victory already in sight, *Waterloo Road* (1944) looks back to the worst period of the 1940/41 air raids and life on the Home Front. Richard Winnington considers it 'on the edge of being first rate, there are in it the unmistakable roots of the British movie'; *The*

New Statesman's critic thinks its chief merits '(unknown until recently to English films) are speed and local colour', although Philip Taylor believes the film's authenticity and 'sense of place' are undermined by 'some traditional British film-making faults'. [105] Surprisingly, for a story mostly concerned with working class culture, *Variety* comments that the 'picture is a striking example of how sound an English production can be if it keeps to the medium it interprets best, that of the middle-class character'. [106] By this they mean Sim's Doctor Montgomery who is of peripheral importance to the plot, and whose characterisation is perhaps not a total success in the context of the whole film especially if it distracts from the main story between Jim (John Mills), Tillie (Joy Shelton) and Ted (Stewart Granger). Indeed critics are irritated by his 'philosophical musings', his impact reduced by 'having some serious points made too forcibly'. [107] Robin Cross regards him more benevolently as 'an eccentric *deus ex machina*' and representative of 'the radical middle class', while director Sidney Gilliat later felt Sim was wrong for the part because he was 'a born eccentric as an actor, and this didn't fit'. [108] And yet it can be argued that Sim (again) appears rather understated in his few appearances, his more controlled tone suggesting he is well cast and does not undermine the thrust of the main narrative. His paternalist soliloquies about 'the little people' verge on the patronising, although his final speech, complete with gurgling infant, is redeemed by its forward-looking vision of a brighter post-war future.

In *The Demi-Paradise* and *English Without Tears*, Rutherford's eccentricity is always modified and directed towards the greater good, her characters consensually integrated into the community. In *Blithe Spirit* (1945) she remains the outsider, an atypical spinster who lives alone and who is freely mocked by the other main characters on whom she has the last laugh. Although shot during the war and openly laughing in the face of death, spiritualism and the afterlife, the film is unconnected to the conflict (as Noel Coward had intended when he wrote the original stage play) and presents a cultivated fantasy. Whether it looks ahead unaffected by the experience of the war or backwards to pre-war days remains a point of debate. *The Times'* critic believes that 'the wit of the lines..., in form and spirit, belong to the despised and demodé thirties', while a more recent assessment by Neil Sinyard links the film to the golden period of postwar Ealing cinema with which it shares 'a certain continuity of

tone and spirit' and 'a preference for realism, middle-class values, and a desire to project an image of the British character'. [109]

In *Green for Danger* (1946), Alastair Sim's eccentricity is brilliantly used by director Sidney Gilliat. The actor's flippant fallibility overturns detective clichés and his Inspector Cockrill is allowed to lampoon the posturings of other authority figures (in the medical profession, for instance). His nonconformity exhibits a mischievousness which clearly delighted a nation weary of wartime restrictions and privations. Like Rutherford's Madame Arcati, his eccentric detective is uncontested by any other eccentrics in the cast and is permitted full rein among the more stock characters who are the focus of his murder investigations. Also, the very English country setting (a hospital converted from an Elizabethan manor) seems more fertile ground for Sim's behaviour than any cityscape. Particularly notable are the many night scenes which give the film a kind of English *noir* quality. Significantly when Sim's detective first appears at the hospital it is in bright sunshine, as if he has literally arrived to bring illumination. Although the film is still set in wartime, with an all too real Home Front background, it was made secure in the knowledge that in 1946 the daily reality of the war was over at last. In the many positive reviews of the film one senses a post-war optimism for a new era in British cinema. This is most evidently celebrated by the critical acclaim and popular success of the Ealing comedies. In *Hue and Cry* (1947) and *Passport to Pimlico* (1949) it is as much the vivid post-war bomb-site locations as the richness of the character acting that draw the attention. The sense of place in both films offers a topicality and reminds the audience of what they have endured, and yet it is the community spirit of the characters that carries each narrative to its consensual conclusion. Charles Barr believes that *Hue and Cry* 'offered a relief from various solemnities bound up with the experience of war', indeed, reviews of the time reflect this as well as exhibiting a huge national pride. [110] *The Monthly Film Bulletin* considers that 'there's life, humour, youth and gaiety and it is English to the backbone', and Helen Fletcher in *The Sunday Graphic* is 'glad that it is British'. [111] Sim's eccentric is employed by the narrative to release the adventure (as is Rutherford's professor in *Passport to Pimlico*), although he has been criticised for overacting which in itself begs the question of whether it is possible for a natural eccentric to underact. The scriptwriter T.E.B.

Clarke, however, warmed to Sim's 'magnificent overplaying a timid writer of boys stories who loathed and feared his readers', while Harry Fowler, who plays young Joe Kirby, has spoken of the contrast between the actor's 'underlying sinister quality' and being 'a kind, lovely man' on the set, an indication perhaps that Sim's duality is a mark of his successful eccentric representation, impressive in only three short scenes. [112] In *Passport to Pimlico* it is T.E.B. Clarke's British humour that earns the most critical approval. Caroline Lejeune responds to his 'mellow native wit...[and] the belief that Britain is a huge secret joke for Britons. "We're English", cries a resident of Pimlico, "and it's just because we're English that we're sticking up for our right to be Burgundians". [113] In this context Rutherford's eccentricities, like her glockenspiel watch, or her asking the Duke of Burgundy's ancestor: "Are you a bleeder?", a reference to his family's inherited haemophilia, don't seem so out of place. In fact her status as an outsider is denied as she is integrated into the community. Her professor, whose interpretation of an ancient document seems to offer the possibility for the fulfillment of everyone's dreams, is the key to the release from rationing and regulations, and with communal inclusivity her very British and eccentric free spirit is warmly absorbed and accommodated.

However, other films of the period in which Sim and Rutherford appear are less successful. *Meet Me at Dawn* (1946) is an example of what happens when the British industry strays from what it knows best. With an American director and star wrestling with a lumpen translation of a French play in a narrative which fundamentally misunderstands the essence and timing of British humour, even the sparkling moments when Rutherford and Stanley Holloway occupy the screen cannot save the film. On the face of it *Miranda* (1948) is another fantasy, rather like *Blithe Spirit*. It may be less dark and lack the subtlety and sophistication of Noel Coward's inspiration, but it has similar potential. Certainly Rutherford thinks so when she links it to *Passport to Pimlico* as 'important in the story of the British film industry because they [the films] put us right on top in a new type of high quality comedy film...not merely poor imitations of Hollywood but had a stamp of 'Made in Britain' on them'. [114] Unfortunately, although *Miranda* was made first, at least one American reviewer notes its similarity to *Mr Peabody and the Mermaid* (Irving Pichel, 1948) which had already been

screened in the U.S.A., and thus the original did look like a Hollywood imitation. Some retrospective reactions to the film have also been less than complimentary. David Shipman calls it 'a quite dreadful comedy carried to success in Britain on the tide of euphoria washing over native films at the time', which is a pity as it negates one of Rutherford's most delightful characterisations, Nurse Cary, the only person eccentric enough to care for Glynis Johns' alluring mermaid. [115] The film is important too as it marks a rare occasion when the fact of Rutherford's eccentricity is actually addressed in the dialogue, her character remarking self-reflexively: 'I'm supposed to be eccentric, isn't that the word?'

The Irish setting for *Captain Boycott* (1947) may convince, in this story of tenant farmers rebelling against their oppressive English landlords, but Sim's performance as Father McKeogh does not, and if neither his accent, looks nor humour ring true, then a faltering characterisation is saved alone by his eccentricity, or as Caroline Lejeune writes, 'a very engaging exhibition of Simmery and mummery'. [116]

In *The Happiest Days of Your Life* (1950) Sim is even described as 'Simian' by one critic, surely the ultimate compliment and a clear acknowledgement of his total individuality and uniqueness. [117] His eccentricities of speech and behaviour are matched by Rutherford who has commented that 'the plot appealed to English audiences who see themselves as rugged individualists and to the world at large who like to think of us as endearing eccentrics'; Marcia Landy observes that the

choice of actors provides the proper distance and distortion necessary for satiric commentary...[they] are responsible for making the familiar world strange through their distinct character types. The eccentricity of their characters is heightened by the contrast between the familiar situations in which they are placed and their own idiosyncratic behaviour...their eccentricity is only a vehicle for exposing behaviour that is, after all, not so uncommon. [118]

It remains a point of debate whether Sim and Rutherford use their eccentricity self-

consciously, and overact in the process, or is it merely a valid response to the dreariness and tedium of ordinary life. However the film remains quintessentially English/British, a certain Ealingesque consensuality spilling over into the narrative where the mutual difficulties of two schools forced to co-exist in the same premises evolve into co-operation. Despite the doubts of some U.S. critics, this typically English farce performed well in American art houses, proving perhaps that the film had international appeal as well. It comes at an interesting turning point in British cinema in that it looks back to the war with its references to rationing and shortages, and yet also looks forward to a new era whose changes are embraced by the pupils but not the staff and especially the two principals (played by Sim and Rutherford) who take refuge in the nostalgia of Empire. Although Sim plays English again it can be no accident that the scriptwriters acknowledge his Scottish roots, at the height of the battle of the sexes with Rutherford, when they (through him) invoke John Knox's infamous dictum: 'The first blast of the trumpet against the monstrous regiment of women'. Most importantly the film is a triumphant affirmation of the eccentric actor's authority and ability to carry an entire narrative. In this respect it sets the tone for many subsequent fifties comedies, especially the St. Trinian's films. However while Sim enjoyed a golden period of stardom in the cinema, up to and including *The Green Man* (1956), dominating the scenarios of most of the films in which he appears (despite the varying scope of his roles), Rutherford, although never less than entertaining, struggled to find her rightful niche in cinema which consistently undervalues her contribution. One revealing facet of Sim's work in this period is his sense of reawakened interest in his own Scottishness. At first this is restricted to a television production of *Mr Gillie* in 1950, and hinted at in the setting of *Folly To Be Wise* (1952), an army barracks near a Scottish university town. It finds more concrete expression in *Geordie* (1955), with Sim comfortably cast as the Laird, even if one could argue that the film remains a very English and rather stereotypical view of Scotland. At the same time Sim was slated to do a commentary for a short film about the Edinburgh Festival, which he probably had to decline due to theatre commitments, and also participated in *This is Scotland* (31/8/57) which celebrated the opening of Scottish Television. Apart from a couple more television adaptations of *Bridie - Mr Gillie* (1960) and *The Anatomist* (1961) - this remains the extent of Sim's revival of Scottish

characterisations. He kept away from the cinema in the 1960s, his return in the following decade heralded by appearances on television, especially in *Misleading Cases* (1967, 1968, 1971), which eventually gave him far more satisfying roles than anything the cinema could offer him. *Misleading Cases* finds him in the company of other eccentrics and a contributor to eccentrically contrived court cases, while television plays like *The General's Day* (1972) allow him to employ a new restraint, in his eccentric portrayal of a retired general past his prime, which verges on the tragic. Both are as English/British as they could possibly be, the television series once described by *Variety* as 'essentially British', while *The Times'* critic, Leonard Buckley, calls the play 'as authentic and as English as Brown Windsor or the Palm Court Hotel'. [119]

Meanwhile Margaret Rutherford found the part of her life ('a natural role for [her] eccentricities', as *Variety* puts it) as Miss Marple, starring in a series of films which represent the triumph of individual eccentricity over the fallibility of authority, the police and the courts. [120] They made her a worldwide favourite as the doughtily tweedy eccentric, an image celebrated in Asquith's international success *The V.I.P.s* (1963) for which she won an Oscar as The Duchess of Brighton, a hapless passenger destined, during the film's duration, not to fly in a plane for the first time, much to the character's relief. However, such is the identification of the actress with her other role that there are discreet references to *Murder at the Gallop* (1963) in the film, while in a review of the final Miss Marple, *Murder Ahoy* (1964), the plot description includes the designation 'Miss Rutherford-Marple', her role now inseparable from the actress. [121] The Miss Marple series is particularly interesting for its mixed view of Britain in the present and the past. In *Murder at the Gallop*, for example, we glimpse a television set in Miss Marple's house and see her dance 'The Twist' at the Hunt Ball, and the cast also includes the stylish Katya Douglas who drives an appropriately modern sports car. And yet Miss Marple's idyllic cottage speaks of another era entirely, a fantasy of country living which probably never really existed.

The Britishness and eccentricity of Sim and Rutherford is at once complex and contradictory, an asset and a limitation. It also alters over time, partly as a response to

changing circumstances in the industry and partly as a result of their developing acting technique. These twin aspects of their personalities are umbilically linked, and although it is possible to be British without being eccentric, the reverse seems less likely, especially to foreign observers.

Sim and Rutherford present a distinctiveness which sets them apart from their less eccentric peers by what they invest and infuse into a character by way of habits, mannerisms, dress and vocal inflection. However, without a convincing *mise en scene*, appropriate music, camera position, publicity, production and direction, let alone a good script and vital contributions from other actors, their performances have less significance and it remains difficult to consider them outside at least some of these contexts.

Rutherford's Britishness is almost always semantically interchanged with her Englishness, the distinction apparently unimportant to most critics. [122] But, as we have seen, Sim's natural identification is more complicated. Dissimilar to a fellow Scot like John Laurie (who emerged as a television star in *Dad's Army* (1968-1977) at the end of his career), Sim was not content - after his 1930s apprenticeship - merely to represent Scottishness in English films. The forties saw experiments as a Czech professor in *Let the People Sing* and an Irish priest in *Captain Boycott* but he was always more comfortable as an English character, like Inspector Cockrill in *Green for Danger*, who happened to betray the hint of a Scottish accent in his pronunciation. He did return to Scottish roles, like The Laird in *Geordie*, but increasingly rarely, and often in the cause of promoting the work of his friend, James Bridie.

Sim does prove incontestably that whatever nationality he portrays he is always as singularly eccentric as Rutherford, and together they almost define an essential element of British cinema in their uniqueness. Although it would be wrong to imply that all stars of British cinema are eccentric - surely Margaret Lockwood, Jean Kent, John Mills and Dirk Bogarde, for instance, are not - or that eccentric behaviour in films is limited to British stars - one thinks, for example, of the hugely popular Marie Dressler in Hollywood, an actress to whom Rutherford is sometimes compared. It would be a mistake too to imagine that Sim and Rutherford, merely because they became stars, always manage to keep their eccentricities under professional control. There are occasions when, due to poor scripting or direction, they

overembellish the characterisation, a sure sign of a loss of faith in the work they are doing. However, when on form, they are unbeatable. To contribute effectively, their eccentricities are harnessed to the characterisations as outsiders, like Sim's Inspector Poole in *An Inspector Calls* (1954), integrators, like Rutherford's Rowena Ventnor in *The Demi-Paradise*, or an intriguing mixture of both, like Rutherford's Miss Marple or Sim's Mr Justice Swallow in *Misleading Cases*. With a few exceptions one senses a careful negotiation between their natural inclination for quirky singularity and a need to apply this to particular roles. If they are happiest starring in the company of other eccentrics - *The Happiest Days of Your Life* is a case in point - even cameo appearances can give lesser films a marvellous tonic just by the fact of their inclusion, like Sim's film producer in *Lady Godiva Rides Again* (1951), or Rutherford's pet shop owner in *An Alligator Named Daisy* (1955).

If the British cinema seemed to promote younger and prettier stars, the corollary was that it did not always provide the best roles to suit actors like Sim and Rutherford, despite their prominence and popularity. Unlike equally industrious contemporaries - Esma Cannon or Miles Malleon, for example - they actually did attain star status as eccentric British character players by dint of their talent, persistence and sheer hard work. And it is their designation as character actors which I should now like to examine in greater detail.

Notes

1. Emerson, R.W. (1969) *Selected Prose and Poetry*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston Inc., pp. 330, 331, 334.
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3. Santayana, G. (1922) *Soliloquies in England*, Constable, pp. 2-5, 30-32.
4. Barker, Sir E. (1927) *National Character: and the factors in its formation*, Methuen, pp. 100, 102.
5. Ibid, p. 134.
6. Ibid, p. 140.
7. Ibid, p. 179.
8. Ibid, pp. 204-207.
9. Ibid, pp. 217, 218, 224.
10. Ibid, p. 262.
11. British Council (1941) *British Life and Thought*, Longmans, Green and Co..
12. Ibid, p. 407.
13. Ibid, p. 440.
14. Richards, J. (1997) *Films and British National Identity*, Manchester University Press, p. 14.
15. Orwell, S. and Angus, I. (1968) *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell: Vol. 2, My Country Right or Left, 1940-3*, Secker and Warburg, p. 64.
16. Ibid, p. 59.
17. Orwell, S. and Angus, I. (1968) *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell: Vol. 3, As I Please, 1943-5*, Secker and Warburg, pp. 1, 6.
18. Priestley, J.B. et al. (1942) *The English Spirit*, Allen and Unwin, pp. 25, 26.
19. Ibid, pp. 28, 29.
20. Michael Flanders and Donald Swann's *At the Drop of a Hat* was first issued on

Parlophone (PMC 1033) (vinyl disc) in 1957.

21. Flanders and Swann's *At the Drop of Another Hat* was first issued on Parlophone (PMC 1216) (vinyl disc) in 1964.

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid. The pruning of British Rail by Beeching is analogous to the disappearance of many smaller cinemas like the Bijou in *The Smallest Show on Earth* (1957).

24. Ibid.

25. Broadly speaking, 'traditional' Englishness/Britishness is defended by those on the political right, like historian David Starkey. See his article 'The death of England; Our country has become a vile antithesis of a nation' in *The Times*, 20/4/96. At the other end of the spectrum is a writer like A.S. Byatt who celebrates a more cosmopolitan Britain. See her article 'What it means to be English' in *The Times*, 6/4/98. (Original page references not given in on-line reprint.)

26. See 'The English', a chapter in Peabody, D. (1985) *National Characteristics*, Cambridge University Press, pp. 95-102. See also Samuel, R. (ed.) (1989) *Patriotism: The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity, Vol. 3 National Fictions*, Routledge.

27. Paxman, J. (1999) *The English: a portrait of a people*, Penguin, preface, p. viii.

28. Ibid, pp. vii, ix.

29. 'Actresses - Mrs John Bull Ltd.', *Time*, 24/5/63. (BFI Press Cuttings)

30. Boyd, Rev. M. 'I'm Mad for Margaret Rutherford', *Variety*, 7/4/65, p. 26.

31. Sim, N. (1987) *Dance and Skylark: Fifty Years with Alastair Sim*, Bloomsbury, p. 97.

32. Kemp, P. (1991) *Lethal Innocence: The Cinema of Alexander Mackendrick*, Methuen, p. 24.

33. Richards, J. (1997), p. 210.

34. See notes 8 and 10.

35. See Paxman, J. (1999), chapter 6 'The Parish of the Senses', pp. 93-114.

36. Marr, A. (2000) *The Day Britain Died*, Profile Books, p. 38. See also Alison Graham's article 'Why we're mad about TV eccentrics', *Radio Times*, 22nd-28th Feb. 1997, pp. 24-5; she believes that for 'enthusiastic, unconventional' eccentric experts and pundits 'British

- television is their natural home, the cultural greenhouse where they can be nurtured like prize mushrooms'. Ibid, p. 24.
37. Damien Johnson in the *Think of England* series, BBCTV, 19/10/00, for *Close Up North* (Greenan, P. (prod.)).
38. Baxendale, J. (2001) 'I Had Seen a Lot of Englands': J.B. Priestley, Englishness and the People', *History Workshop Journal*, 51, Spring 2001, p. 94.
39. Utechin, N. (prod.) *Straw Poll Debate - Englishness Has Had Its Day*, BBC Radio 4, 11/8/01.
40. Marr, A. (2000), p. 35.
41. Richards, J. (1997), pp. 86, 104.
42. Landau, S. and Ramson, W.S. (eds.) (1988) *Chambers English Dictionary*, Cambridge University Press, p. 448. Roget, P.M. (1988) *Roget's Thesaurus of Synonyms and Antonyms*, Tophi Books, pp. 18, 98, 99, 125.
43. Mill, J.S. (1972) *Utilitarianism, on Liberty and Considerations on Representative Government*, Dent, pp. 124, 125.
44. Timbs, J. (1866) *English Eccentrics and Eccentricities*, Richard Bentley, pp. iii, iv.
45. Santayana, G. (1922), pp. 5, 30.
46. Sitwell, E. (1933) *The English Eccentrics*, Faber and Faber, pp. 20-22.
47. Sitwell, E. (1965) *Taken care of: an autobiography*, Hutchinson, pp. 126-8, 132.
48. Hamilton, C. 'The Detective in Fiction' in Priestley, J.B. et al. (1942), p. 132.
49. Zizek, S. (1991) *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*, M.I.T. Press, p. 49. Author's italics.
50. Ibid, p. 60.
51. Maillaud, P. (1945) *The English Way*, O.U.P., p. 40.
52. Ibid, p. 41.
53. Law, R. 'The individual and the community' in Barker, Sir E. (ed.) (1947) *The Character of England*, O.U.P., p. 40.
54. Sutherland, J. 'Literature' in Ibid, p. 306.
55. Ibid, p. 309.

56. Sackville-West, V. 'Outdoor Life' in *Ibid*, p. 421. A more recent version by the comic Julian Clary runs: 'The English like eccentrics. They just don't like them living next door'. I can find no concrete reference for this except as a question on McLeod, A. (series producer) *The Weakest Link* (BBCTV, 13/11/02); West, R. 'The Englishman Abroad' in Barker, Sir E. (ed.) (1947), p. 481.
57. Barker, Sir E. 'An attempt at perspective' in *Ibid*, pp. 568-9.
58. Nancy Mitford concludes that 'The noble eccentric, alas, seems to be dying out', while Evelyn Waugh regrets the then current fad for categorisation when he remarks: 'People seem to be comforted instead of outraged when they are told that their eccentricities entitle them to membership in a class of "psychological types"'. Mitford, N. (ed.) (1956) *Noblesse Oblige: An Enquiry into the Identifiable Characteristics of the English Aristocracy*, Hamish Hamilton, pp. 56, 73.
59. Priestley, J.B. (1973) *The English*, Heinemann, p. 200.
60. Bridgeman, H. and Drury, E. (1975) *The British Eccentric*, Michael Joseph, pp. 5, 7.
61. For characteristically forthright opinions on present-day eccentricity see Strong, R. (1999) 'You don't have to be mad to live here...(but if you are it helps) - why scientists say British eccentricity is the key to Health and Happiness', *The Daily Mail*, 20/4/99; see also Williams, H. (2003) 'Saturday Review: Reference: In Praise of English Eccentrics: Nobody does different better...', *The Guardian*, 11/1/03. (Original page references not given in on-line reprint.)
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63. *Ibid*, p. 175.
64. In his article, John Hess critiques 'characters in the movies of *auteur* directors [who] are larger than life figures who rise above the ordinary' as the result of Truffaut's 'desire and ability to express a certain world view'. Hess, J. 'La Politique des auteurs - Truffaut's Manifesto', *Jump Cut*, 2, Jul./Aug., 1974, p. 20.
65. Durnat, R. (1970) *A Mirror for England*, Faber, p. 162.
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link between eccentricity and genius derives, as Sellar acknowledges, from Dickens' *The Pickwick Papers*, and specifically the phrase 'the eccentricities of genius' which is spoken by the eponymous character himself.

67. Ibid.

68. Keown, E. (1955) *Margaret Rutherford*, Rockliff, pp. 32, 53.

69. Robyns, G. and Rutherford, M. (1972) *Margaret Rutherford: an autobiography as told to Gwen Robyns*, W.H. Allen, p. 25.

70. [producer/director uncredited] *Late Night Line-Up* (interview with Michael Dean), BBCTV, 12/2/66.

71. Robyns, G. and Rutherford, M. (1972), p. 79.

72. Ibid, pp. 109-110.

73. Ibid, p. 221.

74. Heppner, S. (1936) 'Alastair SIM is the Name', *Film Weekly*, 15/388, 21/3/36, p. 29;

Hamblett, C. (1950) 'Mr Sim Has a Secret', *Picturegoer*, 20/813, 2/12/50, p. 13.

75. Sellar, M. (1987), pp. 150, 152; Caughie, J. and Rockett, K. (1996) *The Companion to British and Irish Cinema*, BFI, p. 150.

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78. Ibid.

79. BFI Pressbook.

80. *Film Weekly*, 14/363, 27/9/35, p. 28.

81. *The Monthly Film Bulletin*, 3/27, Mar. 1936, p. 44.

82. *Variety*, 18/8/37; Moss, R. (1987) *The Films of Carol Reed*, MacMillan, p. 100.

83. *The Monthly Film Bulletin*, 4/44, Aug. 1937, p. 167; *Film Information* (New South Wales Federation), Aug. 1967, p. 152. (BFI Press Cuttings)

84. *Variety*, 15/9/37; uncredited review by Frank Nugent. (BFI Pressbook)

85. *The Motion Picture Herald*, 132/4, 23/7/38, p. 42. This is quite an admission for an American critic from a country that boasted the likes of The Marx Brothers amongst others.

86. Sellar, M. (1987), p. 150.
87. Low, R. (1985) *Film Making in 1930s Britain*, Allen and Unwin, p. 263; *The Observer* review of *This Man is News* (1938) (BFI Pressbook); *Film Weekly*, 20/531, 17/12/38, p. 31; *Today's Cinema*, 51/4004, 31/8/38, p. 12.
88. *The Motion Picture Herald*, 133/1, 1/10/38, pp. 42, 44.
89. *Film Weekly*, 20/531, 17/12/38, p. 31.
90. *The Monthly Film Bulletin*, 7/76, Apr. 1940, p. 54; *Kine Weekly*, 277/1718, 21/3/40, p. 26.
91. Graham Greene, writing in *The Spectator*, 7/4/39. (BFI Press Cuttings) The Englishness of *Inspector Hornleigh* (1939) is perhaps more remarkable in view of the script's derivation from the radio play of a Dutch author, and the fact that both producer and director are Americans!
92. BFI Pressbook.
93. Aubrey Flanagan in the *The Motion Picture Herald*, 142/7, 15/2/41, p. 39.
94. *The Times* (BFI Pressbook); Louis MacNeice in *The Spectator*, 7/2/41. (BFI Press Cuttings)
95. William Whitebait in *The New Statesman*, 8/2/41 (BFI Press Cuttings); *Kine Weekly*, 287/1763, 30/1/41, p. 27.
96. *Kine Weekly*, 287/1763, 30/1/41, p. 27; *Today's Cinema*, 56/4539, 12/2/41, p. 13.
97. *Kine Weekly*, 287/1763, 30/1/41, p. 27.
98. Gavin Lambert (BFI Press Cuttings).
99. Ibid; Aldgate, A. and Richards, J. (1986) *Britain Can Take It: The British Cinema in the Second World War*, Basil Blackwell Ltd., p. 14.
100. *The Monthly Film Bulletin*, 11/128, Aug. 1944, p. 87.
101. Sir Ernest Barker's inter-war hopes for the League of Nations were by now unceremoniously dashed. See page 70.
102. Kemp, P. (1991), p. 9.
103. William Whitebait in *The New Statesman*, 9/8/41. (BFI Pressbook)
104. Brown, G. *NFT Programme Notes*. (BFI Pressbook)
105. Richard Winnington in *The News Chronicle*, 13/1/45; *The New Statesman*, 20/1/45 (both

- BFI Press Cuttings); Taylor, P. (ed.) (1988) *Britain and the Cinema in the Second World War*, MacMillan Press Ltd., p. 78.
106. *Variety*, 7/2/45.
107. *The New Statesman*, 20/1/45 (BFI Press Cuttings); Brown, G. (1977) *Lauder and Gilliat*, BFI, p. 14.
108. Cross, R. (1984) *The Big Book of British Films*, Sidgwick and Jackson, pp. 46, 97; Sidney Gilliat quoted in Brown, G. (1977), p. 111.
109. *The Times*, 5/4/45 (BFI Press Cuttings); Sinyard, N. 'Film' in Ford, B. (ed.) (1988) *The Cambridge Guide to the Arts in Britain: Volume 9, Since the Second World War*, Cambridge University Press, p. 242.
110. Barr, C. (1977) *Ealing Studios*, Cameron and Taylor/David and Charles, p. 95.
111. *The Monthly Film Bulletin*, 14/158, Feb. 1947, p. 20; Helen Fletcher in *The Sunday Graphic*, 23/2/47. (BFI Press Cuttings)
112. Clarke, T.E.B. (1974) *This is Where I Came In*, Michael Joseph, p. 156; Harry Fowler interviewed in McFarlane, B. (ed.) (1992) *Sixty Voices*, BFI, p. 88.
113. Caroline Lejeune in *The Observer*, 1/5/49. (BFI Press Cuttings)
114. Robyns, G. and Rutherford, M. (1972), p. 84.
115. Shipman, D. (1980) *The Great Movie Stars: The International Years*, Angus and Robertson, p. 520.
116. Caroline Lejeune in *The Observer*, 4/8/47. (BFI Press Cuttings)
117. *The Sunday Express*, 12/3/50. (BFI Pressbook) Perhaps 'Simian' is not such a compliment as it can also indicate a likeness to a monkey!
118. Robyns, G. and Rutherford, M. (1972), pp. 91-2; Landy, M. (1991) *British Genres: Cinema and Society, 1930-1960*, Princeton University Press, p. 363.
119. *Variety*, 16/10/68; Leonard Buckley in *The Times*, 21/11/72. (BFI Press Cuttings)
120. *Variety*, 18/10/61.
121. *The Motion Picture Herald*, 232/7, 30/9/64, p. 138.
122. Jeffrey Richards has explained that 'because England was the centre, the seat of power, the hub of the Empire, the character of the new *Britain* was provided by *England*, which is why

Britain and England are still often spoken of interchangeably by the English and by foreigners though never by the Welsh and the Scots'. Richards, J. (1997), p. 8. (author's italics)

Alastair Sim and Margaret Rutherford as Character Actors

Despite the importance of the interplay between their film and theatre work and their iconic status as great British eccentrics, Alastair Sim and Margaret Rutherford are essentially character actors. What this actually means in practice is less easy to define. Acting theorists tend to discuss actors as a homogenous group, while those in film studies, especially proponents of star studies, are self-evidently interested in the most prominent players in a narrative, particularly those with lasting appeal. Acting itself has often been a subject for debate by film-makers, although it is only in recent years that it has received wider attention within film studies as a topic for more serious and extended analysis.

I shall begin by outlining some of the salient features of acting theory and star studies and attempt to place character acting in this context. I shall then define and discuss character acting and make special reference to it as an important constituent of British cinema. Next I will examine Sim and Rutherford through descriptions of them by others, and, wherever possible, illustrate their uniqueness by using their own comments on themselves and their work. I will also address issues around gender and genre which seem inseparable from character acting in general and Sim and Rutherford in particular. To conclude, I will use selected examples of their most memorable characterisations to present a portrait that crystallizes the impact of their ebullient personalities on the screen.

The difficulty of designating whether actors are stars or are of lesser importance to a film narrative is exemplified by David Quinlan's directories of stars and character actors. [1] In his foreword to the film stars directory he notes his transference of many entries to the companion volume of character actors in order to provide space for new names, and whilst acknowledging that the British and American stars represented are thus more diverse he does at least characterise them in terms of 'both major and minor'. [2] However, this general observation is not applied systematically to individual actors in the body of his book. Similarly, David Shipman includes both stars and character actors in his annotated collections, and concludes that star quality is 'unfathomable', and so-called 'lesser artists' should possess one or all of 'beauty, magnetism, personality [or] ability', and the very nature of stardom 'must

remain undefined; but you know it when you see it'. [3] Perhaps to define it would destroy the illusion it creates? His own criteria include box office appeal, popularity polls, reputation (critical acclaim), 'interesting' careers, those he considers in some way representative of their era, and those who are famous without necessarily being popular. [4]

Carole Zucker is concerned about the many different approaches that acting theory and criticism produce, and despite the importance and influence of books such as Pudovkin's *Film Technique and Film Acting* (1929) and Richard Dyer's *Stars* (1979), she believes there has been little discussion of what really happens when an actor appears on the big screen. [5] She cites a number of reasons for this including the fact that film studies is a relatively recent academic discipline, film acting is often considered to be the poor relation of theatrical performance, and that semiotic analysis of a film text tends to conflate and confuse performance signs with others like *mise-en-scene*, framing, camera movement, the script, the soundtrack and so on. She goes on to say, however, that these elements undeniably have an impact on our impressions of an actor's performance. She is also alive to the difficulties around analyses of 'the human presence' in cinema, the expressive constituents of an actor's voice and body, their nuances of speech and gesture. [6]

Pudovkin's book, which relies to a large extent on the writings of Stanislavsky, is one of the first theoretical works on film acting, and views performance as 'an organic blend of the actor's personality and the scripted character's attributes'. [7] He notes the possible threat to the creation of a film role by the process of filmmaking itself, for example, because of the need to record performances in small sections and often out of sequence. He advances no overall solution, but warns against mechanical acting. He isolates two kinds of film: (a) a star vehicle with a supporting cast, and (b) 'idea' films where the film itself is the star. In the British context this would include certain genre cinema like Ealing comedies or 'Carry On' films where no one star emerges. Pudovkin uses varying terminology to describe performers other than the star, including 'supporting cast', 'supporting actors' and 'film type'. [8] But he is in no doubt as to their importance when he remarks that 'often the entire expression and value of an incident, though it may centre around the hero, depends [on] those characters of second rank who surround him'. [9] To combat stagey acting Pudovkin resolves to work with those who have

never seen a play or film (so-called 'casual actors'), and filmmaking becomes a matter of montage editing and photographing the actor at the right moment to compensate for their lack of technique. In the context of silent cinema and in the more experimental climate encouraged by the Soviet regime in the 1920s, and worlds away from the more commercial atmosphere in Hollywood, Pudovkin's methods were a more feasible proposition, before the new era of sound when the contrasts between theatre and film acting styles become differentiated. And yet some of his ideas appear to have influenced a later generation of filmmakers and performers in the rather unexpected context of the commercial British cinema of the 1940s. For instance, Ken Annakin, who directed Margaret Rutherford in *Miranda* (1948), has commented that 'she was a complete original, she had no technique at all that she admitted to...you had to shoot until you caught what you wanted from her. What she did have was an original zany quality'; and on another occasion he calls her 'instinctive' and believes that 'her charm or 'entertainment value' was quite individual and not to be turned on at will. You had to set the mood of the scene, and nine-times-out-of-ten she would give you something wonderful'. [10]

Like Pudovkin, Kuleshov approved the use of non-actors and remained critical of theatre acting. However, his use of 'types' is less applicable to supporting actors than to non-actors. Indeed, for him, they are always preferable to actors from the theatre. He states: 'It is not theatre actors but "types" who should act in film - that is, people who, in themselves, as they were born, present some kind of interest for cinematic treatment. That is, a person with an exterior of character...' [11] With the coming of sound many 'types' soon proved inadequate in coping with the demands of dialogue and the subtleties of expression and movement required by cinema which could no longer rely on montage to convey form and meaning. It is Sim and Rutherford's very theatricality which alerted producers and directors in the early years of sound to their potential for injecting the films in which they might appear with life, character and individuality. However, it was still imperative that they be cast appropriately. Kuleshov believes that in order for a film actor to justify a film performance it is important that the actor's physical appearance corresponds. He argues that 'no good actor can be made to remold himself, to make himself over into another type, since in film no make-up, no costuming will

work'. [12] While this view is clearly contentious, there are occasions when Kuleshov's opinions are vindicated. For instance, he goes on to say that 'experience has shown that if one films an actor with a fake beard, it will appear much worse than a real beard'. [13] One only has to watch Sim's miscast Professor in *Let the People Sing* (1942) to recognise the need for prosthetics to be convincing.

Richard Dyer also refers to 'secondary characters' and 'types' in relation to stars. He considers that they are used in fiction 'to enable the proper elaboration of the central, individuated character(s). In this respect, no star could be just a type, since all stars play central characters'. [14] And yet he does concede that a star can appear as a 'type', although 'the 'individuality' of the star masks this just as it does her/his image's typicality'. [15] He also notes the use of 'types' in cinema, through the work of Russian theorists like Kuleshov, Eisenstein and Vertov, firstly for their physical and social appropriateness, and secondly as exaggerations to critique 'the 'ideological tradition' to which the types belong', making them ideal for satire. [16] The reason a performance like Rutherford's Aunt Dolly works so brilliantly in the context of the Boulting brothers' satirical *I'm All Right Jack* (1959) is a characterisation which, although brief in terms of screen time, is responsive to the finer details of the script and the need to represent a caricature of smug aristocracy with a measure of deftness and subtlety. However, Dyer doubts this line of argument in relation to stars, especially with regard to the contest between the most interesting/memorable character and the clearly defined star part. In *I'm All Right Jack* there is little doubt of Rutherford's status in the film as a subordinate character, however, where Rex Harrison is the most prominent star of *Blithe Spirit* (1945) it is Rutherford's delightful Madame Arcati that steals every scene in which she appears.

Dyer usefully identifies two schools of acting, namely 'classical' (via Diderot and Coquelin) whereby the performer does not lose him/herself in a role but bases his/her performance on 'the observation of others or on traditional skill', and the 'modern' (via Brecht, Pudovkin and Stanislavsky) where 'the performer should come to 'live' the character...as fully as possible', this opposition known as 'acting from the outside in: acting from the inside out'. [17] Sim and Rutherford's performances are clearly based on the former, learned in repertory. Dyer draws on the work on Lawrence Shaffer to summarise the essence of Diderot/Coquelin theory which

is characterised by "careful attention to detail", a 'particularly conscious aesthetic of coherence' (including motivation and relevance to the plot), 'a greater stress on verbal fluency and articulateness than with other styles' (he names vaudeville and music-hall, melodrama, radio, the Method), and sometimes 'a certain detachment between the actor and his/her role...that attempts in part to delineate this kind of performance, which...[Lawrence Shaffer]...calls 'character acting'. [18]

Dyer also characterises the performance signs as facial expression, voice, gestures, body posture and body movement, citing the first as the most important but also the most ambiguous. Margaret Rutherford's extraordinary facial mannerisms make her version of Miss Marple utterly unique to this performer. It convinces even if it resembles neither Agatha Christie's original conception of the character nor subsequent small screen portrayals of the same role by Joan Hickson, and, most recently, Geraldine McEwan. Similarly, Alastair Sim's portrayal of Scrooge in the 1951 film was once thought controversial, if still distinctive. In time it came to be accepted as a classic. In some respects his reprise of the role in the 1971 animation of the story is considered even more convincing despite its brevity and the fact that only Sim's voice remains as a performance indicator to compare and contrast with his earlier incarnation of the character. Gianluca Sergi has written specifically about this aspect of performance, its use as an acting tool, how it is recorded by a film crew and later integrated into a film's soundtrack. [19] His contrasting of acting as a performance and within a performance both highlights those factors under and outside an actor's control and the difficulty of separating performance signs from others in a film. As much as actors retain their individuality, remain aware of the film medium in which they are performing, consider the quality of their voice, their interaction with other actors and other sounds on the soundtrack (including music), they are always subject to how they are recorded and edited into the final mix. Sergi's emphasis on the sophistication of present-day soundscapes in films has perhaps less relevance to the era of Sim and Rutherford's best performances in British cinema from the 1940s to 1960s, but some aspects undoubtedly still ring true. For instance, he notes the need for actors to maintain a continuity of delivery over a number of takes. Even allowing for her consummate professionalism, Margaret Rutherford sometimes struggled with this

demand especially when it often seemed to be the case that no two takes of hers were alike!
(See below, pp. 144, 145)

As Richard Dyer has observed, a film's signs are 'determined by the multiple codes in relation to which [they are] situated, and also by [their] place in the totality of the film'. [20] However, as he acknowledges, it is one thing to identify performance signs and quite another to read them accurately. This largely depends on a general knowledge of what the signs mean through culture and history. An incomplete store of this information suggests the possibility of misinterpretation. A gesture or facial expression expressed in a British film of the 1940s might easily be read by a later generation quite differently.

Dyer's work is still groundbreaking and useful, although its scope seems limited in some respects. For instance, there is a tendency to relegate non-stars to the status of 'much more 'ordinary' performers' without an explanation of what this actually means in practice. [21] Paul McDonald has observed that 'not everyone in a film...is a star (though this is often forgotten even within star studies where the search for new objects of study has led to the analysis of more and more minor performers as though they were stars)'. [22] This seems to imply that perhaps for character actors or 'more minor performers' a different approach is required as acting ability and star quality are not necessarily in conflict with one another. The very fluidity of the careers of Sim and Rutherford defies terminological description. Were they character actors, supporting players, featured artists, or any number of other maddeningly imprecise definitions? Clearly their own particular brand of acting encompasses the gamut of the acting hierarchy from bit-part player to character actor, and embraces co-starring roles, cameos and star vehicles. To complicate matters further this range of roles does not necessarily follow a logical upward trajectory and shifts somewhat uncertainly between one and another, quite unlike the career profiles of most prominent stars.

In addition, Dyer has been criticised for a lack of social context - Paul McDonald refers to this as 'ahistoricism' - and the fact that his examples are almost exclusively Hollywood stars and film texts which, by default, ignore the contribution of other world cinemas including the United Kingdom. [23] Perhaps this is enough of a justification in itself for my use of a multi-disciplinary approach which incorporates examinations of Britishness, eccentricity and

theatre styles as well as acting theory and star studies. Fortunately, in recent years, the neglect of stardom in British cinema has been addressed at last. Geoffrey Macnab considers that the very idea of British stardom tended to be dismissed by academics and others due to the attitudes of British producers and publicists. These opinions were moulded, in turn, by negative reviews in the American trade press which bemoaned low production values, slow pacing and a lack of marquee names. And despite articles in fan magazines, positive publicity and the fact of many British actors going to Hollywood and winning Oscars 'the idea of 'the British film star' remained an oxymoron in many people's minds'. [24] The author has no theories around why Britain failed to create international stars, and concentrates instead on specific case studies. But did Britain fail so definitively? It can surely be argued that many British stars (including Sim and Rutherford) had a high international profile in the 1940s and 1950s. Indeed Rutherford's career was reborn in the 1960s thanks to the *Miss Marple* series and appearing alongside Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor in *The V.I.P.s* (1963), while Sim's renaissance was fuelled by his work in television, a medium which sustained the longevity of both actors by introducing their classic film performances to a new generation of viewers.

Macnab also indicates the prevalence of a number of 'stock types' in British cinema. Some, like 'the gentleman-amateur', 'cads and spivs', the 'staunch British housewife' and the 'good-time girl', have little relevance here, while others like 'experts and boffins', 'schoolteachers', 'detectives' and 'chameleons' are the roles usually offered to Sim and Rutherford. [25] The author notes British cinema's 'sneaking regard' for schoolteachers, 'a gallery of eccentric pedagogues...most of them extravagantly incompetent', and he characterises the detective as 'a strange amalgam between the eccentric, inquisitive teacher or inventor and the gentleman-amateur', concluding that 'for the more eccentric detectives, solving a crime is a cerebral exercise akin to a Mensa puzzle. Squalor, lust and bloodshed never much intrude in their investigations'. [26] Macnab argues, in addition, that there is a relative lack of glamour around certain stars who continue to reinvent themselves, and he names chameleons like Alec Guinness and Laurence Olivier, who, he believes, resist classification, remaining 'influential but mercurial', unconstrained by their star personas and

blurring 'the line between the stock type...and the exotic other'. [27] More contentiously he opines that Guinness 'offers something stranger and more sinister than the mild dottiness of Alastair Sim and Margaret Rutherford'. [28] But can the contributions of these actors be reduced in this way? And is it entirely fair to describe all they do as 'mild dottiness'? True, Rutherford was rarely allowed to stray far away from lovable eccentricity at least in her film work, although her effective portrayal of the unsympathetic Mrs Danvers in a stage production of *Rebecca* (in 1940) proved she was capable of darker inventions. [29] But the strange and sinister undertone in Sim's cinematic output, from his reclusive author in *Hue and Cry* (1947), and his interpretation of Scrooge (in 1951 and 1971) to his Inspector Poole in *An Inspector Calls* (1954) and Hawkins the assassin in *The Green Man* (1956), is never in much doubt.

Bruce Babington also notes the neglect of British stars. [30] While star studies concentrates on Hollywood, it tends to ignore those in Europe. He concurs with Macnab about critical condescension towards British cinema as a whole. However, he is most concerned with the Britishness of British stars. He questions the interchangeability of 'English' and 'British' as adequate designations; whether 'British' is still 'a touchstone of ...identity', and if 'Britishness' implies a subsuming Englishness. [31] He believes that although British cinema is 'overwhelmingly English in its centres of production and ideological emphases' it still draws on all parts of the United Kingdom for personnel and subject matter. [32] He also considers it difficult to decide what constitutes a British star, compared to those in Hollywood, due to the fewer star vehicles, more ensemble pieces, less brash publicity and a culture where acting and personality are favoured over star status. In addition he notes, as I have commented above, that even the reference books disagree. For David Shipman, Sim and Rutherford are included in his book as stars while others relegate them to supporting players. [33] Babington's own criteria for stardom include the stipulation that actors be the film's 'major attraction', they are accorded 'special treatment', there is an exhibition of 'personification' which he defines as 'an iconic transtextual sameness beneath variations', and they are the 'subject of 'star discourse'' in the media. [34] Despite the fact that both Sim and Rutherford qualify on all these counts, Babington is content to categorize them as minor stars because their stardom is smaller scale, they lack the 'inflection of sexual glamour' of their

contemporaries, because we tend to consider them as being themselves above any character they might play, and also for posthumous reasons - he names Rutherford's fear of madness, her father's parricide etc. [35] However, in the context of British films, he draws attention to the idealised strength of parental figures, especially fathers (noting Sim's latent vampiricism). He also states that 'the popularity of comedians in polls is often forgotten when thinking about stardom, and elderly comic eccentrics have an interestingly prominent role in the national cinema'. [36] And yet none of this seems to be sufficient to grant Sim or Rutherford extended coverage in his book.

Although mainly using the Hollywood scene as his backdrop, James Naremore makes a number of interesting observations which pertain to the British cinema of Sim and Rutherford. For instance, he notes the requirement that 'supporting players, ethnic minorities, and women be more animated or broadly expressive than white male leads'. [37] Under the heading of 'Rhetoric and Expressive Technique' he establishes the early connections between acting and speechmaking - an interesting observation in the context of the present study, as both Sim and Rutherford taught elocution; he writes:

Early theorists of oratory understand rhetoric less as a technique of adjusting to the theatrical environment than as an artful deployment of "expressions" to move, persuade, and embody traits of character. For that reason among others, acting and poetics in Western culture have frequently been studied in the context of public speaking. The very word *actor* in English was originally meant to suggest the "action" of orators. [38]

In 19th century America, he reminds us that actors were often trained at elocution schools where the theatre was viewed as a medium for declamation. It is surely this connection which Rutherford seeks to burlesque in her audition piece, 'The Shooting of Dan McGrew', in *Murder Most Foul* (1964). But the link between drama and public speaking vanishes around the turn of the 19th/20th century as the former develops visually and representationally, responding to the demands of a wider public. But despite Pudovkin's urging of actors to ignore old-style

vocal training, 'elocutionists' (as Naremore calls them) are still valued for the musicality of their vocal range. [39] In fact the influence of such theatrical knights as Olivier and Gielgud upon British cinema remains until the late 1950s and beyond, before the onset of the British 'new wave', and it is a tradition which finds Sim and Rutherford at their most comfortable.

Naremore also addresses 'Expressive Coherence and Performance Within Performance' and believes that by 'maintaining...expressive coherence...we are all actors, and our performances are judged at nearly every moment of our lives'. [40] This curiously echoes Sim himself when he remarks that 'we are all actors...and we are acting all the time'. [41] However, while Naremore is keen merely to make the connection between ordinary life and the professional theatre, one suspects Sim's rather throwaway line (to deter, no doubt, an inquisitive publicist) was made to demystify the entire process of acting. Naremore also explores the idea of expressive incoherence which occurs 'when the characters are clearly shown to be wearing masks'; he continues:

In such moments the player demonstrates virtuosity by sending out dual signs, and the vivid contrast between facial expressions gives the "acted image" an emotional richness, a strong sense of dramatic irony. Certain character types...are particularly apt to foster this type of incoherence: villainy is a favourite subject for actors because it usually takes the form of an insincere or duplicitous performance. [42]

Note especially Sim's criminal (Soapy Marks) and fawning priest in *The Terror* (1938) and his double characterisation in *The Belles of St. Trinian's* (1954) as the headmistress and her brother, or Rutherford's posing as a maid in *Murder She Said* (1961) or an actress in *Murder Most Foul* (1964) whilst also depicting amateur sleuth Miss Marple.

Naremore also discusses comedy as a genre 'which often provoke[s] alienated styles of performance, [and] depend[s] on exaggerated forms of *bodily* incoherence, often resulting in a sort of expressive anarchy', and which 'lets an incoherence in the "acted image" become almost as visible as the divisions within the character'. [43] One thinks of the unlikely image of

Sim as the fallible detective in *Green For Danger* (1946) spinning around contentedly on a revolving seat whilst ruminating on a murder, or any number of instances where Rutherford uses her physical form to comic effect in a broadly serious situation. The sword fight in *Murder Ahoy* (1964) is a good example of this, as is the bizarre spectacle of her dancing 'The Twist' in *Murder at the Gallop* (1963) - both scenes using comic and improbable bodily movements within an overall performance as successful ploys to entrap the murderer in each case.

Naremore also comments insightfully on what he calls 'accessories', that is 'expressive objects' (after Pudovkin, i.e. 'props'), costume and make-up. Of the first, the author's concern is for the ways in which inanimate objects and performers interact and how 'feelings or psychological states are communicated by the way one handles things'; invariably a prop 'transmits both a symbolic and a "personal" message...and when an actor finds an excuse to manipulate an unusual prop, he or she will steal the scene'. [44] Notice how the tinkling of Rutherford's glockenspiel watch in *Passport to Pimlico* (1949) attracts attention and soon becomes an integral element of Professor Hatton-Jones' character. Naremore argues that whole sequences in films are focussed upon what a performer does with a prop. Sim, for example, is particularly adept at handling telephone calls and there are some beautifully timed scenes in *The Happiest Days of Your Life* (1950), *Folly To Be Wise* (1952) and *The Green Man* which demonstrate not only his particular skill with the object itself but also convince the viewer of the unseen caller's identity. For Naremore, Sim, as a professional actor, is simply keeping 'objects under expressive control, letting them become signifiers of feelings. Sometimes a player's dexterity is foregrounded...but more often it is hardly noticeable, lending emotional resonance to the simplest behaviour'. [45]

Costumes are also an expressive adjunct for the performer and 'serve as indicators of gender and social status, but they also shape bodies and behaviour', and act as determinants of movement and character. [46] Even the most ordinary clothes allow men to doff hats, finger lapels or play with watch chains, while women can adjust skirts, clutch purses and worry with necklaces etc. Note, for example, the enormous flourish with which Rutherford, as Miss Marple, flings her cloak and scarf around her shoulders upon leaving the inspector's office, in

Murder Most Foul, which simultaneously becomes a defiant gesture at his authority and an assertion of her own eccentric individuality. Naremore observes that if a particular costume has many accessories it provides more opportunity for gesticulation, therefore 'the "dressy" figures in films are always the most expressive ones' and cross-dressers especially 'are allowed a broader range of both accessories and clothing styles and hence a larger emotional vocabulary'. [47] Thus Sim's headmistress in *The Belles of St. Trinian's* is much more memorable than her brother, also portrayed by Sim. Naremore also considers that greater realism in films has helped some actors to serve as fashion models. And such was the popularity of the Miss Marple films when they were initially released, that publicity for the second in the series, *Murder at the Gallop*, included not only stills of a scarf and sweater worn by the striking Katya Douglas but also other photographs of Rutherford and Robert Morley dressed in their riding habits. Thus costumes are presented as fashion and 'ordinary apparel becomes extraordinary by association with a star'. [48]

Finally, Naremore tackles make-up as a kind of expressive mask. He notes its use in Western culture as 'grounded in an opposition between nature and artifice', Pudovkin's critique of theatrical make-up in early silent cinema, and its origin in ritualistic drama before the onset of naturalism and realism in the cinema. [49] In the modern era it functions merely as an aid to performance. Thus we are less aware of any particular application of make-up in the films of Sim and Rutherford unless they are asked to portray a theatrical or fantastical character - Sim's genie (Eustace) in *Alf's Button Afloat* (1938) is an obvious example. We become more aware of it when the character they are playing has to be further transformed. When Rutherford is shown applying make-up in *Murder Most Foul* before taking to the stage to play The Honourable Penelope Brown, it is an action which draws attention to her relative lack of it as Miss Marple and serves to increase our empathy for her character.

If the analysis of film acting has been well served in recent years, its younger relation, television, has been relatively ignored in terms of its performers' significance and their image as stars. In fact John Ellis has claimed that television does not produce stars at all but personalities. [50] However, this view has been questioned by Patricia Mellancamp and Denise Mann who have suggested that female performers like Gracie Allen, Lucille Ball and

Martha Raye challenge and undermine the dominant patriarchal codes of their day. [51] Inevitably this suggests a post-feminist agenda, although Ellis's comments can also be contested by the appearance on television of mature male performers like Alastair Sim. As Jeremy Butler has observed, actors from films and the theatre bring with them 'pre-determined images', and in retrospect the 'diegetic husband-wife relationship' of Gracie Allen and George Burns, and Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz in their respective shows on television is not only a key to sexual politics in 1950s America but also seems to be a development of the on-screen relationships of actors like Rutherford, Sim and their spouses in the cinema. [52] By the time Sim rediscovered television in the 1960s there was little prospect that his wife Naomi would star alongside him. *Misleading Cases* (1967, 1968, 1971), Sim's only television sitcom, is undeniably paternalist in tone, but is saved by its very British eccentricity and charm, and the credible complexity of its legal arguments. Similarly, Sim's patriarchal General Suffolk in his finest television play, *The General's Day* (1972), is constantly undermined by female characters, played by Dandy Nichols and Annette Crosbie, who challenge his status and authority.

It was Irving Thalberg in the Hollywood of the 1920s who recognised, at the dawn of the sound era, the need for 'more finely drawn characterisations', and, unlike Russian theorists Pudovkin and Kuleshov, he positively welcomed the influx of actors from the theatre. [53] He would surely have agreed with Walter Brennan's famous attributed remark that character actors exist on screen to make the stars look good, although Hollywood delayed the creation of a Best Supporting Actor/Actress award until 1936. [54] Writing in *Esquire* magazine in 1934, Gilbert Seldes often finds character actors more memorable than the stars and that when absent 'there are blank spots...during which attention wanders...because the movies hardly ever present a character; they merely present a person. And persons become tiresome...[while] characters sustain interest'. [55] He praises Marie Dressler for her creation of character, and continues:

The minor players are allowed certain human qualities which the major

ones forego...They say what the audience often feels, pricking the great bubble of pretensions which floats through the morals of every movie. They are disruptive elements. And they are very good company. [56]

He anticipates the character-based Hollywood movies of the future when he concludes that his greatest pleasure would be to see a film consisting entirely of supporting players. Obviously this is a minority view of the time, but by the 1960s when many critics sense the demise of character acting as they know it, and their appreciation develops a more nostalgic tone, Seldes' vision has become a reality in films like *The Wrong Box* (1966), for example. Typical of retrospective criticism on the subject is Charles Winick's article in *Films and Filming* (1965). He connects the modern character actor with the stock characters to be found in older art forms like the *comedia dell'arte*, and defines them as 'someone who appears in a specific kind of role so frequently that he practically creates it', a marked contrast to John Ellis's definition of stars as 'incomplete' and 'incoherent'. [57] Winick qualifies his remarks by stressing the uniqueness of character actors and the relatively narrow range of parts they are allowed to play. Although, when he states that they are 'not interchangeable with another character actor', one only has to think of the instance when Sim's turning down of his initial casting as the Professor in *Passport to Pimlico* (1949) led to Rutherford's acceptance of the same role, to demonstrate that this is not always strictly true. [58] Winick also confuses the issue by referring to 'character stars' who 'became so famous for particular roles that they became stars'. [59] Of course many others tried and failed to achieve stardom, but he believes that one of the effects of the decline of character acting is also that many stars are now (1965) being cast in character roles. In addition, character stars are less valued in 'teen-pics', and one way of making up for the relative lack of parts is to cast them in cameo roles. Another reason for the decline of character acting is said to be the challenge of European (including British) cinema, to say nothing of the effects of television. With no seven year contracts, the advent of 'package' films and the new prominence of the independent sector, many casting directors begin to think more in terms of star vehicles. Winick denies nostalgia and yet his article is slanted in this way and could be viewed as short-sighted and rather

fearful of the new. It could also be argued that another reason for the disappearance of old-style character acting is a reluctance by modern actors to be typecast in a narrower range of roles.

Alfred Twomey and Arthur McClure entitle their book *'The Versatiles'* to reflect the emotional scope character actors, as specialists, could portray. These actors' great gift was to 'project...moods that had the texture of living experience...[and] helped to produce memorable glimpses of our life and culture'. [60] Of course the authors' frame of reference is the sound era of American films between 1930 and 1955, although their comments could be just as applicable to the British cinema of the same period. Similarly, Leonard Maltin's two volumes are devoted to Hollywood's golden era, but when he comments that character actors 'had the advantage of being in the heart of activity, with none of the responsibilities that accompany stardom' his remarks could easily relate to the early careers of Sim and Rutherford in British films. [61] Also true is his opinion that character actors are often taken for granted because of the impression they are just playing themselves, and are therefore rarely praised for the quality of their acting, despite the fact that they may well have studied their craft as hard (or harder) than the nominal stars with whom they appear.

David Thomson has identified other practical and professional differences between stars and character actors. For instance, stars 'live' through the use of close-ups, and although character players are allowed this privilege, it is never to the same extent or for the same amount of screen time. In the same way, lighting on the set is arranged to suit the stars, while character actors are meant to look less radiant and more like us, the audience. Maybe they serve as our bridge to the stars, a link between our individual realities and the 'reality' of the world depicted on the screen. Thomson also notes that scripts and direction are organised to prioritise the star performance while a character actor will be expected to appear to order and 'deliver' without the same level of consideration. There are, naturally, exceptions, and these usually depend on the eminence of the character actor in question. When Margaret Rutherford first read the script of *The V.I.P.s* (1963) she turned it down. It took a rewrite by Terence Rattigan and much urging by director Anthony Asquith to persuade her to change her mind. In this case her stance was totally justified, as confirmed by her well-deserved Oscar. However,

it could be said that by 1963 Rutherford was once again a fully-fledged star, although alongside fellow cast members like Orson Welles, Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton this remains a question of degree. Thomson considers that if films now tend to disappoint, television is the best opportunity for character actors. Unlike the cinema, television has no time for 'the prevaricating whim and neurotic hesitation of stars'. [62]

Anthony Slide considers two kinds of character player, those with a gimmick who can delight an audience with it in film after film, and those who are less easy to define but tend to be more adaptable. [63] Sim and Rutherford fall into both categories, content to repeat certain character traits but also ready to adapt when required. Often it is not the character actors who are unwilling or unable to adapt, but the audience and the industry who will not allow them to change. Margaret Rutherford accepted her gallery of oddballs with relish, commenting: 'I'm not displeased when people think I'm like my eccentric ladies - I love playing them', although by the end of her career her enthusiasm had waned. [64] Of *Arabella* (1967) she remarked wearily: 'I played my usual taciturn old princess part'. [65] She had longed to play ingenue roles in her youth, but realising that her looks made this unlikely, still held out for more meaty dramatic characters. Away from the comedic performances which made her famous, hints at what might have been are provided by a part like Mistress Quickly in Orson Welles' *Chimes at Midnight* (1966).

Slide notes, however, that not all films can be saved by character actors - one thinks of Rutherford's cameo in *A Countess From Hong Kong* (1966), and Sim's in *Lady Godiva Rides Again* (1951) - although he believes that comedians especially, both from the point of view of a star or character part, recognise the value of a good supporting cast. Slide attributes the English and Irish (though not Scottish!) with contributing most to swelling the ranks of character players and thinks the fascination and obnoxiousness of character itself is made possible by 'the art and craft of these performers, they are able to infiltrate the hearts and minds of audiences', and alluding to Beulah Bondi's famous remark about them being 'the mortar between the bricks' concludes that they are more like 'the foundations upon which the edifice of the motion picture stood secure'. [66]

Tom Charity characterises them as 'the working stiffs in the dream factory' and notes that

'stars are always *doing* something...; supporting players, like the rest of us, simply get on with their lives. They are the true citizens of the cinema'. [67] Like other commentators he recognises their heyday as the 1930s, 1940s and early 1950s, their revival in the 1970s (when new stars like Dustin Hoffman, Gene Hackman and Jack Nicholson - who represent the antithesis of classical Hollywood stars - seem more akin to character performers), and a further renaissance in the 1990s. This new breed made a nonsense of categories and labels when the Supporting Actor Oscar began to be awarded for what many considered starring roles. Perhaps the truth is that character actors have never entirely disappeared but developed over time and changed their function, just as the nature of stardom itself is never static and more of an ever-evolving process.

Almost uniquely, Mary O'Brien avoids the usual comparisons between stars and character performers and designates actors in terms of character, personality, physical and natural types, although she considers that many good actors cross these boundaries. For her the character actor is one 'who strives to create an image of character that is an amalgamation of his own psyche and that of the written image' and whose characterisations are 'whole, natural, and grounded in reality'. [68] She believes that 'the blend of...the actor and the image - is subtle. You are not aware where one ends and the other begins, or which part of the mode of emotional approach is the actor's and which the character's' and that as success is founded in 'the duality of the actor "being" and "acting", we witness simultaneously a duality in the character itself'; and she concludes that: 'duality created by the actor produces a duality of response in the spectator. The complexity of this inner action in both the actor-character and the spectator accounts in some part for our fascination with character actors, and nourishes our desire to see them in role after role'. [69]

Character acting has been hailed as both 'a distinctive aspect of American experience' and 'the very backbone of British cinema'. [70] Stephen Frears, a British director who now works mostly in Hollywood, has commented: 'I love the way these people are so shamelessly familiar...they're like members of your family...I shall be in my grave before I forget them all...I know them better than my relatives'. [71] But the greatest difficulty for the British character actor is not familiarity but working in an industry unsure of whether to concentrate on modest

low-budget films for domestic consumption or profitable prestige pictures to be sold on the international market, a dilemma unresolved today. In effect this has meant a choice between the nurturing of character actors at the expense of fostering a star system to rival Hollywood. In the 1930s at the beginning of Sim and Rutherford's film careers, this polarisation centred on the accommodation of character performers by Michael Balcon's Ealing Studios over the international ambitions of Korda (and Rank in the 1940s). How much these positions were at odds was dependent on how much consensual collectivity had to be sacrificed in the name of internationalism. Those films that attempt compromise, like Sim's *Stage Fright* (1950) with its British locations and international cast, emerge more awkwardly. However, most actors manage to incorporate both traditions into their repertoire as Sim's *Hue and Cry* and Rutherford's *Passport to Pimlico* exemplify for the home-grown audience, while their appearances in *The Millionairess* (1960) (Sim) and *The V.I.P.s* (Rutherford) demonstrate equal comfort in the international niche. It is possible that this unresolvable dilemma has actually given the British performer a richer identity above and beyond the attributes of Hollywood stardom.

Certainly it was the low-budget quota films of the 1930s that gave actors like Sim and Rutherford early exposure and useful experience, and whose comedies, thrillers and comedy-thrillers provided them with rich opportunities for the creation of character. David Sutton identifies the comedy-thriller in particular as 'one of the most notable generic hybrids of the 1930s' and references Sim's 'Inspector Hornleigh' series and *Green for Danger* in particular, although the genre continues to develop in films as different as *Stage Fright* and *The Green Man* and in Rutherford's 'Miss Marple' quartet. [72] Sutton continues:

Rather than any 'overturning' of genre conventions as such, what these films might be said to share is a rejection of the stale heroics or cool detection associated with the protagonists of 'straight' crime-detection films of the time, replacing these qualities with an insistence on the eccentric or unconventional qualities of the protagonists and supporting characters. [73]

He notes the varying weight given to comedy and thriller elements in different films and how the former can be used to upset the balance of seriousness in a particular narrative. For example, Rutherford's *Murder Most Foul* clearly plays for laughs, much more than the previous films in the 'Miss Marple' series, with the result that the murders themselves take on a sense of unreality and we become more concerned for the investigative trail of the protagonist and her encounters with a group of suspects and the inevitably incompetent police force. In the same way, Sim's enquiries and escapades in *Green for Danger* become far more fascinating to us (the audience) than any of the murders or the remaining suspects, simply because of his detective's unconventional methods and engagingly witty personality. Sutton foregrounds the centrality and significance of comedy as a genre in British films of the 1930s and afterwards, as it deals with issues of class, sexuality and gender more directly than other forms of cinema produced at the time. His comments on 'female comedy' are of particular interest for the light they throw upon stars of the time like Gracie Fields, Jessie Matthews and Cicely Courtneidge and their possible impact as role models on a new film actress like Margaret Rutherford. Gracie Fields, for instance, sheds 'conventional cinematic notions of 'femininity', in looks, dress, manner, and narrative positioning', and while Rutherford might have envied her glamour, Sutton considers that Jessie Matthews is 'generally forced into masquerade and imposture in order to succeed in romance and showbusiness'. [74] A more likely precursor for Rutherford is surely Cicely Courtneidge, whom Sutton describes as 'even more desexualised than Gracie, her 'difference' being marked as eccentricity'; but while Gracie Fields' persona compels an audience (on and off screen) by its oscillating between an unusual possession, for a woman, over the direction of her films' narratives and a down-to-earth ordinariness, Courtneidge's appearances offer something altogether more complex. [75] Although married to fellow actor Jack Hulbert, with whom she often featured, she was star-billed but never cast as his love interest, a role invariably given to an actress of more conventional femininity. Even though popular, thirties genre conventions did not sanction Hulbert as a suitable screen partner for her. However, as Sutton appreciates: 'male eccentricity, of appearance or behaviour, did not necessarily prevent a comedian from being absorbed into the standard narrative of heterosexual romance, in which the hero's reward is

inevitably young and pretty'. [76] And yet Alastair Sim's two appearances with his wife (in *Wedding Group* (1936) and *This Man in Paris* (1939)) present small-scale opportunities for flirtatious banter between them, unlike Margaret Rutherford's many scenes opposite her husband (Stringer Davis) where they are rarely involved romantically and are rather portrayed as good friends. Sutton continues: 'Courtneidge, though the 'real' wife could only, when acting with her husband, appear as a desexualised 'aunt' figure; thus, her eccentricities could be both emphasized for comic effect, and comfortably contained or disavowed as she removed herself from the romantic arena'. [77] Sutton references the films *Aunt Sally* (1933, directed by Tim Whelan) which explores the notion of the marginalised eccentric woman, and *Me and Marlborough* (1935, directed by Victor Saville) in which Courtneidge features disguised as a man 'gleefully and successfully appropriating various signifiers of masculinity, such as male clothes, language, weaponry and equalities of physical prowess and leadership', which immediately brings to mind Rutherford's bizarre appearance as a railway tracklayer in *Murder She Said*, to say nothing of Sim's only performance in drag as headmistress Millicent Fritton in *The Belles of St. Trinian's*. [78] Sutton also notes that Hulbert's role in the film becomes, by contrast, one usually taken by a female character in that he becomes the object of Courtneidge's desire and motivator of her actions. Like Rutherford in her maturity, Courtneidge easily adopts more conventionally male attributes and her singularity and eccentricity are used to flout male authority and allow her to emerge as the dominant screen partner in the relationship with her husband. [79]

David Sutton also draws attention to the fact that British post-war comedies began to star comic actors like Alastair Sim and Alec Guinness rather than comedians like George Formby and Jack Hulbert, although he concedes that films of the 1950s like *The Belles of St. Trinian's* owe much to the traditions of music hall and revue from which so many comedies of the 1930s draw their inspiration. He believes that Sim's Miss Fritton as a comic creation 'may be more narratively 'contained' than those [roles] of the 1930s, but [it] still thrive[s] on a form of excess, still function[s] as [a] point...of attraction'. [80] The director Terence Davies considers that the first post-war decade is particularly successful for British comedy because of the calibre of actors including Alec Guinness, Rutherford, Sim and a host of others who are as

effective in the smaller roles. [81] But were the male and female of the character acting species always afforded the same opportunities by the industry at the time? Bryan Forbes has drawn attention to the dilemma of the young and beautiful Peggy Ashcroft who would challenge people to forget her looks and concentrate instead on her acting. Forbes notes the resentment of certain critics that some actors might be both beautiful and talented. [82] To her disappointment, this was never a problem for Margaret Rutherford, who, from her earliest performances was marked out to be 'a character actress, a term applied to women not considered attractive enough to be the love interest in films', in other words, the non-sexual woman. [83] Although it is interesting to see how this apparently fixed screen identity is toyed with in the 'Miss Marple' films - in the first two of the series the character has to decline a couple of marriage proposals.

Sue Aspinall has explored the representation of women in British films of the period, and although she tends to concentrate on younger and more glamorous stars like Margaret Lockwood, Phyllis Calvert, Deborah Kerr, Joan Collins and Diana Dors, rather than older character players like Rutherford, her observations are surely of relevance to all female stars who worked in the industry at the time. She notes the changes in 'ideological significance' from the 1930s for women with 'increased and continuing participation in paid employment' and 'increased opportunities for sexual activity and sexual knowledge'. [84] However, the films' narratives perpetuate an ideology of two irreconcilable types, that of housewife and mother or female worker. Perhaps, as Rutherford was not particularly identified with either it saved her (to a certain extent) from stereotypical representation? But Aspinall believes that the combination of a generally conservative narrative convention served to reinforce capitalist patriarchy, and that despite some leftish sympathisers, most British filmmakers were male and hardly pre-feminist crusaders. In the same way, the war had opened up new possibilities for women in the world of work, just as the new welfare state had at home, but any questioning of their traditional roles and their place in society went unchallenged for a generation. If, as Aspinall argues, British stars 'never matched up to Hollywood standards of sex appeal and glamour' then perhaps older, more eccentric performers like Rutherford represented something more authentically British and held the balance of experience

over their younger contemporaries who had to ape the American star system and play out a certain 'sexual objectification' in their promotion to advance their careers. [85]

As the many descriptions of Margaret Rutherford indicate, her 'image' is far from clear. It can be complex and occasionally paradoxical and contradictory, and quite unlike the young ingenues with whom she often shares the screen. Typical is Malcolm Boyd's appreciative portrait in *Variety* (1965). For him, Rutherford's various images are 'quite complicated, largely because they are made to appear simple'. [86] Her beauty is revealed through her human decency and earthy humour, although he is most struck by:

that indomitable face of British granite which under the stress of crisis, flexes itself into deep thought and then grim determination. Her moral decisions are clear as freshly fallen rain water: this is good and that is evil. Of course one always knows which side Miss Rutherford is fighting on. [87]

And yet he concludes that all he really knows about the actress is 'a combination of her images', an admission of the evident confusion for the viewer about what is real and what is acted. [88] Likewise, American critic Jerry Vermilye thinks her appeal is 'universal and knows no age barrier. She is forceful, yet pliable - fierce, yet human'. [89] George Howe, who played opposite Rutherford in the original stage production of *The Happiest Days of Your Life*, remembers:

She did not know how funny she was being. She never strove to be funny and was always sincere in her approach to a comic part...an unconscious comic...[who] could not help being amusing. She had nervous tricks...and these mannerisms were encouraged by film directors, much to the delight of her public. [90]

Her first biographer, Eric Keown, talks of her 'unique position in the public heart' and their perception of her as 'the universal aunt' who projected an 'eccentric absurdity and the warm

sympathy that lies only just below its surface'. [91] He records that:

from the start the technique of film acting fascinated her. Missing the warmth of an audience, she found it lonely work on the set, but the need to be precise, to remember that minute changes of expression would be visible to everyone and not merely to the front rows of the stalls, appealed to her. And with her long practice in elocution she was able to enrich the taut, chopped language of the cinema, that too often is jerked, as if it were tired chewing gum, from the side of the mouth. [92]

Like Keown and Boyd, others are intrigued by her face, body and style. Before embarking on a 1954 tour to Norway to read poetry, a *Daily Mail* picture is captioned: 'Only one woman can knot a scarf so jauntily, button a cardigan so carelessly, clasp a handbag so ineffectively', while *The New Yorker's* critic, Brendan Gill, is delighted by:

that great face with its beguiling assortment of crags and valleys, and that plump, ramshackle and yet quick moving body [which] dominate any setting; moreover by the authority of her style she breathes life into roles that without her would betray themselves as literally paper thin. [93]

Her fellow actors are similarly complimentary and insightful. Dame Flora Robson, who stars with Rutherford in *Murder at the Gallop*, recalls her as 'sincere and serious', and how she learned from Rutherford to play comedy seriously. [94] Frankie Howerd, her co-star in *The Runaway Bus* (1954), finds her to have 'absolutely no sense of humour', but was rather 'a serious actress interpreting and portraying eccentricities of character. For if she had no sense of humour, she did have a great sense of audience - she knew how to project a role'. [95] Keith Baxter, who met her while working on Orson Welles' *Chimes at Midnight*, records a memorable Mrs Malaprop in Sheridan's *The Rivals*:

She could bring the house down, but never for one second did she lose her own innate femininity. I thought how heartbreaking it was that this gentle woman, blessed with such an inner core of goodness, should have been saddled with a physical appearance that induced such laughter. She knew she looked funny, and she knew that, as an actor, she could use it...she never saw herself as a gorgon [or]...a grotesque. In her soul she was a girlish, loving, romantic woman and it was those qualities that lent such unique pathos to her work. [96]

If it sometimes seems as if she is repeating herself in her choice of roles, this is perhaps a mistaken impression. Certainly, her actor-husband Stringer Davis thinks so when he declares that 'Margaret...likes novelty. She likes playing a part that is different. She creates a part, like the headmistress, the shoplifter, then goes on to something else. She finds the old stuff intensely boring. That is why she remains on top'. [97] In the same interview Rutherford confirms that she prefers to look ahead, to think and talk about future projects. To Gwen Robyns she outlines her approach to acting:

I first read a part and usually know on sight if I want to play it. Then I just think about the character. I consciously work out what I am going to do with a role. I just play it as I think and have no 'picking-up' tricks. People say that I am a natural actress. I merely play a part as truthfully as I can.

I have been told that I can manipulate each part of my face with precision while the rest remains homely and normal. This is true, because like any trained and experienced actress I do have every twitch and ripple of my body under control. I have always known how to make it obey my mental image of a part. [98]

Brendan Gill thinks her particularly effective in comedy not only for her droll audacity but for her ability to convey a sense of appearing to exist both inside and outside her character at the

same time, along with a capacity for exuding sheer pleasure in performing. [99] But for Rutherford herself, acting is a much more simple process, as vital to her life and survival as breathing. For her, comedy as a genre is 'something that is alive to the fullest extent of my personality' as long as it is 'well written and in good taste'. [100] She never planned to become a comedy character performer. Rather: 'I have always felt like a bird. I have always wanted to be free to take wing...to escape from convention'. [101] Although when she says: 'I always try to underact, to make my eyes expressive or twitch my nose or tremble my chin - mannerisms that have naturally developed over the years', it is surely also true that those performances which 'take wing' remain her most memorable in the cinema. [102]

Alastair Sim is also at his best when his acting range is unconstrained, and seems delighted to escape convention at every possible opportunity. But when he started to become typecast as a 'heavy' in the 1930s he could not help lightening the sinister qualities of these roles with liberal doses of humour. This led him into comedy, but, like Rutherford, he never fully abandoned hopes to play more dramatic roles.

In common with his female counterpart, descriptions of Sim invariably liken him to assorted animals. Terence Pettigrew's is characteristic, but revealing:

Sim's eyebrows were extraordinary. They enjoyed unrestricted travel up and down that pleasantly rumpled face like hedgehogs scampering over an unmade bed. When they shot up in amazement it seemed they would go into orbit, and when they plummeted down in reproachful scowl they made his eyelids redundant...every mannerism in his huge box of tricks was sharpened to a fine edge. He looked at times like a turkey startled by bright sunlight - with much twitching and croaking and rolling of those big button eyes. But he could also chortle like a schoolboy peering through a crack in the gym-mistress's changing room - swooping to a low, rapturous chuckle that fizzed and splashed like vintage champagne. [103]

Ian McKellen, who acted with Sim on the stage, thinks of him as 'a tall man, shambling, [with

a] strange face - not beautiful. And everything looked rather comical about him - large fisheyes...he was funny. And at odds with the world'. [104] If McKellen cannot imagine Sim as King Lear he believes that he might have been cast more appropriately as The Fool. In fact when the self-deprecating Sim was appointed as Rector of Edinburgh University in 1948 he referred to himself as 'a qualified fool', a designation confirmed by his wife Naomi, who has said that 'he could not take himself seriously at any time', and yet 'he took his work seriously', although she recalls him telling her: 'Acting [is] not a man's job...the only excuse I have for being an actor is that I tried absolutely everything else first and failed at them all'. [105] If Sim, according to McKellen, was at odds with the world, then it also baffled him and made him suspicious of those in authority, which is the reason why so many of the establishment figures he portrays are shown to be fools.

Another colleague from the theatre, Patricia Routledge, has spoken of Sim's 'God-given face which was interesting enough if it didn't move. Then when it started to move it was intriguing. Then when it started to move with the mind behind it, it was something else altogether'. [106] Naomi Sim confirms that 'if his mind had conceived a thought that he wanted his body to illustrate, his body could do it absolutely instantaneously. There was no question of rehearsal or trying something out. Once the thought was there he could do it'. [107] Kerry Gardner, who worked with Sim on the stage, considers that his special qualities were revealed in an 'awareness of people's frailties and he would point them out with gentle and rather affectionate comment in his performances which made people laugh, basically at themselves. But he was never cruel. He had a loveability about his characterisations'. [108]

As a student of the actor's performances, Stephen Fry envies Sim's control, his 'utterly relaxed' manner, and the way he looks directly at his fellow actors, while Nigel Hawthorne admires his improvisatory skills, his gentleness and the understated delicacy of his technique. [109] Fry makes special mention of Sim's voice, with everything 'exquisitely phrased', and the impressionist Alistair McGowan talks of its rising inflection which was used to illustrate an insecurity in some of the characters he played, particularly those more isolated and marginalised in society. [110] Patricia Routledge also notes both the actor's stillness and his sense of danger, an attribute confirmed by Stephen Fry who never knows what Sim will do

next, asserting that often his choices are not likely to be found in the script. [111] If the results sometimes surprised audiences (and fellow actors) they also seemed completely natural in the context of the production.

Sim's most important audience was his wife Naomi who would critique aspects of his performances and knew him well enough to realise what he was trying to convey. Her first impression of him in 1926 was of a 'tall and gangly [man] with crisp, black hair already receding, a lively face with huge eyes, and a very beautiful smile' - she believed him to be 'about forty' (he was in fact barely twenty-six). [112] She is critical of his early roles in the theatre and the cinema for their lack of realism. Confronted by the brutal realities of the war, and the effect of acting in and directing plays by his friend James Bridie, Sim's acting style changes and the characters he plays are transformed from caricatures into real human beings. In her biography of Sim, his wife records how closely they worked together on stage plays but admits she had less to do with his work in the cinema. She remembers that:

Once Alastair had decided to do a film he studied the script and thought about the way he wanted to play the character for a long time, of course, and we discussed it often, but there were no hours and hours of learning lines...[he] could never settle to the serious learning of lines until he saw exactly how the director was going to set up the scene and what his own moves were going to be. Since he was, of course, entirely familiar with his character's situation in each scene it wasn't difficult for him to learn the exact lines very quickly once he knew how the scene would be shot. [113]

If Sim worked harmoniously with his wife and his fellow actors, he remained an enigma for most contemporary commentators. *Picturegoer's* Charles Hamblett is clearly fascinated by the actor in his portrait written for the magazine in the wake of the success of *The Happiest Days of Your Life*. On the one hand he acknowledges Sim's popularity with audiences and the respect he has earned in Britain and America; on the other he finds it hard to define his particular flair, putting it down to intelligent humour. And despite a description of him as the

'most outstanding character actor in pictures', he is also content to relegate him to the status of being 'not yet a fully-fledged star; merely a cut above the average run of supporting players'. [114] Hamblett is well aware of Sim's reluctance to discuss his craft, something which evidently bemuses the studio's publicity machine of the time. Sim's studio biography talks of a 'comparatively sudden rise to screen stardom', which also recognises his uniqueness, but which seems equally frustrated by the difficulty of disclosing much information about the man himself. [115] This is particularly evident in the encounter with R. Quilter Vincent on the set of *An Inspector Calls* (1954), although Sim's suspicion of the interviewer and his reticence at answering his questions presents a more complex and interesting figure who was not always content to play the industry game. [116] There is an evident contradiction between his unwillingness to theorise about his craft and someone who was only too eager to pass on the benefit of his knowledge and experience to a younger generation of actors. If he did not promote himself he quite definitely practised his own methods (as Naomi Sim reveals in her biography) and exerted an almost auteurist control over his own film appearances, from an initial discrimination to an active engagement with a script with which he would be free and whose lines he would often improvise, to say nothing of directors to whom he would make suggestions. When Quilter Vincent asks him if he is glad to play a serious role for a change, Sim replies that all the parts he plays are serious to him. Asked if he still enjoys acting, he returns, ambiguously: 'I don't feel that I'm acting now so much as *behaving* in a certain way'. [117] This anticipates a remark by John Ellis, when he is discussing the options of a star performer as a choice between over and under-performance. Ellis considers that the latter produces 'the effect of behaving rather than performing', although as 'anything that the star does becomes significant' then he/she 'is permitted to underact, compared to the supporting cast...[producing] the effect that the star behaves rather than acts'. [118]

Sim's comments to Quilter Vincent on the roles he would choose echo those of Rutherford, when he tells him:

I won't take on a part unless it has some facet of my own character in it. It's

either a man I would like to have been, or, but for the grace of God, might have been. But an actor shouldn't know what sort of person he is really; he is all people and nobody, he is what the part he is playing demands him to be, perhaps he is simply what the public wants him to be. [119]

Before going on to discuss a selection of Sim and Rutherford's performances, there is another aspect of their work, to which I have already alluded, which cannot be ignored: the influence and impact of their respective spouses, Naomi Sim and Stringer Davis, whose importance both personally and professionally is incalculable. Both knew their partners a long time - Stringer Davis for more than 40 years, Naomi Sim for over 50 - and as professional actors themselves they were able to use their knowledge of the industry and love of their craft to bear upon the work of their more famous spouses. In both cases the resulting association created an extraordinary symbiosis.

The effect of Alastair Sim upon the young Naomi Plaskitt was electric. They met in an amateur production of W.B. Yeats' *The Land of Heart's Desire* when she was a shy 12-year-old lacking in confidence, and he was 26. With his encouragement she won a scholarship to RADA at 16 and they married when she was 18 in 1932. Only four years later she appeared in the first of two films with her husband, *Wedding Group*. [120] Her role as Jessie the maid was slated to last three days, but extended to 13, to her obvious delight - 'I had the time of my life', she wrote later. [121] Unlike her relaxed comic turn in *This Man in Paris*, Jessie has a greater significance as a character opposite Sim's stern minister, Angus Graham. In the domestic scenes at the manse Sim is surrounded by women (Jessie and two daughters) and children (two young sons) but he has no wife, who we therefore presume to be dead. In her absence Jessie functions as a surrogate partner, helpmate and mother figure for the younger children as well as contributing to the running of the household. She also manages to reunite the lovers in the story, appears in the wedding group portrait of the film's title, and speaks the last words of the screenplay. As they pose for the photograph in the final scene, Sim turns to her: 'It's a grand match, Jessie', to which she responds: 'Aye, I made it mysel' ', an exchange which not only hints at the possibility of future romance between the two characters but encapsulates

the warmth of their real-life union.

Her unbilled cameo in *This Man in Paris* is even more playful. Colette MacKintosh (Naomi Sim) is the landlady of newspaper editor Lochlan McGregor (Sim), and in a brief breakfast scene the actress displays a caustic wit at the expense of her husband's character. Discovering a story in a rival newspaper, she taunts him: 'Aye, it's been going on a lot longer than yours and it always seems to get the news first!' And when he seems more concerned that his reporter, Drake (Barry Barnes), has failed to run the story for their newspaper rather than the fact that a man has been murdered, she chides him and punches his arm! As he races to the phone, pushing her out of his way, and tapping it impatiently for a number from the exchange, she points at him with a teaspoon and observes, with heavy irony: 'Would ye no be better to dial?!' Especially in profile she is hardly the archetypal cinematic beauty with her prominent nose, massive chin and toothy smile, but radiates enough vivacity and character to indicate that she might have developed into a fine supporting player. [122]

Stringer Davis functions in a more subtle way than his appearances might suggest. Unlike Naomi Sim's occasional and rather arbitrary performances, his are regular and largely contractual. He had known Margaret Rutherford since they first met in rep. at Oxford where he was acting and producing. Over the next decade and a half she enjoyed great success in the theatre and then the cinema, leaving him far behind. Feeling guilty about this she often had it built into her contract that he was to be allowed a small role in any production in which she might appear. But this stipulation was not set in stone and there are many significant films from her maturity in which he does not feature, including *Passport to Pimlico*, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1952), *Chimes at Midnight* and *A Countess From Hong Kong*.

The films in which he does appear may usefully be divided into those in which he plays scenes with his wife and others where he is cast as a separate individual. In the latter category, however small his role, he is usually depicted as a facilitator of the action and often works as a benign influence on the progress of the narrative: in *The Happiest Days of Your Life*, he is Reverend Rich, the most kindly among a trio of school governors inspecting what they do not yet know is now a co-educational establishment; in *Curtain Up* (1952) he again dons a dog collar as a vicar who attends to Harry (Robert Morley), producer of Catherine's

(Margaret Rutherford) play, and unconscious after a fall; in *Castle in the Air* (1952) as a hall porter he ensures that a message for Miss Nicholson (M. R.) is received, and is concerned for her welfare; as a publishing director in *Miss Robin Hood* (1952) his single line praises a writer (Richard Hearne) who befriends the title character (M. R.); he plays a harrassed shop assistant at a department store sale in *Trouble in Store* (1953), blind to the pilfering of Miss Bacon (M. R.); *The Runaway Bus* (1954) finds him as a transport official inoffensively moving little flags around on a map while Cynthia Beeston (M. R.) wields her umbrella aboard a fogbound bus; in *Mad About Men* (1954) he plays another vicar, concerned that someone - probably Miranda (Glynis Johns) - has left some rare Spanish blooms in his collection box; *Just My Luck* (1957) casts him as a Goodwood official who helps Norman (Wisdom) locate a jockey, gain his winnings and get the girl of his dreams; and in *I'm All Right Jack* he is a reporter who poses questions to Kite (Peter Sellers) and Windrush (Ian Carmichael). *The Smallest Show on Earth* (1957) presents a rare example where, as Emmett, one of three directors of a rival cinema to the Bijou where Mrs Fazackerlee (Margaret Rutherford) works, Davis is cast in direct opposition to his wife. Of these performances Rutherford comments: 'We have a clear understanding that once on the set we never interfere with each other's work. If [he] has a little scene on his own then I always go to my dressing-room and leave him to get on with it'. [123]

Of greater interest are the other group of films where Davis functions as the enabler, helpmate and collaborator. Here all his scenes (with a few brief exceptions) are with Rutherford - as in real life. The first of these - and his initial appearance in one of her films - is *Miranda* (1948) where he plays a helpful museum attendant to Nurse Cary (Rutherford) who calls him 'young man' even though Davis was then nearly 48! Their scene lasts all of 15 seconds and Rutherford was reportedly happy once it was in the can. In *Innocents in Paris* (1953) Davis plays another artist (Arbuthnott) to his wife's Gwladys Inglott. His lifetime's work is painting copies of the Mona Lisa, and Gwladys pleases him by purchasing one of his canvasses - his first sale. *Aunt Clara* (1954) (played by Rutherford) allows him a couple of lines as a doctor expressing concern for her state of health. However his best known role is that of Mr Stringer opposite his wife's Miss Marple in the 1960s series of films. The part was

invented by the scriptwriters (David Pursall and Jack Seddon) and owes nothing at all to Agatha Christie. Mr Stringer (the local librarian) acts as Miss Marple's confidant and errand-boy, but more importantly stands in as a kind of replacement for a husband. They appear together in many domestic scenes without the least suggestion of impropriety, and, in contrast to Miss Marple's marriage proposals (from characters played by James Robertson Justice and Robert Morley) which are doomed to failure, her relationship with Mr Stringer is a constant, based on mutual respect and affection. Her reliance on his help and support is matched by his devotion and concern, to the extent that he seems to be willing to put his whole existence on permanent hold for her. The effect of this partnership spills over into his cameo in *The V.I.P.s* where he plays an old-fashioned, courteous waiter and hall porter to Rutherford's Duchess of Brighton. He even demonstrates 'the Twist', immediately evoking the Hunt Ball sequence in *Murder at the Gallop*. What is most interesting in the Miss Marple films, and in *The V.I.P.s*, is the extent to which Rutherford and Davis appear to exchange traditional gender roles, whereby she appears strong, unstoppable and fearless while he is cautious, softly spoken and shyly charming. His acting is not always admired, but he uses his gentle presence to set the brilliance of his wife's performances into ever sharper relief. Those who criticise him perhaps fail to recognise that his understated personality effectively provides a necessary contrast and support for his wife both as an on-screen actor and an off-screen husband. [124]

The parts played by Naomi Sim and Stringer Davis alternate between amusing cameos and more complex roles which forge deeper connections to the parts played by their spouses. Unlike, say, Hitchcock's famous appearances in his own films, neither of them brings any other baggage with them to the screen other than their marital status. [125] Thus the continuing fascination for the cineaste remains the interplay between the relationship depicted on the screen and what we know of their actual married lives, as the one is so clearly dependent on the other. [126]

With *Blithe Spirit* and *Green for Danger* Sim and Rutherford enter artistic maturity. Neither Rutherford's Madame Arcati nor Sim's Inspector Cockrill consume the most screen time, but each character, although flawed, seems to appropriate the narrative for their own purposes and dominate the proceedings. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine either film without them.

Rutherford's association with *Blithe Spirit* goes back to 1941 and its theatrical conception by Noel Coward who, according to studio publicity, apparently wrote the play in five days! Although not devised with Rutherford in mind, once it was finished Coward thought of her and added extra dialogue - 'Margaret took possession of my pen' as he put it. [127] It opened in Manchester in June 1941 to good reviews and soon enjoyed an extended London run, Rutherford staying with the cast for over two years. However Coward was not always happy with her interpretation. His diary for the 12th of July records that he 'saw part of *Blithe Spirit*. Good House. Performance all right except for Margaret Rutherford', a reaction corroborated by Michael Redgrave who ventured to praise the actress playing Madame Arcati to be met with 'one clipped word - "Amateur!"' [128] One can almost hear Madame Arcati's reply in a line from the film: "'amateur" is a word I cannot tolerate!'. Co-scriptwriter Anthony Havelock-Allan attributes Coward's attitude to his exasperation over Rutherford's inability to give the same performance in the theatre two nights running. [129] Coward was also unenthusiastic about the film version, but fortunately most other commentators disagree. Rutherford's eccentric but realistic portrayal of a medium is all the more remarkable in the light of a shooting schedule beset with problems. Coward, who was away for much of the time entertaining the troops abroad, left instructions that there should be no alterations or expansions to his original text, assuring the director that he was more than capable of coping with its particular demands. David Lean was equally unsure he was able to tackle it. One difficulty was the limiting of much of the action to a single room; another was the special lighting required for Elvira (Kay Hammond), the ghost of Charles Condomine's (Rex Harrison) first wife; in addition, Lean and Rex Harrison clashed on how the comedy should be played; the casting of Harrison (too young), Constance Cummings (as Ruth, too American and too pretty) and Kay Hammond (not pretty enough) was problematic; a closed set was imposed by the director as much of the film had to be rehearsed like a play, without unnecessary interruptions; and delays were also

caused by the colour processing and reshooting. The original 12 week schedule became 6 months. Rutherford complained to Gwen Robyns: 'The film[ing] seemed to go on forever...we all became very tired of it towards the end'. [130] And yet, despite all the difficulties, David Lean grew very fond of Rutherford and learned to love the film in his later years. He recollected:

I always thought she must have been aware of how eccentric she was, but not at all. For one scene she had to eat a sandwich. She'd say something, take a bite and munch away in a very funny exaggerated way. I went up to her on rehearsal and said, "Margaret, a little less with the sandwich I think". And she'd do it again and I'd say, "Even less still".

We broke for lunch and went to the restaurant at Denham and I remember looking across and there was Margaret eating a sandwich in exactly the same way as she did on *Take One*. [131]

His comments illustrate the dilemma of other directors (like Ken Annakin) who had to shoot until Rutherford produced something magical and appropriate to the scene; in addition, it is evident that Rutherford's eccentricity was an inseparable element of the performance itself. From Rutherford's perspective the experience garnered her the best notices of her career and an international reputation. But what continues to fascinate is the challenge to Rutherford's delightful character study of Madame Arcati by the competing claims of at least three other contributors to the narrative. From the beginning of the film the emphasis on Coward's creative input is constantly underlined. Not only is the billing 'Noel Coward's *Blithe Spirit*', but his producer credit appears after that of director David Lean, almost as if to undermine him. This impression is heightened by Coward's own unmistakable voiceover which introduces the opening scene. However, Lean's success in turning an essentially theatrical piece into cinema should not be underestimated: the camera pans and advances forward with admirable freedom, there are excellent exterior scenes which could not possibly work in the theatre (including the moment when Elvira, with Charles as her passenger, drives past a traffic

policeman to whom she appears invisible!), to say nothing of the special effects of lighting and make-up which won an Oscar. Finally there is Rex Harrison, whose considerable personality is somewhat hijacked by the others. As the leading man he was perhaps entitled to feel he had been a little sidelined. His memory of working on the film is encapsulated in a couple of sentences: 'David [Lean] set up a stage and just photographed it. Four of us got up in line and then Margaret Rutherford would walk down the middle pulling faces'. [132] Film historians must judge if his evident frustration is justified or merely sour grapes. How different is Rutherford's own assessment of the character when she comments: 'Underneath the comic facade I saw a person of flesh and blood with serious beliefs'. [133] She continues: 'I never intend to be a satirist, I never intend to play for laughs. I am always surprised that audiences think me funny at all. I find it hard to even analyse what I do except perhaps in my timing...If my work looks effortless, it is not. It is a question of tireless polishing the whole time'. [134] Her remarks confirm the impression of the critic Dilys Powell who enthuses about a 'naturally comic performance' which works because Rutherford does not play it 'with the seeming awareness of being funny', unlike Rex Harrison who appears overly self-conscious by comparison. [135]

From the moment Condomine and his second wife Ruth (Cummings) engage in conversation in the first scene it is in anticipation of the forthcoming evening, and especially the visit of Madame Arcati. The latter is of course unaware (until later) that Condomine is merely using her as research material for his new book about a homicidal medium, and his patronising tone diminishes our regard for him whilst increasing our intrigue for her. At his last line - 'We can't hurt the old girl's feelings however funny she is' - we cut to a radiant Margaret Rutherford enjoying a bicycle ride, her cape and scarf fluttering behind her. Her entry proper into the drama a few screen minutes later - through Condomine's french windows at the back of the house, surprising the maid (and us) - effectively brings the film to life and provides its focus. She is at once charming and garrulous, racing away with Coward's verbal fluency with a beautifully sculptured dexterity as she dances and sings her way through the part: 'It was wonderful cycling through the woods this evening. I was deafened with birdsong...Down with your head, up with your heart and you're over the top like a flash and skimming down the

other side [of the hill] like a dragonfly'. She may irritate Ruth with her 'schoolgirl phraseology' ('in a jiffy', 'fire away') but delights us with her sheer zest for life, her colourful clothing and beads lending her a resemblance to a cross between a Girl Guide and an ageing beatnik. Her mood changes in a later scene when she discovers she has been invited to the seance 'in a spirit of mockery', and it is hard not to feel that Ruth deserves everything that Elvira - sometimes literally - throws at her. Of course Madame Arcati's sincerity wins out over the sarcasm and cynicism of the others, although her triumphant return of the wives' spirits is muted by their continuing presence as ghosts alongside their now deceased husband - Madame Arcati is fallible after all.

Margaret Rutherford believed that Coward had written *Blithe Spirit* on a theme deliberately unconnected with the war, and yet, despite its surface hilarity, it is full of meditations about the afterlife and presents a rather elegiac reflection on the end of his theatrical partnership with Gertrude Lawrence who had married and gone to live in America. In the same way, Alastair Sim's role as Inspector Cockrill in *Green for Danger* uses humour to mediate the horrors of murder and the tedium of the traditional whodunit against an all too real Home Front background, but secure in the certain knowledge that in 1946 the daily reality of the war was over at last. Sim's flippant fallibility overturns detective clichés, allowing his inspector to lampoon the posturings of other authority figures, like those in the medical profession, as well as barely disguising his own insecurity. His provocative and unorthodox questioning of the suspects is prefaced by a scene, prior to his arrival, where Dr Barnes (Trevor Howard) openly challenges the authority of his senior registrar Dr White (Ronald Adam), a scenario whose unpunished insubordination can barely be imagined in the film's war context, but is refreshing from the point of view of its real life aftermath (i.e. victory).

The screenplay was developed by Sidney Gilliat and Claud Guernsey from an unimpressive novel by Christianna Brand and marked the first film to be produced at Pinewood since the studio was derequisitioned. Sim was apparently not the first choice for the inspector and one wonders how differently his part would have been played by Robert Morley (who declined the role due to commitments in the theatre). Naomi Sim suggests that it was her husband's first starring role but this is surely untrue even if he does establish himself as the film's major

protagonist. [136] His name actually appears after Sally Gray, Trevor Howard, Rosamund John and the title, but his presence is acknowledged by the unique manner of his credit ('And presenting Alastair Sim as Inspector Cockrill'), and the fact that, like Dr Montgomery in *Waterloo Road* (1944), the action takes place as a flashback within his mind as he dictates a letter. Like the earlier film an expressive voiceover stamps a kind of authority over the narrative long before we see his character in the flesh, some thirty-five minutes or so into the story. Up to this point most of the scenes have taken place at night, giving the film an English *noir* quality, until Sim arrives at the hospital in bright sunlight as though he has literally appeared to bring illumination. The voiceover particularises his involvement in the case: 'I myself, in person, arrived on the scene'. Like Dr Montgomery, his pronouncements are patriarchal and paternalist, a fact emphasized by the presence of so many women in the cast, but unlike his previous character Sim's inspector is immediately revealed as flawed. The solemnity of his voiceover is wonderfully at odds with the jaunty figure who appears on the screen carrying a briefcase, an umbrella resting on one shoulder. His whimsical personality is underpinned by William Alwyn's score and his fallibility suggested by a running physical gag when he hears the sound of a bomber overhead and leaps over a gate to find cover at the sound of a nearby explosion. Later, as he hides at the entrance to an underground shelter his voiceover is economical with the truth: 'From time to time one of those infernal devices roared overhead...but such trifles did not for a moment distract me from my purpose'. On the last occasion when he looks around for a place to secrete himself as he leaves the hospital, the noise turns out to be a passing motorcyclist to Sim's dismay and our amusement. He has some other marvellous moments aided by Gilliat's imaginative direction: note the self-satisfied smile as he swivels round on a stool clutching his umbrella and briefcase, the voiceover declaring: 'Yes, I was idiotically pleased with myself at the time'; and Sim's shadow on a sunlit path as the voiceover announces lugubriously: 'The next morning my presence lay over the hospital like a pall'; also, his disappointment at guessing the wrong solution to his bedtime whodunit, prophetic of his miscalculation at the climax of the drama; finally, his open-mouthed, speechless amazement at being outmanoeuvred by the murderer's suicide. Unlike his 1930s work the verbal witticisms provided by the script are carefully woven into the story and remain

consistent with his character. When he announces himself at the hospital with: 'Scotland Yard I'm afraid [chuckles]...sickening, isn't it?', the remark functions both as an inconsequential aside and an assertion of his eccentric nonconformist detective who exhibits a mischievousness which clearly delighted post-war-weary audiences and critics. Despite its often flippant representation, his detective parody is never achieved at the expense of a lessening of dramatic tension.

The two films share a sense of post-war release, reflected in the exuberance of both performances. Like Rutherford, Sim's impeccable timing is praised, and there is a considerable sense of anticipation before the appearance of their characters in each film. These are both revealed to be flawed but display a naturalism beside the more one-dimensional suspects in *Green for Danger* or the sceptical guests at the seance in *Blithe Spirit*. Above all, Madame Arcati and Inspector Cockrill are outsiders with whom the other characters in the narrative are compelled to interact in order to propel it forward with any conviction.

Their roles in two subsequent Ealing comedies are far less substantial, but still crucial to the development of each plot. Margaret Rutherford's Professor Hatton-Jones in *Passport to Pimlico* and Alastair Sim's Felix H. Wilkinson in *Hue and Cry* are also outsiders, but while the first is consensually integrated into the community, the second stays determinedly in the shadows. Both, however, make the maximum of impact in the minimum of scenes. Their first sequence in each film creates the necessary impression.

Rutherford's initial appearance is delayed until 18 minutes into the film. In fact she has to be questioned twice by the coroner (Stuart Lindsay) before she responds to him. At first all we see is a figure rummaging in an ancient casket before it is snapped shut to reveal a female professor, a more unlikely characterisation in a film of 1949. She uses the courtroom as her academic platform to explain the meaning of the parchment found in the bomb explosion, and sways around with considerable expressive freedom in the witness stand, declaring, to her attentive audience, that 'with the aid of this most exciting document I am now able to change the course of history'. As she says the word 'Pimlico' her glockenspiel watch tinkles as if in agreement with her. Her explanation is further 'translated' by the coroner who confirms that

the local people of Pimlico are indeed Burgundians! The end of her speech is drowned in a general hubbub but her three-minute cameo is quite enough to establish her character. In a later scene she is ecstatic to meet the ancestor of the Duke of Burgundy (Paul Dupuis) whose lineage she will be delighted to confirm. A third scene finds her aboard a tube train, her presence announced by her trademark tinkling watch. When the train stops for the Pimlico customs and she is reunited with the Duke, she is able to endorse his rightful succession to the title - with 'Floreat Burgundia!' as her jubilant cry. She pops up again towards the end of the film merely to express her concern for the rather dilapidated condition of the Burgundian standard which she wants to return to a museum, but this is a brief moment as her character is no longer essential to a narrative which has drawn the natives of Pimlico back into the larger English community from which she herself came and to which she will now return.

Sim's appearance in *Hue and Cry* is also delayed by about 18 or 19 minutes into the film. It is well prepared by director Charles Crichton, who uses a combination of sinister music by Georges Auric - also the composer of the score for *Passport to Pimlico*, a noirish use of shadows, and an unexpected overhead shot emphasizing an imposing block of flats as contrasted with the two boys who walk towards it and seem like ants by comparison, all of which creates an unsettling prelude to Sim's first scene. As they ascend the steps Joe (Harry Fowler) and Alec (Douglas Barr) are stalled by the sound of Sim's reclusive author Felix H. Wilkinson whose measured tones echo menacingly down the stairwell: 'Your fate is in my hands...nothing can save you now...you are all alone...and I have a silencer on this gun'. The smaller of the two boys (Alec) starts to turn back but Joe urges him onwards and into Sim's top floor flat. Once they realise that he is merely reading a story on to tape and he that they are fans of his work, Sim's mood brightens, he welcomes them inside and serves them 'ginger pop', his own glass laced with gin. We then have another opportunity to enjoy Sim's declamatory reading of the next installment of his detective story which he plays with evident satisfaction for the boys, his voice this time oddly detached from his person by the dictaphone (which he jokingly refers to as 'Dick'). His mood alters again when he realises that a gang of crooks have appropriated the code he invented for their own purposes, and he warns the boys against going to the police with: 'Remember what happened to Nicky the Nark!'. He greets his

cat affectionately and sends away the boys, slamming the door behind them. Throughout the encounter his persona is also established by an odd combination of clothing including a waistcoat, tie and long scarf, then varied by the addition of a curious polka-dot dressing gown in a second scene which is considerably briefer than the first. Joe blackmails Sim to write a story by the morning, which will aid the eventual capture of the crooks. Sim at first refuses until he realises he has no choice, sighing: 'Oh how I loathe adventurous-minded boys!' A third even shorter appearance is just a single shot showing Sim fidgetting with his scarf and stuffing it into the bell of his radio loudspeaker, his character now illustrated by urgent music alone, as the film veers towards its climax and the children foil the crooks. At around eight minutes in total, Sim's character occupies less screen time than Rutherford's professor in *Passport to Pimlico*, and yet his charismatic eccentric is almost more memorable and certainly more vivid than either of the other major adult roles in the film played by Jack Warner and Valerie White.

Another significant aspect of Sim and Rutherford's star character performances is revealed in a pair of sequels, a follow-up and a remake which are illustrative of both actors' enduring popularity. Neither *Miranda* nor its lesser sequel *Mad About Men* represents great film-making, but they contain one of Rutherford's own favourite characterisations, Nurse Cary, the only person considered eccentric enough to be entrusted to look after Glynis Johns' mermaid. The first film's narrative had been polished on the stage before the young director Ken Annakin was assigned to the version for the cinema. But despite the happy outcome in terms of its performances Rutherford again encountered a professional jealousy on the set, similar to that of Rex Harrison when she worked on *Blithe Spirit*. In one scene Griffith Jones (playing Doctor Paul Marten) attempted to upstage Rutherford (herself no mean steal-stealer) only to be reprimanded by the director. Annakin describes her as 'that most generous and superb old English actress [who] didn't have to be talking to catch your eye and make you laugh or cry, or just get a warm feeling about her! She used to do something quite unique with her mouth and lower jaw'. [137] Outlining his approach to working with her, he continues: 'one would gently rough out the movements, rehearse the scene as little as possible, and turn on the cameras until she produced that wonderfully funny (or sad) expression that made you love her'. [138] Annakin is particularly fond of three Rutherford scenes in the film. [139] The first

shows her suspicion about her new charge turn to wide-eyed amazement and pleasure when she realises Miranda is a mermaid, her delight registered by a radiant close-up. The second occurs when Rutherford impulsively demonstrates the Mazurka for Miranda, singing and dancing, bending down, waving her arms in the air, gesturing with her hands and spinning around until she is aware Doctor Marten (Griffith Jones) has entered the room when she retreats in a flush of embarrassment. [140] The third is the moment when Miranda presents her with a gift of real pearls which she at first refuses and then is moved and happy to accept. Annakin finds Rutherford amusing but senses her great humanity too. In his autobiography he conflates the second and third scenes but his comments usefully summarise the experience:

Maggie took the pearls, looked at them as if they were the most priceless treasure and, despite her weight and age, did a spontaneous pirouette around the room, delicate as thistledown. I think we made five takes, and the last one gave me goosepimples, so I printed it!

This was one of the great moments for which instinctively I had known I must become a director. I had created a moment of magic. [141]

Only Rutherford and Johns survive from the earlier film in *Mad About Men*, which is made in colour. Yet, despite this, and although Nurse Cary dances, sings, even swims (!) and is given far more opportunities than in *Miranda*, somehow greater exposure to the character in a more diffuse narrative produces a less focussed performance. For example, much is made in the publicity for the second film of Rutherford's swimming prowess as if in compensation for the lack of any truly magical moments like those found in the first, as I outline above. Perhaps it is merely that the young Ken Annakin is more successful in capturing Rutherford's natural spontaneity and vivacity in *Miranda* than Ralph Thomas in *Mad About Men* where the actress seems to convey a far less memorable character in a more routine performance.

The popularity of Norman Wisdom at least ensured that Rutherford's two films with him were widely seen, although her billing as co-star is hardly commensurate with the amount of screen time she occupies in either film. In the first, *Trouble in Store*, it is surely Jerry

Desmonde and Lana Morris who are more visible. However, Rutherford's experience and resourcefulness tell over that of Wisdom, who she remembers being 'very uncertain as we began shooting' and full of 'doubts and uncertainties'. [142] She managed to persuade him to have fun on the set of his first film, 'to be more natural and loosen up' and 'learn the difference between stage and film technique' both in terms of scale and timing. [143] The resulting contrast of styles is all too apparent, and while Wisdom is saddled with slapstick, sentiment and songs which hold up the progress of the narrative unnecessarily, Rutherford is always more restrained and sophisticated. Much of her fooling is quite often managed alone. There is, for example, a priceless moment when her outsized licking of luggage labels on to a suitcase is more intrinsically comic than any scriptwriter might have hoped. And in the sequence when her shoplifter, Miss Bacon, tries on an assortment of hats, much of her dialogue is delivered as a running commentary to no one in particular, spoken out loud. Then, after a screen absence of over 35 minutes or so, she reappears at the department store sale for her finest moment when, thanks to trick photography, a model train appears to run inside the sleeve of her coat! By the second film, *Just My Luck*, Wisdom was a major British star and Rutherford recalls that they 'were already seasoned troupers by then', but she has even less to do. [144] Her appearance has little relevance to the plot and some critics have even considered it unnecessary. [145] She is certainly at home in the company of a veritable zoo of animals (with whom she enjoyed acting), although her portrayal of an unlikely aristocratic eccentric with an Irish brogue inherits some of Wisdom's sentimentality. However, her final speech, to herself - 'Ah, the young...may God bless them...reckless...foolish...mad...crazy...adorable' - is wonderfully nuanced, as she moves from sitting to standing to clasping her hands under her chin to cuddling a rabbit, and from quiet recollection to assertive enthusiasm and back - a microcosm of a performance which magnificently displays exquisite subtlety and range.

While Rutherford's appearances in these films can be described as co-starring or cameo roles, Sim's are expected to carry the burden of each narrative. In fact he plays two parts in *The Belles of St. Trinian's*, that of magisterial headmistress Millicent Fritton and her crooked bookmaker brother Clarence. In Sim's first scene they are featured together, apparently in the same physical space, certainly a greater technical novelty in 1954 than it would be now. There

is also a reference made to a third character, their mother, who hangs in a portrait on the wall of Millicent's study and who is again another likeness of Sim. But it is the formidable headmistress that is the actor's most unforgettable creation. When impressionist Alistair McGowan first saw the film he did not realise that the character was actually played by a man and now considers it the 'best performance of a woman given by a man'; he is particularly inspired by Sim's vocal delivery remarking that the actor did not need to pitch his voice up higher in the manner of others (he mentions Robin Williams' Mrs Doubtfire and Dustin Hoffmann's Tootsie) but merely to give it 'a light touch'; neither does Sim feel the need to 'camp up' the character to any great extent, and the result for McGowan is 'very realistic, very subtle - I was convinced'. [146] Patricia Routledge has spoken of Miss Fritton's 'exquisite detail. She's very stylish and [has] a great sense of her own femininity without any awkwardness or gaucheness'. [147] Routledge believes that Sim's comedy is quite different from much of today's 'look at me, aren't I funny?' variety and notes his obsession with 'the moment' and the constancy of great focus on detail in his work. Apparently Sim's daughter Merlith used to show publicity pictures of Millicent and Clarence to people as 'my parents', and Naomi Sim has recognised another family connection. She:

liked his Miss Fritton because he made her so gentle and sweet-natured. Seeing him for the first time dressed and made up at the studios was a very strange experience for me. On his high heels he towered over me, the beautifully coiffed wig adding to his height and the necessary padding to his girth, a rather monstrous female reminding me slightly of my great-aunt Anne but hardly at all of Alastair. [148]

Sim's impersonation harks back to the chaotic world of *The Happiest Days of Your Life*, a fact emphasized by the presence of so many of the same actors in the cast, especially Joyce Grenfell and George Cole who are the most prominent. Marcia Landy also thinks Sim's Miss Fritton signals 'the reversal of all roles and therefore all behavioural expectations about males and females. His impersonation also divests power and authority of its solemn aura'. [149]

Unlike Margaret Rutherford, who was happy to recreate her role as Nurse Cary in *Mad About Men* a full six years after the original film and to work again with Norman Wisdom in *Just My Luck*, Sim seems to have approached the sequel to *The Belles of St. Trinian's* (1954) with some reluctance. The result is that his cameo of two scenes in *Blue Murder at St. Trinian's* (1957) is disappointingly brief but the effect of his performance, especially in the first film, has such an impact that some commentators are convinced that he stars in the entire series. This diffidence about the repetition of characters in the cinema is also true of another of his most famous portrayals, that of Ebenezer Scrooge. Twenty years after Brian Desmond Hurst's feature film of 1951 Sim was persuaded to repeat the role in an animated version of the story, considering that if the result was definitive enough he would never have to play the part again! Of course he was aided by the fact that the film would only feature his voice and compress the narrative to twenty-six minutes - i.e. under a third of the length of the original feature. Comparisons are instructive, especially in view of the controversial nature of Sim's original performance, and its gradual acceptance as a classic interpretation, and its later evolution. For example, the compression of the scene when Marley's ghost appears to Scrooge from eight minutes of screen time in the original to around three minutes in the remake is beneficial to the narrative in that the subsequent visitations of the spirits are now in more logical proportion to the rest of the story. However, the reduction of the final scenes of Scrooge's redemption from around twelve minutes to about three or four drastically lessens their emotional impact and deprives us of one of the best features of Sim's original performance. But despite the brevity of the animated version there is a greater subtlety in the characterisations. For instance, the scene of Marley's ghost is blighted in the first film by the overprominence of shrieking music (by Richard Addinsell) on the soundtrack, the jangling of chains and Sim's repeated yelling, while Michael Hordern's Jacob Marley alternates between a self-conscious monotone and an ear-piercing squeal. Twenty years later both actors offer a more modulated vocal delivery which still provides variety but without the need for excessive mannerisms.

Variety considers the original *Scrooge* (1951) 'a grim thing...long, dull and greatly overdone' and that Sim 'without directorial or script restraint, stalks through the footage like a tank-town

Hamlet'; their reviewer concludes that 'neither Sim's name, nor those of the other British players will mean anything on the marquees for stateside playdates'. [150] Unsurprisingly, Naomi Sim remembers things rather differently:

I liked most of the film but particularly the scenes of Scrooge's redemption towards the end, where Alastair put so much of himself into the joy of having the scales lifted from his eyes and of being given another chance. This film did much better in America than it did over here. Alastair once had a letter from an American who said that watching *Scrooge*, which was televised every year, was always an essential part of his family's Christmas Day. [151]

And the majority of critics seem to agree with her, although the doubts remain and it has become hard to dissociate criticism of the film and its director from assessments of the actual performances. For instance, a contemporary reaction by Milton Shulman in *The Evening Standard* believes the adaptation 'makes Scrooge credible at last', but regrets the film's lack of imagination (and budget), while Sim is the character 'as I think Dickens wanted him to be'. [152] Others are persuaded by Sim's reformation at the end of the film but less than convinced by his attempt at curmudgeonliness. Unusually, the critic of *The New Yorker* believes him to be successful until the moment of his transformation, while Hollis Alpert, writing in *The Saturday Review*, claims him as 'the most marvelous and wonderful Scrooge of all', and talks of 'the magic allure of the Sim personality' who demonstrates 'the basic primer of acting'; Alpert considers that the performance will gain Sim the largest U.S. audience thus far in his career - completely overturning the opinion of *Variety's* reviewer. [153] The studio publicity machines for both versions of the story are particularly anxious to assert a sense of authenticity. Thus, in 1951, Sim's casting is said to be inspired, high profile stars like Bette Davis and Douglas Fairbanks jnr. are said to be fans of the actor, and, most important, are the quoted remarks of Dickens' grand-daughter, Mrs Alice Waley, who visited the set. [154] She is reported to have said that 'it seemed as if Leech's original illustrations had come to life

before my eyes' and that it had been 'a fascinating experience to watch Mr Sim re-creating the character of Scrooge. How my grandfather would have loved this film!' [155] By 1971 this need for authenticity is to be found in 'the Dickens dedication' of the film-makers, the faithfulness of the script to the original text, the use of period prints, but most of all that the words are 'impeccably voiced' by Sim as 'the definitive Scrooge'. [156]

More recent reappraisals of the live-action film are generally affirmative, often linking Sim's iconic performance with the film itself. Thus Terence Pettigrew thinks it 'a near-perfect adaptation' with Sim coming 'close to the popular conception of Scrooge'. [157] Jeffrey Richards places *Scrooge* with other Dickens' adaptations of the 1940s like David Lean's *Great Expectations* (1946) and *Oliver Twist* (1948), and Cavalcanti's *Nicholas Nickelby* (1947), as part of a series which cross-fertilises two prevailing trends in cinema, that of the Gainsborough period melodramas and the Hollywood film *noir*. He thinks they 'restored the darkness to the Dickensian vision and retold the stories in a shadowy, atmospheric chiaroscuro Dorean London, far removed from the bright, pastoral imagery of 1930s Dickens'. [158] He also views them as documents of social concern in the context of post-war reconstruction and the new welfare state, conferring 'definitive' status on them with their 'performances which have not been matched in cinema since'. [159] But is Brian Desmond Hurst's *Scrooge* really the equal of the others? Certainly not for Tom Charity of *Time Out*, who thinks the film is 'no classic', the adaptation 'prosaic' and the director unexceptional without 'much facility for cutting or movement'; he is especially critical of the choppiness of the transitions between scenes, something which is treated with far more imagination in the 1971 animation, but is careful to isolate Sim as 'splendidly aloof'. [160] Sue Harper and Vincent Porter call the film 'an artistic triumph' whose art-direction strikes 'a balance between a Dickensian Gothicism and a period realism', and whose total effect is 'well-proportioned, with major and minor roles well co-ordinated, a shapely narrative, and a comely texture'. [161] In addition they note Hurst's 'even-handed' approach in not favouring Sim's central character too much during filming, 'a difficult task, since his was an unusually effusive performance'. [162] This concurs with Hurst's own account of the film which details a difference of opinion with Sim on the shooting of a particular scene with Kathleen Harrison, and perhaps explains why

her landlady and a whole host of subsidiary characters are virtually absent from the remake, possibly at the actor's suggestion and not merely due to the requirements of American network television that the narrative be compressed. [163] Like *Blithe Spirit*, the competing claims of Dickens' story, Hurst's direction and Sim's performance perhaps indicate a struggle for authorship of the original film.

Rather than examine the relative failure of two substantial star character parts in *Miss Robin Hood* and *Aunt Clara*, even though the latter marks one of Rutherford's own personal favourite roles in the cinema, it seems more appropriate to discuss one of her most iconic, especially at a time in her career when her status as a star of the big screen was less assured than that of Alastair Sim. I am thinking, of course, of her Miss Prism in Anthony Asquith's *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Critical dissection of the film is largely concerned with its effectiveness (or not) as filmed theatre. A typical reaction, by Geoff Brown, regrets that the director 'never attempts any cinematic wit to complement the verbal ping-pong of Wilde's play: his cameras do little more than reverently record a great patriotic theatrical event'. [164] Others bemoan the lack of a personal stamp on the film and 'the absence of a controlling hand in the diversity of acting styles'. [165] However more positive reactions to the film consider that the adaptation deliberately allows the performances to emerge unencumbered by any purely cinematic devices. Dilys Powell has pointed out the need for the adaptation to emphasize the artificiality of the comedy, which she believes Asquith has achieved, and although 'there is no suggestion of a performance on a stage, the playing is deliberately theatrical; nobody pretends to be living in the world of unfinished sentences'. [166] Tom Ryall also notes that 'critics have made much of the theatrical preamble but have ignored the way in which the opening shots of the narrative are resolutely 'cinematic''. [167] Powell considers that Edith Evans does not have to sacrifice her larger than life stage personality to be acceptable on the screen. But if Evans is determinedly 'theatrical' in her playing does it matter so much if this works in the context of the film? Or could it be argued that her performance as Lady Bracknell amounts to an overprojection of the role which demonstrates a relative lack of awareness for film acting's particular requirements? Surely it is this aspect of her acting armoury which Rutherford, a more experienced screen actor than Evans, manages

so effortlessly. It is those small details in her first scene, like the dropping of her books, fidgeting with her pince-nez or pinning on her hat, and her tender examination of the infamous handbag in her last appearance, which tell against some of the other more dramatic moments in the film. Indeed, it is her underemphasis which informs the whole performance. Dorothy Tutin remembers her as 'perfection. To be on the set when she was doing that scene with her handbag was such a privilege. She did it in two takes, both of which were wonderful, and I was practically in tears'. [168] Rutherford's first biographer Eric Keown talks of her 'balancing...on a tightrope between yearning rhapsody and brisk determination', while Paul Dehn thinks her 'just sufficiently in control of her romantic longings to snap them back into their proper place as cleanly as she snaps the pince-nez back to her bosom'. [169] The performance incidentally marks her last for the cinema in a part with a theatrical derivation and it would be nearly a decade before she was offered an all-embracing starring role commensurate with her talents, and one which would raise her profile again to the level enjoyed by Alastair Sim in the 1950s.

Sim's diversity and versatility as an actor is evidenced in a quintet of his films from the peak of his success in the early 1950s until the early 1960s when the roles may have diminished in size but gained in authority and subtlety. He dominates the narrative of *Laughter in Paradise* (1951) even though the film's intent was probably to feature the fortunes of the Russell family, as they carry out the wishes of their deceased relative, in equal proportion. True, Sim's role is possibly the best, but, as a contemporary review notes, 'he manages to make much of his material sound rather better than it probably is'. [170] And, like *Hue and Cry*, it is the sound of Sim's voice that we hear in his first scene as he solemnly dictates his latest trashy thriller (*Bloodlust!*) to his adoring secretary, Miss Wilcott (Eleanor Summerfield), before the camera allows us to see him. But he is far from happy making a living writing lines like 'a convulsive terror shook her frame and Petal moaned', and gently turns away a bronze bust of Shakespeare that appears to mock him. Later in the scene, when he discovers he may be the wealthy beneficiary of a will and have the opportunity to write literature, he turns it round again, an amusing touch which accords with the opinion of an American reviewer who noticed his 'gift for creating laughter out of the most insignificant gestures'. [171] *The Daily*

Chronicle notices in particular his 'long, anguished hands and his voluble eyebrows [which] are always new and always astonishing', and are much in evidence in two subsequent scenes when Sim's character tries to get himself arrested. [172] In the first, his attempts to steal jewellery from a department store are thwarted by criminals, and when he is detained by in-house detectives he discovers he has been robbed - he swivels round in a fluster, demands compensation, flapping at his pockets and theirs. Naomi Sim remembers that 'he was always rather proud of himself for having been able to do the long and complicated shot in one take'. [173] Better yet is a second scene where his repeated preparation to smash a shop window with a brick is interrupted until, at his fourth attempt, he stands with his back to the premises, covers his face with one hand and hurls the brick over his shoulder with the other. The impressionist Alistair McGowan thinks that 'every reaction is plotted so carefully...the worry, the desire, the fear. I'm sure that must have come from a knowledge and admiration for those silent comics', while Nigel Hawthorne, who is also appreciative of Sim's comic expertise in this scene, believes that the actor's final gesture upon being apprehended by a policeman and crowning him with his umbrella, was his own idea, independent of the script. [174] Although the film undoubtedly relies on a display of Sim's familiar mannerisms and personality, it is also dependent on the contributions of an ensemble cast with whom Sim often integrates, although perhaps it is significant that his most memorable scenes, including those just mentioned, show him working most of the time on his own. This is even more apparent in *An Inspector Calls*, where his bogus policeman pricks the consciences of a wealthy family. Of course it is necessary that his character questions each member of the group in order for the narrative to proceed, and while Sim is in their company he demonstrates an impressively intense observation of them as they bicker amongst themselves, a dour smile playing around his lips. However he remains an enigmatic outsider, and it is his final wordless scenes, where he is glimpsed apart from the others, rocking in a chair and smiling to himself, which tell so vividly. The effect of his presence is so powerful that one of the most striking images in the film remains the last, of an empty rocking chair, now abandoned, once his 'Inspector Poole' realises the family know he is a fraud. His apparent separateness from the rest of the cast creates an angelic, almost other-worldly character. As Caroline Lejeune

noted at the time, Sim seems to do 'practically nothing very charmingly; he has a delightful way of making a celestial bell go *ping* whenever he appears', at once a tribute to his invisible technique and screen charisma. [175]

After the stillness and almost static quality of Sim's performance in *An Inspector Calls*, *The Green Man* presents one of his most lively both verbally and physically. He effortlessly conveys the schizophrenia of an alternately engaging and ruthlessly determined assassin. In now-typical Simian fashion, the preamble to the main narrative, where his voiceover tells us how he disposed of his previous victims, extends to around three or four minutes of screen time before the camera allows us to marry the face with the voice of his character. In this sequence he presents us with variations of Hawkins as a young man with hair (!), a Mexican with a thin moustache and wide-brimmed hat, and as a suited business-type with black, thick-rimmed spectacles. The satisfaction with which he dispatches pompous authority figures would have appealed to the actor, but the assassinations are somewhat ironic in the context of Sim's professional life as he was himself becoming part of an establishment which his character seems only too intent to destroy. It can be no accident that his very first words in the film - 'Ah, school days...the happiest days of one's life' - refer back to a past triumph, *The Happiest Days of Your Life*, with which it is connected in mood and feeling. In that film, and *Laughter in Paradise*, as Sue Harper and Vincent Porter have observed:

the traditions of order are disrupted, and the classbound protagonists have to display flexibility in the face of enforced social change or legal challenge. Cinemagoers were able to laugh at the misfortunes of the pompous while sympathising with the social struggles of the timid. [176]

In *The Green Man*, Sim's assassin fails to eliminate self-important tycoon Gregory Upshott (Raymond Huntley) who is saved by bumbling vacuum cleaner salesman William Blake (George Cole).

Sim is particularly adept at telephone calls and the film showcases a number of examples. The finest is a scene which was apparently improvised on the set between Sim and George

Cole when the latter comes to report his finding of a body. Sim told him to 'forget about lines. Just do your damndest to get to the phone and say whatever you would say in the circumstances and I will do the same and manage to prevent you'; Naomi Sim records that the result was 'like a beautifully choreographed little dance'. [177] Others were less convinced by Sim's methods. In his autobiography Terry-Thomas, who appears in the second half of the film as Boughtflower (in his familiar screen persona), calls it

an experience to collaborate with Alastair Sim. You never knew exactly what he was going to do, and neither, I felt, did he. My personal opinion was that half the time he couldn't make up his mind how to play the part with the result that his performance was rather fey. [178]

However this view must be countered by one recent assessment which considers the role one 'of rare genius' and that the actor on this evidence was 'the finest British screen comedian of the sound era'. [179] It is in the farcical scenes towards the end of the film where Sim seems particularly in his element. He is startled by the ladies' trio in the lounge of the hotel - immediately evoking a similar scene with a string quartet in *Folly To Be Wise*, and even the restaurant scene in *Brief Encounter* (1945) - and at once decides to befriend them with such wittily delivered lines as 'I don't think I've ever heard a trio play with such brio', and 'in fact, I was wondering after that perfect andantino whether I might offer you a little vino'. The 'vino' is gratefully accepted as they all roar with laughter and talk at the same time. The skill of Sim's performance is revealed in his changes of expression from this sparkling joviality to a dour and purposeful determination a moment later when he resumes his plan to destroy Sir Geoffrey Upshott, his sinister intent only somewhat redeemed by his concern that the ladies' trio should not perish in the bomb blast.

In *School for Scoundrels* (1960) Sim plays his final teacher for the cinema, a comfortable pedagogue whose brooding performance hovers over a film which really belongs to the contest between put-upon innocent Henry Palfrey (Ian Carmichael) and the super-confident cad Raymond Delauney (Terry-Thomas) for the attentions of April (Janette Scott). Sim

features as a kind of referee and stands in for the author Stephen Potter himself, famous for the one-upmanship books upon which the script is based. Thus he exerts a sort of unimpeachable moral authority upon the narrative until its unexpected conclusion. Once again, in Sim's first scene we can clearly hear his lecture in progress, as Palfrey enters the Lifemanship college, before we see him in the hall, leaning on a lectern and addressing his students, making them laugh and think hard about the course they are about to undertake. The next scene, which follows after a brief fade, is more intimately set in Potter's study as he listens to Palfrey's reasons for enrolling at his school. Sim presents a striking contrast to the uneasy Palfrey whom he gently manages to outmanoeuvre. He appears utterly relaxed as he sits in an armchair about to enjoy his cup of tea, smoking a fat cigar, his unconventional short tie loosely arranged around his neck, both emblems of the character's professional success and eccentric individualism. At this stage Potter is very much 'one-up' on his pupil. This relationship begins to change as Palfrey learns the secrets of Potter's art, and is beautifully illustrated by the second tennis match scene where Palfrey trounces the increasingly apoplectic Delauney. Sim hardly features in the scene at all, but one is constantly made aware of him playing a discreet solitary game of croquet on an adjoining lawn, the cuts back to him revealing a playful disguise (of a moustache, spectacles and a deerstalker) as he emerges from behind a bush to observe the others or just takes a moment to listen to them. The only dialogue involving Sim occurs at the end of the scene when his character confers the Lifemanship certificate upon his pupil who is rapidly losing his inferiority complex. Everything else is conveyed by 'looks', nods, glances and, at the end, a tap to Palfrey's bowed head with Potter's tassled mortar board, an unexpected ritualistic gesture which signifies the former's acceptance of his award. Chas. MacLaren especially enjoys Sim's portrayal of Potter, which brings to the scene 'an authority that is rich and almost mystical. Chaucer, I believe, would have described [it] as *maistrie*. At all events it is something precious, individual and extremely rare'. [180] However Sim's casual detachment is undermined at last in his final scene where Palfrey declares his love for April and 'sincerity rears its ugly head'. For love is the one thing over which Lifemanship has no power. Dumbfounded, Sim addresses the camera directly, and as the sub-Rachmaninov romantic

score swells on the soundtrack, he yells for the orchestra to stop, but fails and departs, leaving the camera to concentrate on the lovers' kiss as the film ends. The scene works brilliantly in the context of the film as it is so unexpected and also proves that the rather smug pedant of the opening scenes is vulnerable after all. Far from creating a mere subsidiary character, Sim's Stephen Potter seems to be instrumental in holding the entire fabric of the narrative in place, for without him it collapses. The epilogue (under the credits) shows Delauney on his way to Potter's school to sharpen up his Lifemanship skills, returning us, in circular fashion, to the film's opening sequence.

In the same way, Sim's wily lawyer, Julius Sagamore, may not be the most prominent character of *The Millionairess* (1960), but he is hugely missed when absent from the screen. *The Times'* critic thinks he 'hovers about enveloped as in a cloak [of] benign, unscrupulous cunning'. [181] *The Hollywood Reporter* considers that he 'overplays grandly, making up to some extent for Miss Loren's hesitancy', and Dilys Powell commends his 'sly portrait of the imperturbable lawyer' while bemoaning Sophia Loren's comparative lack of 'comic authority'. [182] However, if Sim manages to steal scenes away from the relatively inexperienced Loren, Peter Sellers, in their only major encounter, proves not to be as overawed. The initial scene of the film fascinatingly contrasts the beauty and poise of Loren with Sim's characteristic vocal delivery as he darkly intones the will of Epifania's (Loren) deceased father, as both compete for visual and aural attention. Asquith, the director, begins with a close-up on Loren (underpinned by dramatic and romantic music) and slowly pulls back to a medium shot, while Sim is shown rising to his feet to speak in a medium long shot which slowly zooms in to a close-up on his face. However, at the peak of the zoom the actor sits down (on his last word 'dead') and rather than follow him the camera tilts upwards to a painting on the wall, the effect of which is to draw equal weight to both performances. The credits which follow hint at Sim's importance to the narrative, his name placed after Sellers and Loren. His next scene, at his office, establishes a more clandestine, low-key love affair between Sagamore and his secretary Muriel (Pauline Jameson) which parallels the more significant one between Sellers and Loren. However Loren emerges second to Sim when it comes to verbal banter. In the following scene when she comes to confront her ex-husband and his mistress at their flat,

Loren can only snarl insults at them while Sim, with characteristic aplomb, pretends to share a joke one moment just to declare the next, with a broad smile, that he will see them in court. A later sequence with Loren returns us to their initial meeting, although this time Sim stands beside the seated Epifania, physically separated from the rest of his board of directors, now a conduit for the wishes of her own will, but on top of a situation he is determined to save. Sim's final act is to secure the jobs of his directors, retain the affection of his secretary and ensure the reuniting of Kabir (Sellers) and Epifania, which allows the expected happy ending. Although not particularly successful critically or commercially, *The Millionairess* is an indication of the kind of plum roles Sim might have been offered in the international films of the 1960s had he chosen that particular option in his subsequent career.

For Margaret Rutherford it was the apparently insignificant role of Miss Marple whose enormous success hastened her opportunities for appearances in the international co-productions of the time. What is almost forgotten now is that her re-emergence as a star character player nearly did not happen. She had misgivings about the part, telling Gwen Robyns: 'I never wanted to play Miss Marple...it was simply that I never found murder amusing', and on another occasion she admitted: 'I do not like murder. It has an atmosphere I have always found uncongenial', an understandable reservation in the light of her early life. [183] In addition, although Rutherford did not know it at the time, Agatha Christie, who had just sold the rights to MGM and hoped they would make a television series, was far from happy with her proposed casting as the amateur sleuth. However, friends persuaded the actress of the character's moral value, and she was won over by the 'gentleness and sincerity' of director George Pollock, to say nothing of the fact that, due to problems with the taxman, she needed the money. [184] She became the third actress to portray Miss Marple, and the first on celluloid (after Barbara Mullen on the stage in the 1940s and Gracie Fields on U.S. television in 1956), and such was the impression she created with critics and public alike that her interpretation of the role has long been regarded as definitive. Jon Tuska, for instance, has called the series 'among the finest detective films in general and those featuring female investigations in particular' and he also believes that the result of Rutherford's screen portrayal was to effect 'subtle changes in the fictional characterisation' in Christie's subsequent novels.

[185] The actress's portrayal was helped by the writers (David Pursall and Jack Seddon) who enabled her to project a tougher character than envisioned by Christie, incorporating her own personal idiosyncrasies into stories sometimes originally intended for Hercule Poirot and inventing the role of Mr Stringer, for her husband, Stringer Davis, as her faithful sidekick. Rutherford's success is as much due to this freewheeling adaptation as her own injection of emotion and humour into rather routine whodunits, and remains the ultimate triumph of performance over direction and script. [186] As Albert Watson has observed, the character is 'proof positive that heroes don't have to be male, young and athletic' and the key to Rutherford's interpretation is found in a description of her by Melvin Maddocks who writes that:

One had an impression of frumpy hair fringed above baleful eyes and a permanently reproachful mouth. A formidably blocky torso stands draped in a regular tarpaulin of a sweater, descending over a tweedy skirt of indefinite length beneath which protrude two dangerously thin legs based hopefully upon sensible walking shoes. The effect is of a warmly bundled English bulldog. [187]

One of the most striking, and surprising, of Rutherford's scenes, to which I have already referred, occurs in *Murder She Said* when she appears as a tracklayer on a railway line 'disguised in a forage cap and a rotund set of overalls that make her look like the Michelin man's sister' as Alexander Walker mischievously, though accurately, describes her. [188] The costume projects an unlikely asexual image and emphasizes the swapping of gender roles with her screen (and real life) partner, Stringer Davis. In fact her attire proves to be an important aspect of her performance throughout the series, from her riding habit in *Murder at the Gallop* to her impressive naval outfit which commands so much attention in the opening scenes of *Murder Ahoy!*. *Murder Most Foul's* very theatricality also draws attention to her dress sense, from the businesslike tweed suit in the earlier sequences to an extraordinary ensemble later on, which includes a shapeless low-necked creation with a large woollen

bauble resting where one would expect cleavage, an almost literal denial of her sexuality. The continual innuendo in the dialogue underlines this impression. When showing Miss Marple to her room, the landlady's parting shot is 'and no male callers upstairs!'. 'The very idea!', one is supposed to think. And yet the films also play with the idea of her femininity as her unlikely exterior is attractive enough for characters played by James Robertson Justice and Robert Morley to propose marriage to her. If she had jokingly thought her performance in *The Happiest Days of Your Life* seemed proto-feminist in intent, there was no doubt about it now. [189] In one priceless exchange, the dismayed Inspector Craddock (Charles Tingwell) declares: 'Only a woman's mind, possibly only yours, would have dreamt that one up', to which she replies, gently: 'It may irritate you inspector, but women sometimes have superior minds. You'll simply have to accept it'. Indeed, her timing of a line and her vocal range are exemplary and varied, as one might expect of an elocution teacher, from bristling indignation to quiet authority. Characteristic too are her facial distortions. When the inspector interrupts Miss Marple's discussion of the case with Mr Stringer by arriving unannounced at her home, she screws up her face as if to say to Stringer, 'we must humour him'. Again, when she corrects Cosgood's version of her name - he calls her 'Mrs Marble' - she vents her displeasure by pursing together her lips and moving them up and down as few other actresses could with the same effect. She is also presented with physical challenges throughout the series, mounting a horse in *Murder at the Gallop* and taking part in a swordfight in *Murder Ahoy!*, no mean achievement for an actress in her early seventies!

But none of these attributes would be effective were it not for the context in which Rutherford's performance is set. Humour is a vital ingredient of these films as it mediates the potentially shocking impact of the murders. In a peculiarly British fashion it is used at the moment of tragedy. In *Murder at the Gallop*, for example, Miss Marple has some difficulty persuading a caller to clear the party telephone line so she can report a murder. The comic device is effective in Rutherford's hands and presents an instance where her performance is both deliberately amusing and an integral part of her natural unstoppable eccentricity. The humourous slant of the script also allows the characters (and the viewers) to absorb and address other issues which a more serious interpretation might have avoided in the cause of

faithfulness to the literary original. For instance, there seems to be a noticeable move from the upper crust Ackenthorpe family of the first film in the series to the more egalitarian third which incorporates a working class actor like James Bolam. However the fourth film - *Murder Ahoy!* - reverses this trend and reverts somewhat to the mood of the first. In that film - *Murder She Said* - James Robertson Justice's invalided patriarch seems to represent a symbol of the crumbling class system and is perhaps a metaphor for the ailing condition of contemporary Britain with the collapse of the empire and its old self-confidence. Its continuance lies in the hands of both Ronnie Raymond's cocky public schoolboy and the redoubtable survivor Rutherford herself for whom past events - like her winning a ladies' golf championship in 1921 - are recalled as if they happened recently. But the film projects the pervasive sense of looking over its shoulder with its 1930s telephones, steam trains and constant references back to World War Two. The sight of a diesel train going past at one point is a sole concession to the present only two years before Doctor Beeching and the Great Train Robbery. By contrast, *Murder at the Gallop* seems like the first of the series really set in the 1960s, as I have indicated elsewhere, with Katya Douglas's sports car, a television set and Rutherford dancing 'The Twist' with 'a massive enthusiasm that may remind some spectators of an earnest rhinoceros rubbing its backside on a tree trunk!' [190] The modern practical world of police cars is pitted against the old-fashioned common sense of Miss Marple and Mr Stringer who travel on a bicycle and tricycle respectively or in their pony and trap. The third film, *Murder Most Foul*, depicts a popular slogan of the moment, 'Drink a Pint of Milk on Milk Day', on a passing milk float. Much more significant is a Rutherford line to the inspector when she sweeps out of his office with 'and a Marple's word is her bond', as it immediately connects her, albeit unwittingly, to another hero of the day. The line was enough to inspire Cecil Wilson to describe her as 'a maiden aunt of Sherlock Bond' and Philip Bradford to write a whole article comparing the rather different personas of Miss Marple and James Bond. [191] However by *Murder Ahoy!* the exuberance of the earlier films is gone and the aching evocation of old England, with its naval jargon, sea shanties, mentions of Nelson and Trafalgar and even the singing of *Rule Britannia!* with barely a trace of irony, presents such a *fin de siècle* atmosphere in an oddly uneven production that must have appeared too old-fashioned at the

height of the swinging sixties. *The Monthly Film Bulletin* calls the film 'elementary and lethargic in the extreme, this is rock-bottom Miss Marple', and yet even here Rutherford sparkles, critics of the time finding her still 'irrepressible', her 'stern and startled face acquir[ing] a few more creases and twitches'. [192]

If Rutherford is let down by script and direction in these films, a decided asset is undoubtedly Ron Goodwin's 'Miss Marple theme' and incidental music which effectively contributes to the establishing of mood and the creation of character. Variations on the cheerful, bouncy theme are heard throughout the series and help to bond the music and the character, which has the impact upon the viewer of even greater identification with her. Goodwin also finds the inspiration to compose recurring motifs for some of the other characters like Cora (whom we never meet as she is impersonated by Flora Robson) in *Murder at the Gallop* or the spooky Eva (Alison Seebohm) in *Murder Most Foul*. His simple use of woodwind, strings and clavichord are memorable and distinctive. The highlight of his work (apart from the theme itself) must be a sophisticated, rather doleful, sub-baroque fugue in *Murder Ahoy!*, where, as the various murder suspects creep around the ship unaware of one another, they are identified in the score by different instruments, each fugal entry corresponding magically with the separate screen appearances of the characters.

It should be noted too that Rutherford's performance as Miss Marple encourages and develops the potential for others, including series regulars Charles Tingwell and Stringer Davis and also James Robertson Justice in *Murder She Said*, Robert Morley and Flora Robson in *Murder at the Gallop*, Ron Moody in *Murder Most Foul* and Lionel Jeffries in *Murder Ahoy!*. And if the effect was to gain her entry to international productions like Orson Welles' *Chimes at Midnight* or Charles Chaplin's *A Countess From Hong Kong* and a prolonged career, the downside was that Miss Marple's very popularity occasionally counted against her. For instance, Charles Higham, who critiques the variable performances of *Chimes at Midnight*, concludes that Rutherford's Mistress Quickly 'evokes unfortunate memories of Miss Marple', but his comments are surely disproved by the actress's finely nuanced characterisation which runs the gamut from her energy and amusement at the antics of Falstaff in the earlier scenes to her measured sorrow at his passing, her comical chins, so evidently on display in the Miss

Marple films, now concealed by the period costume. [193]

Alastair Sim's Indian summer as a character actor is best illustrated by two performances from television. The two characters he plays are both figures of the establishment, a judge and a general, but could not emerge more differently. His Mr Justice Swallow gave him the opportunity to develop a performance over three series and nineteen episodes between 1967 and 1971 in *Misleading Cases*, his only sitcom. He presides over a court where, to his delight and frustration, writer and eternal litigant Albert Haddock (Roy Dotrice) presents various moral dilemmas, a welcome tonic for the judge compared to the more tedious cases he usually has to oversee. Naturally Haddock can rely on a sympathetic hearing, however absurd the circumstances, and Swallow invariably rules in his favour. Prior to meeting the actor, producer/director John Howard Davies admits to being rather in awe of Sim, however he found him 'gracious, delightful, very funny and completely, utterly, relaxed'. [194] Howard Davies also recalls that at the first readthrough Sim noticed that the part was somewhat larger than he had hoped with its pages of summing up at the end. So the actor, quite casually, ripped them out of the script telling his producer/director that he could achieve a much better result with a 'look' or two. [195] And it is to the credit of Howard Davies that Sim's suggestions prevailed, as seen in the four episodes of the series which survive. These exhibit a certain quaintness and charm in comparison with some of the less sophisticated sitcoms of their era and seem in retrospect like a reaction against the prevalent popular culture, as character and eccentricity are privileged over youth and empty glamour. In the 1967 episode 'Is Britain a Free Country?' there are references in the opening scene, set on Hammersmith Bridge, to mini-skirts, swinging London and Camaby Street, but it is Haddock's antics, both outside and inside the courtroom, as the middle-aged writer who is still young at heart, and Swallow's later judgment upon them, which attract our interest. The fascination of the series lies in its ability to function in both conservative and radical fashion at the same time. Thus the eccentricity of many of the characters, in whose company Sim always seems at home, and Haddock's unorthodox methods in court are contrasted with the conventions of the situation comedy which dictate a formulaic structure to ensure continuity and audience identification. Accordingly, every episode is divided into two sections, the first of which propels the narrative

towards the situation which will determine Haddock's taking legal action, and the second which is always set in the courtroom. There remains a rather odd disjunction between the two, and the trivialities of Albert Haddock and his wife Florence (Avis Landon) in the opening scenes can sometimes feel protracted before we reach the complex but highly entertaining legal banter of the second half. Sim, as the judge, appears noticeably older, but seems unaffected by being restricted behind his desk, and dominates the proceedings as he is positioned physically above the others in the courtroom, and even when he does not speak, the camera catches momentary nuances of expression in his face and gestures as he reacts to the intricacies of the case in progress. The 1967 episode shows him at the court of appeal in the company of two other judges with whom he shares deliberation, but this only increases the opportunities for him to support the unconventional Haddock, to the irritation of the stern Judge Adder (John Welsh). Sim laughs with urbane and irreverent benevolence, often answers for Haddock and at the moment of judgment turns to his colleagues on the bench, adjusts his wig, then waves, nods and smiles at Haddock as if to indicate to him that he has already won the case in advance of the summing up! As the story concludes and the credits begin to roll, the camera cuts to the amused face of Swallow, giving us little doubt who is the star of the show. The surviving episode of the 1968 series, 'Right of Way', takes great delight in a parody of the Hollywood film industry as evidenced in the opening gambit where Haddock and his wife stumble on to a film set only to have an elephant step on their portable tape recorder! Again, Sim's delight at the subsequent hearing is reflected in his benign smile, his abrupt and comical changes of expression, his handling of props like pens or spectacles, and, most of all, in the timing and delivery of individual lines which makes them more amusing than they seem on the printed page, as well as allowing them to acquire an extra veneer of legal veracity. Summing up, he asserts that ultimately opinions do not matter ('It is either a fact or it is not a fact') and Haddock cannot be blamed as he is not a lawyer, 'but why Sir Joshua [Thorley Walters] with his wealth of legal knowledge should waste this court's time with the 'opinions' of witnesses [laughs then looks exasperated] I just don't understand' [audience laughter as the judge undermines the prosecuting counsel once more]. The 1971 series is in colour and also manages to be a little freer with the structure of the show, allowing scenes in

Somerset House and a dental surgery as well as epilogues after the courtroom scenes. The first finds Haddock in trouble with the tax authorities to whom he has sent his remittance on a cheque inside a bottle which should reach them, by the 'usual channel' (The Thames). After three years the crucial relationship between Haddock and Swallow is entertainingly re-established to the obvious pleasure of the studio audience, as the judge asks after his welfare and that of Haddock's wife, while the defendant compliments the judge on his youthful appearance. But, if anything, the show's final episode, 'Regina Versus Sagittarius', is even more skilfully developed, giving Sim every opportunity to display his many mannerisms amongst an excellent cast who demonstrate, as had Sim in his youth, that minor characters can carry the burden of narrative interest as much as the nominal stars. Especially memorable in this story, about the effectiveness and influence of astrology and the stock market, are Sim's reactions to the witness statements of hearty dog-breeder Freda Hicks (June Jago) and financial expert Sir Richard Partridge (John Cleese). It is particularly interesting to watch Cleese, who apparently accepted this small role as a stockbroker just for the chance to work with Sim, observed by the latter as his character expounds his views on astrology in colourful and verbose language, as one has the impression of the comic torch being passed from one to the other. One wonders what Sim made of the rather more outrageously unconventional humour of *Monty Python*.

Sim's General Suffolk in writer William Trevor's *The General's Day* (1972) inhabits another world. Naomi Sim thinks the role unlike anything he had attempted before and considers it 'the best thing he ever did on television'. [196] William Trevor was at first concerned whether the actor was correctly cast but was convinced by the characterisation when Sim 'became that man'. [197] In Trevor's excellent television play Sim's general is caught between the affections of rather sinister charlady Mrs Hinch (Dandy Nichols) and the spinsterish schoolteacher Miss Lorrimer (Annette Crosbie), and it is a tribute to the writing, directing and acting of the three principals and those in smaller roles that the relatively slight story emerges so powerfully. The opening views of the sea and the front, shot at Hastings, stand in for the typical retirement community of south coast seaside resorts, and are particularly evocative. The first close-up of Sim is impressive, his face lined and anguished, old conflicts still raging

inside his head, as we hear a military march, the noise of gunfire and horses neighing on the soundtrack. It sets the tone for the last battle to come. There follows a terrifically well-observed scene, between Sim and Nichols, 'she pert and familiar, he distant and defensive', whose impact is such that it colours the rest of the narrative, and although they have no subsequent sequences together, Nichols' char maintains an entrenched fixture in the story as she sets up home in the general's cottage without his knowledge or permission. [198] Their encounter reaches a climactic pitch of intensity as Sim's vocal inflection rises ever higher, exasperated at the challenge to his authority. Later his general is allowed to display a variety of emotions from a relaxed charm to abrupt fury and drink-sodden pleas for forgiveness. The role shows Sim to be considerably more physically active than Judge Swallow might make us believe, whether he is striding along the front, gently escorting Miss Lorrimer to a table at a 'sale of work' or staggering around after too many drinks. *The Daily Mail's* Peter Black is content just 'to watch talent at work at the proper business of compressing and distilling instead of stretching out', while Rosemary Say of *The Sunday Telegraph* salutes Sim's 'discarding [of] his comic hallmarks of quivering eyebrows and flailing arms, [to] make...a tragic figure of the General'. [199] Sylvia Clayton notes the 'finesse' of the production and considers Sim 'faultless in his whole style of speech and gesture and his sudden transitions from easy courtesy to impotent rage' and Leonard Buckley savours his move 'from a military crispness through explosive moments to a crumbling ebullience as the events of the day and the drink [take] their toll'. [200] If the work of Sim's maturity is less well known than that of Margaret Rutherford, it is just as important, and surely deserves a wider audience.

Like so many of the events and the cultural artefacts of the early 1950s, Sim and Rutherford's great collaboration, *The Happiest Days of Your Life*, seems to look Janus-like both backwards and forwards at the same time. It could be seen as a precursor to the anarchy of the St. Trinian's films and even the bawdiness of the Carry Ons, and to provide a platform for both actors where anything seems possible for them in the future. Equally its mocking of government inefficiency harks back to the war, while there are references to the pre-war excellence of the school's pupils and to figures of the distant past like John Knox who

are invoked to inform the comic battle of the sexes between Sim's Wetherby Pond and Rutherford's Miss Whitchurch. The film is reflective of a kind of national uncertainty. In 1951, for example, there was a general welcome for the end of rationing and yet the voters had returned their wartime leader (Churchill) to power. In addition, two major events of the time - The Festival of Britain (1951) and the Coronation (1953) - were also illustrative of cultural and historical ambiguity. The Coronation brought a young monarch to the throne and caused many to purchase a television set for the first time; and yet the event could be viewed in retrospect as an unimaginative reassertion of royal prerogative at a time when the war had succeeded in breaking down class barriers. Likewise, The Festival of Britain was an attempt to look to the future, but the film industry's contribution, *The Magic Box* (1951), which tells the story of cinema pioneer William Friese-Greene (and features Rutherford in a cameo), positively aches for the past, much of its narrative told in affectionate flashback. Maybe this is one reason why *The Happiest Days of Your Life* works so effectively, because of its contemporaneity. Not only are there critiques of government inefficiency and rationing (as in the Ealing comedies) but also a couple of delicious parodies of recent films - David Lean's *Oliver Twist* (1948) and Carol Reed's *The Third Man* (1949) - which would surely have been appreciated by audiences at the time - to say nothing of a joke against the Rank Organisation as Rutherford's Miss Whitchurch reprimands her sports mistress for striking a gong too forcibly: 'a tap, Gossage, I said a tap. You're not introducing a film!' The uncertainty of the relationships within the school in some ways represents the nation as a whole, with its horror of the sexes mixing and the prospect of a complete breakdown of organisation and regulation. This is exemplified by the clashes between Sim's Wetherby Pond and Rutherford's Miss Whitchurch that derive, as Marcia Landy has observed

not only from their sexual differences but from the specific actors who portray the roles. Margaret Rutherford's eccentric behaviour is pitted against Alastair Sim's eccentricities. Their antagonisms spring from their determination to each get their own way. Both of them are undermined at the end, each left out in the cold. They each represent particular excesses

of authority figures. The supporting actors are also selected so as to emphasize their foibles. [201]

But it is the gloriously ebullient performances of these two principal actors, and those who portray their various staff and pupils, which enliven the film. Director Frank Launder tells Gwen Robyns that Rutherford 'embodies that type of headmistress as no other actress could' and his experience of working with the star accords with that of Ken Annakin on *Miranda*. [202] He remembers:

We could never put marks down for her...we just had to keep the camera rolling wherever she was likely to be. Alastair Sim used to retreat into the corner to let her have full swing...I like an artist like that...My definition of an actress is one who learns the same thing and learns it completely. She does the same thing, take after take, in exactly the same manner. But an artist is one who has great moments, many great moments. These are the real artists and Margaret is one of them. [203]

He adds that 'the difficulty is to make the right compromise between the artist and the supporting actors', a balance which is successfully maintained in the film and which Rutherford and Sim, as supporting actors themselves, would have been the first to understand. [204] If Rutherford's acting methods on the set were unorthodox to say the least, the combined performances of both actors receive equal critical acclaim for the most part. *The Sunday Chronicle* thinks them 'the best mixed comedy pairing since Groucho Marx and Margaret Dumont', while Naomi Sim evenhandedly considers that they

matched each other perfectly during their scenes together when you felt that their mutual anger might cause them to ignite at any minute. I always felt that those two had a lot in common in that their playing of anything at all was so highly individual. You couldn't employ a Margaret Rutherford 'type'

or an Alastair Sim 'type'. [205]

Some are less disposed towards Rutherford's Miss Whitchurch. *The Daily Mail's* critic calls her performance 'a blown-up version of her familiar tweedy battleaxe', while Sim's

is something more. Here is a white-nosed comic, splendid in his uniqueness, who owes nothing to anybody: he has the perfect cinematic face, which can change its expression imperceptibly and continuously, and in turn be finicky, sly, hating, outraged, cunning, diabolic, petulant, craven or withering. [206]

Perhaps this is less a criticism of Rutherford than a deliberate foregrounding of Sim's particular attributes, and an indication that each one represents a different strand of character acting. If the actress appears to play herself, Sim seems the more adaptable. For instance, his portrayal as a woman-hating patriarch is more remarkable as he was quite the opposite in real life. However, the idea that Rutherford always plays a version of herself is disproved by the reaction of the daughter of a friend (the actress, Molly Weir) who was impressed by the contrast between her fierceness on the screen and her gentleness and quietude in person. [207]

Returning to the film itself, the impact of both actors' performances is confirmed by the impression that they have many scenes together, when they spend relatively little screen time in each other's company. In fact they share the screen in about nine or ten scenes lasting no longer than 25 minutes in total. As I have outlined previously, their first screen encounter is a salient example of how the filmmakers opened out the theatrical original into something vibrantly cinematic. But the results would be worthless were it not for the playing of Sim and Rutherford. In two subsequent scenes it is Sim who appears to command more attention than his co-star - when he wakes up bleary-eyed after a night sleeping in the bath, and also when his attempts to conduct an English lesson in the hallway are foiled by escalating chaos. However, without Rutherford to play to (or against!) the final cut of the film might have created

a much more uneven effect akin to Sim's appearances in the episodic *Laughter in Paradise* with its variable script and performances. And the reason that *The Happiest Days of Your Life* works so productively is that both actors avoid the commonplaces of stage farce in favour of a more genuine reaction to the situations in which they find themselves. This does not mean they cannot be physically engaged with their roles, as one is reminded by Sim's grasping of a telephone receiver from an outraged Rutherford, or the latter's purposeful stride up the driveway at her first appearance in the film, but that they are always alive to the subtleties of the characters they have created and the fine details about them which register so tellingly on the screen. Their first combative meeting is wonderfully balanced by a final scene where they stand holding hands, almost in self-defence, now powerless to regulate the confusion and the din that surrounds them. Rutherford looks perplexed and perhaps a little nervous, while Sim beams with joyous release as if he realises he has nothing left to lose. Their final dialogue is obscured by the raucous music on the soundtrack as their characters address one another with new-found respect, Rutherford's expression revealing the merest hint of a smile as the credits roll.

The film performances of Alastair Sim and Margaret Rutherford illustrate the difficulty of accurately defining what it means to be a character actor, especially as this status is so often compromised by their frequent elevation to leading roles. The broad spectrum of characterisations played by both actors compounds the problem of categorising them and determining their contributions to the art of character acting. One can, for instance, regard what appear to be cameos, like their roles in *Passport to Pimlico* and *Hue and Cry*, as starring parts - as the credits indicate - for the effect they create or their crucial importance to the narrative. However, their skill is rendered ineffectual when they are granted key roles prematurely, as in Sim's *The Big Noise* (1936) and *Let the People Sing*, or provided with special vehicles, like Rutherford's *Miss Robin Hood* and *Aunt Clara*, which seem to restrict their expressive freedom, convoluted by unimaginative direction and poor scripting. Does it really matter if Margaret Rutherford exhibits a comparative lack of acting technique so long as she can collaborate with directors like David Lean, Frank Launder, Anthony Asquith and

George Pollock who can harness her eccentricities for their various purposes?

In the 1950s Rutherford and Sim began to accommodate changing notions around character acting whereby more unlikely stars were starting to be cast in leading parts - one thinks of Katie Johnson's old lady, Mrs Wilberforce, in *The Ladykillers* (1955), for instance. Indeed, both stars at this time project a sense of being less rigidly defined, prominent or removed from their fellow actors than their American counterparts. Hence the prevalence of the more British culture of the 'jobbing' actor, anxious to take on any role, large or small. Perhaps this gives the British character star more opportunities than they might find in the U.S.A., despite the lower British budgets, and ultimately, the chance to leave behind a richer legacy.

Does the British context also allow for a more liberal attitude towards the exchanging of gender signifiers - like Sim's Miss Fritton, or Rutherford's appropriation of male characteristics and dress in the Miss Marple persona? Possibly; although this comparative freedom, if it does exist, is tempered by their unequal star status at different times. Despite his unconventional appearance and manner, Sim found principal roles far easier to come by than Rutherford in the 1950s, but can this only be attributed to a question of his gender?

They were more evenly matched when it came to performing in their favourite genres - comedy and the comedy-thriller - which provided them with excellent possibilities to run the full gamut of their eccentricity, but also to explore ideas and emotions around class, gender, sexuality (and so on) which when represented in, say, high drama, might have been deemed socially unacceptable at the time. Sim's detective in *Green For Danger* is prone to error and probably unprofessional in his methods, but we warm to his jaunty personality and wit alongside more conventionally drawn stereotypes. Similarly, Rutherford's Miss Marple strikes a blow for female individualism which proves attractive and successful over the faults and flaws of the largely male-dominated police force and law courts.

The multiple images projected by Sim and Rutherford present a complex and contradictory impression upon the viewer which adds to their allure as character stars, and it is the enduring enigma of their personalities on the screen that continues to fascinate the cinemagoer.

Notes

1. Quinlan, D. (1985) *The Illustrated Directory of Film Character Actors*, Batsford; Quinlan, D. (1986) *Quinlan's Illustrated Directory of Film Stars*, Batsford.
2. Ibid, foreword (unpaginated).
3. Shipman, D. (1980) *The Great Movie Stars: The Golden Years*, Angus and Robertson, pp. 7, 8.
4. Ibid, p. 8.
5. Zucker, C. (ed.) (1990) *Making Visible the Invisible: an anthology of original essays on film acting*, Scarecrow Press Inc..
6. Ibid, p. viii.
7. Butler, J. (ed.) (1991) *Star Texts: Image and Performance in Film and Television*, Wayne State University Press, p. 35.
8. Pudovkin, V. (1929)(1954 edn.) *Film Technique and Film Acting*, Vision Press, pp. 105-107. This last designation ('film type') also appears in the writings of Lev Kuleshov to refer to non-actors. See Levaco, R. (1974) *Kuleshov on Film*, University of California Press, pp. 63-4.
9. Pudovkin, V. (1929), p. 113.
10. McFarlane, B. (ed.) (1992) *Sixty Voices*, BFI, p. 6; Annakin, K. (2001) *So You Wanna Be a Director?*, Tomahawk Press, p. 35. This is not an isolated instance. See David Lean's comments on Margaret Rutherford in rehearsals for his film of *Blithe Spirit* (1945) in Brownlow, K. (1996) *David Lean*, Faber and Faber, pp. 188-9. See also Rutherford's own account of the making of *The Statelty Ghosts of England* (1964), a documentary for American television, in Robyns, G. and Rutherford, M. (1972) *Margaret Rutherford: an autobiography as told to Gwen Robyns*, W.H. Allen, p. 204, when she refused to 'camp up' her role as a presenter to satisfy the whims of a producer.
11. Kuleshov quoted in Levaco, R. (1974), pp. 63-4.
12. Ibid, p. 64.
13. Ibid, p. 64.
14. Dyer, R. (1979) *Stars*, BFI, p. 117.

15. Ibid.
16. Ibid, p. 118.
17. Ibid, pp. 149-50.
18. Ibid, p. 160.
19. Sergi, G. 'Actors and the Sound Gang' in Lovell, A. and Kramer, P. (eds.) (1999) *Screen Acting*, Routledge.
20. Dyer, R. (1979), p. 153.
21. Ibid, p. 154.
22. McDonald, P. 'Star Studies' in Hollows, J. and Jancovich, M. (eds.) (1995) *Approaches to Popular Film*, Manchester University Press, p. 80.
23. McDonald, P. 'Reconceptualising Stardom' in Dyer, R. (1998) *Stars*, BFI, p. 177.
24. Macnab, G. (2000) *Searching for Stars: Stardom and Screen Acting in British Cinema*, Cassell, p. vii.
25. Ibid, pp. 104-142.
26. Ibid, pp. 125, 130.
27. Ibid, p. 142.
28. Ibid, p. 140. The comparison between Sim and Guinness has been noted by more than one commentator. In fact the role of Professor Marcus in Alexander Mackendrick's film *The Ladykillers* (1955) was originally intended for Sim until Michael Balcon decided that Guinness would be a more commercial proposition. However even Guinness was reluctant to accept the part at first considering that it was more suited to Sim. Mackendrick assesses that in the end Guinness 'did a better Alastair Sim than Alastair would have done', and Sim's daughter Merliith believes that Guinness 'did the most wonderful impersonation' of Sim, so much so, that she was often reminded by people how memorable her father was for a film in which he did not appear. See Kemp, P. (1991) *Lethal Innocence: The Cinema of Alexander Mackendrick*, Methuen, p. 113; Merliith Mackendrick interviewed in Fisher, J. (prod.) *Heroes of Comedy: Alastair Sim*, Channel 4, 30/9/97. Philip Kemp has also drawn attention to the similarity of the initial appearances of Sim as fake medium Mr Squales in *London Belongs To Me* (1948) and Guinness in *The Ladykillers* 'even down to the intonation of the words', but

while Sim appears naturally sinister and mysterious Guinness's portrayal seems more absurd and theatrical. Kemp, P. (1991), p. 122. For instance, when Sim removes his hat to display a rather unsuccessful comb-over it seems a logical and realistic extension to the seediness of his character, while Guinness's initial covering of his face with his hat before revealing an unlikely set of teeth is far more melodramatic in the context of the scene, and the facade of Professor Marcus only becomes credible due to the actor's subsequent performance. Of the two, it is Guinness who more readily assumes a literal and figurative mask to present the character he is portraying. Alexander Mackendrick recalls that at the end of shooting, when Guinness removed his wig, he - the director - 'always expected him [Guinness] to take off his face with the other [hand] and reveal nothing at all underneath, because he could be anything'. See Frears, S. *Typically British*, BBC Television, 2/9/95. Sim, by contrast, is almost always recognisably himself, often bringing a sense of the sinister to the majority of the roles he plays, including a later scene in *London Belongs To Me* where he flirts with lonely landlady Mrs Vizzard (Joyce Carey) over afternoon tea. Alistair McGowan comments that 'he [Sim] could just as easily kill her as kiss her'. McGowan interviewed in Fisher, J. (prod.) *Heroes of Comedy: Alastair Sim*, Channel 4, 30/9/97.

29. Eric Keown records that Rutherford's performance as Mrs Danvers 'generated uncanny menace'. Keown, E. (1955) *Margaret Rutherford*, Rockliff, p. 32.

30. Babington, B. (ed.) (2001) *British Stars and Stardom From Alma Taylor to Sean Connery*, Manchester University Press.

31. *Ibid*, p. 5.

32. *Ibid*, p. 5.

33. Shipman, D. (1980) *The Great Movie Stars: The International Years*, Angus and Robertson, includes Rutherford and Sim (pp. 519-22, 549-51). However, see Jones, K. et al. (1976) *Character People: The Stalwarts of the Cinema*, Barnes, for example, which includes Rutherford (pp. 177-8).

34. Babington, B. (ed.) (2001), p. 7.

35. *Ibid*, p. 7.

36. *Ibid*, p. 7.

37. Naremore, J. (1988) *Acting in the Cinema*, University of California Press, p. 43.
38. Ibid, p. 46.
39. Ibid, p. 46.
40. Ibid, p. 69.
41. BFI Pressbook for *Laughter in Paradise* (1951), p. 3.
42. Naremore, J. (1988), p. 76.
43. Ibid, pp. 76, 77-8.
44. Ibid, pp. 84, 86.
45. Ibid, p. 87.
46. Ibid, p. 88.
47. Ibid, p. 89.
48. Ibid, p. 92.
49. Ibid, p. 94.
50. Ellis, J. (1982) *Visible Fictions*, Routledge, p. 91.
51. See Mellencamp, P. 'Situation Comedy, Feminism, and Freud: Discourses of Gracie and Lucy', and Mann, D. 'The Spectacularization of Everyday Life: Recycling Hollywood Stars and Fans in Early Television Variety Shows' in Butler, J. (ed.) (1991) *Star Texts: Image and Performance in Film and Television*, Wayne State University Press, pp. 316-332, and 333-360.
52. Ibid, p. 316.
53. Irving Thalberg in *Picture-Play* (1926), quoted in Walker, B. 'Due Respects', *Film Comment*, 25/6, Nov-Dec. 1989, p. 58.
54. Ibid.
55. Seldes, G. 'The Itsy-Bitsy Actors' in *Esquire* (1934), quoted in Twomey, A.E. and McClure, A.F. (1969) *The Versatiles: A Study of Supporting Character Actors and Actresses in the American Motion Picture 1930-1955*, A.S. Barnes, p. 21.
56. Ibid.
57. Winick, C. 'The Face Was Familiar', *Films and Filming*, 11/4, Jan. 1965, p. 12; Ellis, J. (1982) *Visible Fictions*, Routledge, pp. 91, 92.

58. Winick, C., Jan. 1965, p. 12.
59. Ibid, p. 14.
60. Twomey, A.E. and McClure, A.F. (1969), A.S. Barnes, unnumbered preface, 'page 1'.
61. Maltin, L. (1973) *The Real Stars: Articles and Interviews on Hollywood's Great Character Actors*, Curtis Books, p. 10.
62. Thomson, D. 'The Lives of...Supporting Players', *Film Comment*, 25/6, Nov-Dec. 1989, p. 33.
63. Slide, A. 'The Character Player', *Films in Review*, XLI/3, Mar. 1990, pp. 130-138; XLI/4, Apr. 1990, pp. 204-211.
64. Jones, K.D. et al. (1976) *Character People: The Stalwarts of the Cinema*, Barnes and Co., p. 178.
65. Robyns, G. and Rutherford, M. (1972), p. 208.
66. Slide, A. 'The Character Player', *Films in Review*, XLI/4, Apr. 1990, p. 211.
67. Charity, T. 'Second to None', *Time Out*, 1294, 7/6/95, p. 71.
68. O'Brien, M.E. (1983) *Film Acting: The Techniques and History of Acting for the Camera*, Arco, p. 36.
69. Ibid, pp. 36-37.
70. Jones, K.D. et al. (1976), p. 11; Gifford, D. (1968) *British Cinema*, Zwemmer Ltd., p. 6.
71. Frears, S. (dir.) *Typically British*, BBCTV, 2/9/95.
72. Sutton, D. (2000) *A Chorus of Raspberries: British Film Comedy 1929-1939*, University of Exeter Press, p. 182.
73. Ibid, p. 182.
74. Ibid, pp. 192, 193.
75. Ibid, p. 193.
76. Ibid, p. 201.
77. Ibid, pp. 201-202.
78. Ibid, p. 204.
79. The impact of Sim and Rutherford's respective spouses on their careers is explored on pages 140-143.

80. Sutton, D. (2000), p. 228.
81. See Terence Davies' comments in Dixon, W.W. (1994) *Re-Viewing British Cinema 1900-1992*, State University of New York Press, pp. 252-3.
82. Forbes, B. (1980) *That Despicable Race: a history of the British Acting Tradition*, Elm Tree Books, p. 257.
83. Sylvia Paskin 'Dame Margaret Rutherford' in Thomas, W. (ed.) (1992) *The International Dictionary of Films and Filmmakers - Vol. 3*, (2nd ed.), St. James Press, p. 877.
84. Aspinall, S. (1981) *Representation of Women in British Films, 1943-1953*, M.A. Thesis, p. 34.
85. Ibid, pp. 40, 42.
86. Boyd, Rev. M. 'I'm Mad for Margaret Rutherford', *Variety*, 7/4/65, p. 26.
87. Ibid.
88. Ibid.
89. Vermilye, J. 'Margaret Rutherford', *Films in Review*, 41/8-9, Aug./Sep. 1990, p. 387.
90. George Howe, quoted in Ibid, p. 390. 'Tics' might seem more logical here than 'tricks', although in the context of Howe saying that Rutherford 'wrinkled her nose like a rabbit and she gobbled', maybe 'tricks' is appropriate after all?
91. Keown, E. (1955), pp. 11, 12.
92. Ibid, p. 25. Is Keown's last observation merely a plea for better verbal enunciation in the cinema or a sideswipe at then (1955) currently fashionable 'Method' acting?
93. Keown, E. (1955), p. 62; Brendan Gill, quoted in Robyns, G. and Rutherford, M. (1972), p. 27.
94. Dame Flora Robson, quoted in Simmons, D.L. (1983) *Margaret Rutherford - A Blithe Spirit*, Arthur Barker Ltd., p. 159.
95. Howerd, F. (1976) *On the Way I Lost It*, W.H. Allen, p. 108.
96. Baxter, K. (1998) *My Sentiments Exactly*, Oberon Books, pp. 193-4.
97. Stringer Davis, quoted in Best, A. 'Dowager Duchess of Laughs', *Picturegoer*, 28/1020, 20/11/54, p. 16.
98. Robyns, G. and Rutherford, M. (1972), p. 27.

99. Brendan Gill, quoted in *Ibid*, p. 27.
100. Robyns, G. and Rutherford, M. (1972), p. 39.
101. *Ibid*, p. 69.
102. *Ibid*, p. 109.
103. Pettigrew, T. (1982) *British Film Character Actors: Great Names and Memorable Moments*, David and Charles, pp. 185-6.
104. Baines, G. (dir.) *Alastair Sim: a qualified fool: 1900-1976*, BBCTV, 11/1/83.
105. *Ibid*.
106. *Ibid*.
107. *Ibid*.
108. *Ibid*.
109. Stephen Fry and Nigel Hawthorne are among contributors to Fisher, J. (prod.) *Heroes of Comedy: Alastair Sim*, Channel 4, 30/4/97.
110. *Ibid*.
111. *Ibid*.
112. Sim, N. (1987) *Dance and Skylark: Fifty Years with Alastair Sim*, Bloomsbury, p. 1.
113. *Ibid*, p. 143.
114. Hamblett, C. 'Mr Sim Has a Secret', *Picturegoer*, 20/813, 2/12/50, p. 13.
115. *Laughter in Paradise* (1951), BFI Pressbook, p. 1.
116. Quilter Vincent, R. 'Mr Sim Lowers His Guard', *ABC Film Review*, 3/12, Dec. 1953, pp. 4-5.
117. *Ibid*.
118. Ellis, J. (1982), p. 104.
119. Quilter Vincent, R., Dec. 1953, p. 5.
120. Naomi Sim made another film in 1936, without Alastair Sim, called *Highland Fling*, a farce starring Naughton and Gold of the Crazy Gang, which involves a race to find a will in a haunted Scottish castle. A contemporary reviewer found it 'successfully amusing' and praised the 'good supporting cast'. *The Monthly Film Bulletin*, 3/30, Jun. 1936, p. 99. There is no current print at the BFI.

121. Sim, N. (1987), p. 94.

122. 'She gave up acting without regret, and even in old age considered that this was "the greatest blessing that could have befallen me. It meant that all my interest became centred on Alastair's work which was the bond that made us so close"'. *The Daily Telegraph*, 9/8/99, p. 21 (obituary for Naomi Sim).

123. Robyns, G. and Rutherford, M. (1972), p. 96. Stringer Davis also appears in *On the Double* (1961) as a butler and in Rutherford's final film *Arabella* (1967) as a gardener. I have been unable to locate copies of either film which makes it impossible to determine the extent of his participation in them.

124. Ken Annakin describes Davis as 'a pleasant individual but you wouldn't call him an actor at all. If she hadn't wished him to be playing this sort of part, you wouldn't have bothered with him'. Annakin, quoted in Macnab, G. 'A quivering lip and a blithe British spirit', *The Independent Review*, 29/9/2000, p. 11. Charles Osborne calls Davis 'a mediocre actor who, at his wife's insistence, had a role written in the [Miss Marple] series for him'. Osborne, C. (1982) *The Life and Crimes of Agatha Christie*, Michael O'Mara Books, p. 162. Both assessments are rather harsh. Annakin's comments seem unfair in the context of a 15-second scene and ignore the effectiveness of amateur players and non-actors in films, while Osborne's spite is informed less by Davis's suitability in the role of Mr Stringer than his irritation at the scriptwriters for daring to depart from the letter of Agatha Christie's novels in their adaptations.

125. Alfred Hitchcock's TV persona, along with his other film work, was well known to audiences at the time.

126. The personal and professional relationship between Rutherford and her husband is best characterised by an exchange in a television interview of 1966. The interviewer (Michael Dean) asks them if it is difficult being married to an actor. Davis responds: 'I don't think so. I've been a supporting actor all my working life since 1920 and I really didn't see why I shouldn't support a star off stage as well as on stage'; Rutherford answers: 'And my side of that question is that without this particular support I couldn't have done what I have done. So for me it's a *sine qua non* to have him at my side'. [producer/director uncredited] *Late Night*

Line-Up, BBCTV, 12/2/66.

127. *Blithe Spirit*, BFI Pressbook.

128. Payn, G. and Morley, S. (1982) *The Noel Coward Diaries*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, p. 8;

Redgrave, M. (1983) *In My Mind's Eye: An Autobiography*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, p. 146.

129. Anthony Havelock-Allan quoted in McFarlane, B. (ed.) (1992), p. 117.

130. Robyns, G. and Rutherford, M. (1972), p. 51.

131. David Lean quoted in Brownlow, K. (1996) *David Lean*, Faber and Faber, pp. 188-9.

132. Rex Harrison quoted in *Ibid*, p. 190.

133. Robyns, G. and Rutherford, M. (1972), p. 47.

134. *Ibid*.

135. Dilys Powell in *The Sunday Times*, 8/4/45. (BFI Press Cuttings)

136. Sim, N. (1987), p. 117. Apart from the early *The Big Noise* (1936), *Let the People Sing* (1942) is the first time Sim received top billing in the cinema.

137. Annakin, K. (2001) *So You Wanna Be a Director?*, Tomahawk Press, p. 34.

138. *Ibid*, pp. 34-5.

139. I was fortunate to meet the director at a screening of *Miranda* (at The Showroom Cinema, Sheffield, 9/5/01) on a promotional tour for his autobiography. (*Ibid*.) He considered that the film had not dated because it concerned 'the temptation of men by a very beautiful girl'; it was 'a joy to make' and took 'a lot of nervous energy and pluck on my part' to accept the assignment as director. He also spoke of the 'excellent acting' and told me he felt lucky that Margaret Rutherford had been cast in the film.

140. David Kossoff, who appears with Rutherford in *The Mouse on the Moon* (1963), wrote to the actress in the 1960s: 'You...know what to do with your body and your head in the most astonishing way. When other people make faces you use that heavy chin and that wide-set eye look. I have always admired the way you know what to do with your body. You have looked at this with remarkable honesty but there is not a muscle that escapes your notice. I like the economy of your movements - how you never waste energy. I have always thought that the sign of quality in a performer is economy and this you have in very full measure'. Robyns, G. and Rutherford, M. (1972), pp. 186-7.

141. Annakin, K. (2001), p. 35.
142. Robyns, G. and Rutherford, M. (1972), p. 98.
143. Ibid, pp. 98-99.
144. Ibid, p. 99.
145. See Anthony Bairstow in *The Daily Herald*, 6/12/57. (BFI Press Cuttings)
146. Alistair McGowan interviewed in Fisher, J. (prod.) *Heroes of Comedy: Alastair Sim*, Channel 4, 30/4/97.
147. Patricia Routledge interviewed in Ibid.
148. Sim, N. (1987), p. 133.
149. Landy, M. (1991) *British Genres, Cinema and Society, 1930-1960*, Princeton University Press, p. 365.
150. *Variety*, 14/11/51.
151. Sim, N. (1987), p. 132.
152. Milton Shulman in *The Evening Standard*, 28/11/51. (BFI Press Cuttings)
153. *The New Yorker*, 8/12/51; Hollis Alpert in *The Saturday Review*, 1/12/51. (BFI Press Cuttings)
154. BFi Pressbook.
155. Ibid.
156. Aleene MacMinn in *The Los Angeles Times; The Philadelphia Inquirer* (BFI Pressbook); Alvin R. Marill in *Films in Review*, 35/10, Dec. 1984, p. 630.
157. Pettigrew, T. (1982), pp. 32, 187.
158. Richards, J. (1997) *Films and British National Identity*, Manchester University Press, p. 341.
159. Ibid.
160. Tom Charity in *Time Out*, 24/12/99, p. 98. (BFI Press Cuttings)
161. Harper, S. and Porter, V. (2003) *British Cinema of the 1950s: the decline of deference*, Oxford University Press, p. 163.
162. Ibid.
163. See Hurst, B.D. (1986) *Brian Desmond Hurst: An Autobiography*, unpublished, p. 149.

164. Geoff Brown in Milne, T. (ed.) (1993) *The Time Out Film Guide*, Penguin, p. 333.
165. Penelope Houston in *The Sunday Times*, 29/6/52. (BFI Press Cuttings)
166. Dilys Powell in Elvin, G. et al. (1968) *Anthony Asquith*, BFI, unpaginated.
167. Ryall, T. (2005) *Anthony Asquith*, Manchester University Press, p. 136.
168. Dorothy Tutin interviewed in McFarlane, B. (1997) *An Autobiography of British Cinema*, Methuen, p. 582. If Tutin enjoyed working with Rutherford, she admits she 'didn't have such a happy relationship with Edith'. Ibid.
169. Keown, E. (1955), p. 55; Paul Dehn in *The Sunday Chronicle*, 29/6/52. (BFI Press Cuttings)
170. *The Monthly Film Bulletin*, 18/209, Jun. 1951, p. 275.
171. *The Motion Picture Herald*, 185/9, 1/12/51, p. 1125.
172. *The Daily Chronicle*, 1/6/51. (BFI Press Cuttings)
173. Sim, N. (1987), p. 133.
174. Alistair McGowan and Nigel Hawthorne are contributors to Fisher, J. (prod.) *Heroes of Comedy: Alastair Sim*, Channel 4, 30/4/97.
175. Caroline Lejeune in *The Observer*, 14/3/54. (BFI Press Cuttings)
176. Harper, S. and Porter, V. (2003), p. 269.
177. Sim, N. (1987), pp. 133-4.
178. Terry-Thomas and Daum, T. (1990) *Terry-Thomas Tales Tales: An Autobiography*, Robson Books, p. 91.
179. Fane-Saunders, K. (ed.) (2000) *Radio Times Guide To Films*, BBC Worldwide Ltd., p. 593.
180. Chas. MacLaren in *Time and Tide*, 2/4/60. (BFI Press Cuttings)
181. *The Times*, 19/10/60. (BFI Press Cuttings)
182. *The Hollywood Reporter*, 163/46, 7/2/61, p. 3; Dilys Powell in *The Sunday Times*, 23/10/60. (BFI Press Cuttings)
183. Robyns, G. and Rutherford, M. (1972), p. 175; Vermilye, J. 'Margaret Rutherford', *Films in Review*, 41/10, Oct. 1990, p. 459.
184. Robyns, G. and Rutherford, M., Ibid.

185. Jon Tuska in his book *The Detective in Hollywood* (1978), quoted in Haining, P. (1990) *Agatha Christie: Murder in Four Acts*, Virgin Books, pp. 131-2.
186. Alfred Hitchcock avoided whodunits for this very reason. He tells Truffaut: 'I don't really approve of whodunits because they're rather like a crossword or a jigsaw puzzle. No emotion. You simply wait to find out who committed the murder'. Truffaut, F. (1984) *Hitchcock by Truffaut*, Paladin, p. 92.
187. Albert Watson in *The Western Mail*, quoted in Haining, P. (1990), p. 147; Melvin Maddocks in *The Christian Science Monitor*, quoted in Simmons, D.L. (1983), p. 136.
188. Alexander Walker, undated and uncredited. (BFI Press Cuttings)
189. Rutherford - one suspects with her tongue firmly in her cheek - considers that in Miss Whitchurch (*The Happiest Days of Your Life*) she had never before lent herself 'to a more disgraceful exhibition of ruthless feminism'. Robyns, G. and Rutherford, M. (1972), p. 88.
190. *Time*, 5/7/63. (BFI Press Cuttings)
191. Cecil Wilson in *The Daily Mail*, 24/10/64 (BFI Press Cuttings); Bradford, P. 'Surely, Mr Bond, it's easier my way?', *ABC Film Review*, 14/12, Dec. 1964, pp. 10-11.
192. *The Monthly Film Bulletin*, 32/381, Oct. 1965, p. 151; *The Motion Picture Herald*, 232/7, 30/9/64, p. 138; Cecii Wilson in *The Daily Mail*, 30/9/65. (BFI Press Cuttings)
193. Higham, C. (1970) *The Films of Orson Welles*, University of California Press, p. 170. Note, by contrast, how Asquith is only too happy to reference *Murder at the Gallop* and the Hunt Ball sequence, as Stringer Davis demonstrates 'the Twist' in *The V.I.P.s*, immediately reminding the audience of the earlier film and Rutherford's characterisation of Miss Marple.
194. John Howard Davies, interviewed in Fisher, J. (prod.) *Heroes of Comedy: Alastair Sim*, Channel 4, 30/4/97.
195. Ibid.
196. Naomi Sim, interviewed in Baines, G. (dir.) *Alastair Sim: a qualified fool: 1900-1976*, BBCTV, 11/1/83.
197. William Trevor, interviewed in Ibid.
198. Leonard Buckley in *The Times*, 21/11/72. (BFI Press Cuttings)
199. Peter Black in *The Daily Mail*, 21/11/72; Rosemary Say in *The Sunday Telegraph*, 1972.

(BFI Press Cuttings)

200. Sylvia Clayton in *The Daily Telegraph*, 21/11/72; Leonard Buckley in *The Times*, 21/11/72. (BFI Press Cuttings)

201. Landy, M. (1991) *British Genres, Cinema and Society, 1930-1960*, Princeton University Press, p. 364.

202. Robyns, G. and Rutherford, M. (1972), p. 90.

203. Ibid.

204. Ibid.

205. *The Sunday Chronicle* review, quoted in Walker, J. (ed.) (2001) *Halliwel's Film and Video Guide 2002*, Harper Collins, p. 354; Sim, N. (1987), p. 132.

206. *The Daily Mail*, 10/3/50. (BFI Press Cuttings)

207. See Robyns, G. and Rutherford, M. (1972), p. 92. In the story Robyns and Rutherford actually refer to the stage rather than the screen, although it is quoted in the context of a discussion about the film, so this could be a factual error on their part. However, even if it is correct, the crucial differentiation between the performer and the real person is still pertinent. For a more detailed analysis of Rutherford and Sim's contributions to *The Happiest Days of Your Life* see Babington, B. (2002) *Lauder and Gilliat*, Manchester University Press, pp. 156-162.

Conclusions and Summary

Alastair Sim and Margaret Rutherford present an interesting contrast. While Sim seemed to take charge of his career, he also accepted many of the roles he was offered, taking risks by playing characters new to his repertoire. Of course this tailed off as he became better known and he was more discriminating in his choice of parts, although the richness of his dual nationality in itself seemed to provide him automatically with a wider diversity of characters, classes, and in one memorable instance (Miss Fritton), genders. Next to him, Rutherford seems more cautious, but always amenable, happy just to accommodate herself to an industry which could hardly have ignored her. Unlike her co-star in *The Happiest Days of Your Life*, she had to be coaxed into portraying some of the roles for which she became most famous. Thus she visited a medium before essaying Madame Arcati, anxious that she should represent them faithfully; she hesitated over the formidable Miss Whitchurch, conscious of, and perhaps slightly bemused by, the character's pre-feminist intent, unsure if the part was right for her; and the murderous connections to Miss Marple also caused her to waver, only accepting the role when she was convinced of the character's honourable intentions and moral rectitude. Sim, at least in his maturity, seems the more adaptable of the two and less typecast; Rutherford becomes known as a specialist in eccentric aristocrats and yet proved, when she was allowed the opportunity, that she could play other roles as different as Nurse Cary, Mistress Quickly and Miss Marple. However both actors could be said to appear to best advantage when they seem to play versions of themselves, although this is difficult to gauge especially when there is so little documentary material of them not consciously 'performing'. Of course, in Sim's case, there is virtually nothing, but even Rutherford's interviews and public appearances that do survive take on aspects of performance. Her two television interviews are recorded in advance, probably at her request, but still find her uneasy. In the second, she continually refers back to her husband, Stringer Davis, who takes on the function of a theatrical prompter. She is noticeably happier at the end reciting Edward Lear's 'The Owl and the Pussycat'. Again, it is also not surprising that her Variety Club acceptance of her award for best British actress of 1963 is sometimes known as her 'Grande

Dame' speech because she seems to adopt a specifically dithery persona which immediately engages her audience. The fascination of both performers is therefore very much revealed through the interaction of their life and work and especially the incalculable effect of their respective spouses, Stringer Davis and Naomi Sim, without whom their professional careers might have been considerably less prominent or finely nuanced.

A large proportion of their working lives was devoted to the theatre, whose lure neither of them ever completely abandoned for the cinema, and it is the complex relationship between the two which informs some of their best work. It was not just that they had to learn new techniques in front of the camera, and adapt to other media like television and radio, but that they proved they could be flexible within the ever-changing circumstances of the British industry whose unhappy plight Sim so brilliantly satirises in *Lady Godiva Rides Again*. Unlike their American counterparts, neither the lower salaries nor the relatively miniscule budgets of the films in which they appeared seemed to restrict their creative range, indeed the post-war austerity served to toughen up their professionalism. And of course they were both much more than just actors, with Sim exhibiting a talent as a stage director and Rutherford relishing the chance to read poetry, sometimes to prisoners. Their long stints as featured players made them both somewhat reluctant stars and perhaps explains why they were only too happy to engage in other activities outside film and theatre performances.

If their oscillation between the theatre and films proved beneficial for both, their Britishness and eccentricity, always complex and contradictory, could be (at different times) an asset and a limitation. Rutherford's eccentricity gave her a distinctiveness over her contemporaries which is manifested in her habits, mannerisms, dress and vocal inflection, and which can be shown to advantage on the screen over lengthy periods without losing our interest or sympathy. Sim's Scottishness is evidently important to him but not if it becomes disrespected and demeaned into stereotype and caricature. Thus he incorporates gentle hints of his Scottish roots in the vocal inflection of most of the English characters he portrays - an individualistic and eccentric trait which at once defines his screen identity and marks him out as a special performer. Therefore his Scottishness (and Rutherford's Englishness) becomes inseparable from his eccentricity. Of course if either of them are wrestling with a poor script or

unsympathetic direction the camera can make them seem uncomfortable or merely foolish, but when they are seen to be given the benefit of the doubt and their quirky singularity is artfully applied to the creation of character, they are to be seen at their best.

Their eccentric Britishness inevitably defines them as character actors, although what this actually means in practice is difficult to assess when they seem equally at home in cameos and bit-parts as in specially tailored star vehicles. However this flexibility gives them a quite separate identity from their equivalents in the U.S.A. and ultimately provides them with greater career opportunities. It seems likely too that the British context in which they both worked allowed for a more liberal attitude towards gender signification - like Sim's Miss Fritton, or Rutherford's 'Michelin man' costume as Miss Marple in *Murder She Said* - as well as the chance to tackle other areas like class (for instance) in their favourite genres of comedy and comedy-thriller, through the liberal use of their innate eccentricity.

Inevitably there are alterations and additions to, and omissions from, my originally stated aims and objectives when I began this project. For instance, there is an undeniable sense of overlap between one section and another. Can Sim and Rutherford's lives be separated from their stage work, or their films be spoken of in isolation, without reference to their very British and eccentric identities, or their character studies not inform and be informed by all the others? Obviously there is a need to discuss aspects of the two actors separately as far as this is possible, but there is an equal need to view them as salient features of the whole human being. At first, I was very interested in the idea of the actor as the *auteur* of his/her own work, a concept which has been explored by Patrick McGilligan in his 1975 study of James Cagney. [1] However, it seems to me now that it is enough to outline the effect of Sim and Rutherford as actors on the big screen to indicate that no-one, even (or especially) directors, can work in a sort of creative vacuum, and each contributor to a film makes a necessary and vital impact upon the finished product. If the film that is viewed by the public is not perfect in its execution then at least parts of it may be savoured, and how often is it the case that Sim and Rutherford's exuberant performances rescue otherwise rather tiresome British films! And if this illustration of their art demonstrates anything clearly, it is that of the primacy of the performer in British cinema. Of course, I should like to have widened the discussion, and

there is probably scope for another section on their theatrical work alone, or room for a whole dissertation on the reactions of their fellow actors towards their performances - I planned a series of interviews. In addition, further research is needed on other British actors (and those of other cinemas) who provide magical, but largely unrecognised, contributions as character players, a singularly skilful art in itself, as I hope to have shown. It is only in this way that we can even begin to build a more composite and fully representational picture of the richness and diversity of the British cinema.

Annotated Filmography - an introduction

This annotated filmography is a chronological list of the films and television appearances of Alastair Sim and Margaret Rutherford. The first line indicates title (in *italics*), director, date and the role undertaken by Sim or Rutherford [in square brackets]. If the film has an alternative title (or titles) this is given on the next line.

The purpose of the ensuing cast list is to show not only the most prominent/interesting performers in the production but also to indicate the billing of Rutherford (M.R.) and Sim (A.S.). I have consulted the films themselves wherever possible to verify the two actors' respective billings but it often proves an inexact science where opening and closing cast lists contradict one another and different prints present different information. Where the films are not currently available I have relied on studio publicity and reviews of the time which again are frequently contradictory. The aim has been to give a detailed cast up to and including Sim and Rutherford and add any subsequent performers of interest/significance. It would be absurd, for example, to list the 80-strong cast of *The Magic Box* especially as Rutherford's participation in the film takes all of two minutes and fifteen seconds!

Next comes a genre description (for films only) and plot summary, followed by a critical commentary. The numbers in square brackets refer to the notes at the end of each section on Rutherford and Sim.

I have included some documentary items to fill out the picture; for a more complete listing see the actors' separate films and television appearances, pp. 289-294.

The greatest frustration for a researcher into this period of British film history (1930s-1970s) is the question of availability. It is not merely that many films of the 1930s or television programmes of the 1950s and 1960s have vanished forever but the realisation that some which do survive are in such a poor state of preservation they are unable to be viewed, like the countless preservation prints held by the BFI, for instance. In addition, there are others whose disappearance seems almost inexplicable. Where, for example, are extant copies of Sim's *Escapade* (1955) or Rutherford's final film *Arabella* (1967), neither of which is exactly obscure? They are certainly unobtainable from any of the sources below, and other

distributors I have contacted. Happily the majority of Rutherford and Sim's popular films are regularly shown on terrestrial television and are continually reissued on video and now DVD. With the exception of the handful of distributors I contacted, all of whom drew a blank on the less often seen items, I have restricted my sources to the following, indicated at the end of each film commentary:

BBC: British Broadcasting Corporation Archives

BFI-PP: British Film Institute - Preservation Print

BFI-VC: British Film Institute - Viewing Copy

VID-OA: Video - off air

VID-UK: Video - United Kingdom (available currently or previously)

VID-USA: Video - United States of America (available currently or previously)

All films/television programmes are produced in British studios unless stated in the text.

Alastair Sim - Annotated Filmography

Riverside Murder [1] (Albert Parker, 1935) [Sergeant Mackay]

(Basil Sydney, Judy Gunn, Zoe Davis, A.S.)

Crime Drama. An inspector (Basil Sydney), aided by a female reporter (Judy Gunn), solves the riddle of three financiers' deaths.

A typical 'quota quickie' of the period which anticipates Sim's later role as Sergeant Bingham in the *Inspector Hornleigh* (1939-41) series of films. *Kine Weekly* likes the mix of romance, mystery and comedy; *Today's Cinema* acknowledges 'diverting comedy from broad Scots sergeant', while *The Daily Film Renter* finds Sim 'amusing' and 'a joy'. [2] In an early interview Sim comments: 'I was asked to play the part of a Cockney detective, but I rebelled. I had never tried to portray a Cockney in all my life. So I persuaded the studio to change the character into a Scot'. [3] [BFI-VC]

A Fire Has Been Arranged (Leslie Hiscott, 1935) [Cutte]

(Bud Flanagan, Chesney Allen, Mary Lawson, Robb Wilton, Harold French, C. Dernier Warren, A.S., Hal Walters)

Farce. A trio of bumbling crooks (Flanagan, Allen and Walters) bury their stolen loot in a field. On their release from prison ten years later, they return to discover that a department store has been erected on the site.

Sim plays Cutte, a shady department store manager. With his business on the brink of bankruptcy he will take advantage of any financial opportunity, including a plan to burn down his own premises - hence the film's title. The film receives mixed reviews and is nominally a vehicle for Flanagan and Allen. [4] However, it soon becomes evident who is the real star of the film. *The Sunday Times* calls Sim 'the gem of the show', and *The Sunday Express* considers that with his 'lantern-jaw and eerie eyes [he] moves up another notch as a new kind of funnyman in British films'. [5] [VID-OA]

The Private Secretary (Henry Edwards, 1935) [Mr Nebulae]

(Edward Everett Horton, Judy Gunn, Oscar Asche, Barry Mackay, Sydney Fairbrother, Michael Shepley, O.B. Clarence, Davina Craig, Aubrey Dexter, A.S.)

Farce, based on a popular Victorian stage play in which a perpetually confused clergyman, Reverend Spalding (Edward Everett Horton), is impersonated by a rich playboy desperate to avoid his creditors.

Sim portrays Mr Nebulae, a medium, who appears in only two short scenes. *Film Weekly* finds him 'engagingly ghoulish', while a *Sunday Times* reviewer considers that 'the only real hit of the production was the superb grimacing of Alastair Sim. If he is not snapped up by Hollywood he ought to be. His is a personality so full of gloom that he epitomises the entire world depression in his own person'. (!) [6] [VID-OA]

Late Extra (Albert Parker, 1935) [Mac]

(Virginia Cherrill, James Mason, A.S., Cyril Cusack, Donald Wolfit, Hannen Swaffer, Michael Wilding)

Crime Drama. A young reporter, Jim Martin (James Mason), tracks down a double murderer and bank robber.

James Mason's first film boasts an impressive supporting cast including (apart from Sim) Donald Wolfit, Cyril Cusack, Michael Wilding and real-life journalist Hannen Swaffer as himself. Studio publicity indicates that Sim plays a Scottish journalist, most likely a prototype for his roles as Joshua Collie in *The Squeaker* (1937) and Lochlan MacGregor in the two '*This Man*' films. At present *Late Extra* exists only as an unviewable preservation print at the BFI. [BFI-PP]

Troubled Waters (Albert Parker, 1936) [Mac MacTavish]

(Virginia Cherrill, James Mason, A.S., Margaret Rutherford)

Crime Drama. James Mason plays a government agent who saves a villager's liquid explosives from smugglers.

Sim is reunited with the young stars of his previous film and it marks the third time he had

worked with American director Albert Parker, whom Rachael Low describes as 'a quota king'. [7] Sim plays a Scottish innkeeper and *Kine Weekly* thinks he 'carries off the [acting] honours' and that his character's 'efforts after publicity keep the ball rolling'. [8] In the context of this survey the film is notable for the inclusion of Margaret Rutherford in the cast, although contemporary reviews do not mention her. It is unfortunate that - like its predecessor - *Troubled Waters* exists at present only as a preservation print at the BFI, and that there is also no surviving publicity material. [BFI-PP]

Wedding Group (Campbell Gullan/Alex Bryce, 1936) [Angus Graham]

(alternative titles: *Wrath of Jealousy/A Man of Wrath/Nurse in Grey*)

(Fay Compton, Barbara Greene, Patric Knowles, A.S., Ethel Glendinning, Naomi Plaskitt)

Romantic Drama set at the time of the Crimean War, it incorporates a fictionalised portrait of Florence Nightingale (Fay Compton) as the action alternates between a Scottish village and the Crimea. Originally a radio play.

Sim effortlessly portrays a dour Scottish minister and adds considerable verisimilitude to the depiction of Scottish village life by his presence alone, his performance described as 'immense' by *Kine Weekly*. [9] However his effectiveness in the role is not matched by the scenes in the Crimea featuring Florence Nightingale carrying her lamp and tending to wounded soldiers which seem almost mythical by comparison. [10] [BFI-VC]

The Big Noise [11](Alex Bryce, 1936) [Finny]

(A.S., Norah Howard, Fred Duprez, C. Dernier Warren, Edie Martin)

Comedy. Finny (Sim) is a humble employee of the shaky Capricorn Oil Company who is made president to cover up for the dubious business practices of two promoters. With the help of company secretary Mary Miller (Norah Howard) Finny's business fortunes are improved and his associates' crookedness exposed.

Sim's partner in many scenes is a goat ('Cap', the company mascot) and he is even asked to sing, but despite studio publicity trumpeting the role as 'his first starring film' the critics are not impressed. [12] Their comments reveal a split between what is evidently a poor film and an

appreciation of Sim's special qualities. While he is found 'funny', 'amusing at times' and 'entertaining in his characteristic manner' they deplore his inclination to 'over-exaggerate the characterisation. The fact of the matter is that Sim is not a big enough comedian to carry a picture of this sort entirely on his own shoulders. By the time the picture is over [only 65 minutes!], it is likely that you will have grown a little weary of his mannerisms'. [13]

Keep Your Seats Please [14](Monty Banks, 1936) [Drayton]

(George Formby, Florence Desmond, A.S., Gus McNaughton)

Farce (with songs) about the search for jewels and bonds hidden in a set of dining room chairs.

As if aware of his premature promotion to star status, Sim looks much more comfortable here playing an unscrupulous solicitor and providing support to comedy and music-hall stars of the day, as in the earlier *A Fire Has Been Arranged*. [VID-UK]

The Mysterious Mr Davis (Claude Autant-Lara, 1936) [Theodore G. Wilcox]

(alternative title: *My Partner Mr Davis*)

(Henry Kendall, Kathleen Kelly, Richard Gofe, A.S., Guy Middleton)

Comedy/Drama. Julian Roscoe (Henry Kendall) invents a business partner and becomes involved with criminals.

In 1938, John Newnham reported for *Film Weekly* that the film was originally 'a completely straight story, and it was decided at the last minute that comedy relief would have to be introduced. So Alastair Sim was enraged. He had to appear as a lunatic who popped into the story every now and then. He still doesn't know of any legitimate excuse for the introduction of the character'. [15] If the film is criticised for its lack of cohesion, Sim's insane ex-city banker is praised for creating something memorable out of poor material. It remains one of his oddest performances and perhaps a lesson to actors who are not receiving the direction they deserve. [16] David Shipman calls it a 'star' part but its effectiveness is hijacked due to its rather obvious imposition on a dull narrative to ensure easy laughs. [17] Sim's confusion about the purpose of the role results in a characterisation prone to over-exaggeration as if to

compensate for the uninspiring material. [BFI-VC]

The Man in the Mirror (Maurice Elvey, 1936) [Interpreter]

(Edward Everett Horton, Genevieve Tobin, Ursula Jeans, Garry Marsh, Aubrey Mather, A.S., Felix Aylmer)

Farcical Comedy. Jeremy Dilke (Edward Everett Horton), a shy man bullied by his wife, mother-in-law and business partner, is shown the way to success by a more confident and assertive alterego (also played by Horton).

Sim is a fake interpreter to the equally unlikely Bogus of Bakhara (Aubrey Mather), a role which allows him the opportunity in only four scenes to portray two personalities within one character, a sort of microcosmic nod to Horton's starring part. The first of Sim's three films for the prolific Maurice Elvey. [18] [VID-OA]

Strange Experiment (Albert Parker, 1937) [Bob Lawler]

(Henry de Vries, Mary Newcombe, A.S., James Carew, Ann Wemyss, Donald Gray)

Crime Drama. A young chemist, James Martin (Donald Gray) is implicated in a jewel robbery and turns to his aunt, a notorious jewel 'fence', for help.

Sim plays Bob Lawler, a member of a criminal gang and perhaps a progenitor of Soapy Marks, his character in *The Terror* (1938). Neither Parker's direction nor the confusing narrative of this 'pseudo-scientific crime play' is much liked, although Sim steals the notices as usual, described variously as 'convincing' and 'excellent', while a more recent assessment acknowledges his 'capacity for fawning villainy' and considers him 'never less than enjoyable'.

[19] [BFI-VC]

Clothes and the Woman (Albert de Courville, 1937) [Francois]

(Tucker McGuire, Dorothy Dare, Mary Cole, Rod La Roque, George Stone, Constance Collier, A.S.)

Romantic Comedy. On a trip to Cannes, Joan (Tucker McGuire) realises that clothes can be more of a disadvantage than an asset when it comes to impressing the man of her choice.

Sim portrays Francois, man-servant to Eugenia (Constance Collier). The film is sold on the charms of former silent star Rod La Rocque and his real life ten year marriage to the equally forgotten Vilma Banky, dubbed 'Hollywood's happiest couple' by the publicity machine. In a flimsy comedy awash with stereotypes, Sim's scenes with Collier are an undoubted highlight. *Kine Weekly* comments: 'The only humour frankly exposed is that confined to the amiable and amusing technique and mannerisms of such well-known stage players as Constance Collier and Alastair Sim. They, in fact, save the picture'. [20] The emphasis on theatrical pedigree is illustrative of the low esteem in which many British film stars were held by the critical establishment of their day. There is no current print at the BFI.

Gangway (Sonnie Hale, 1937) [Taggett]

(Jessie Matthews, Barry Mackay, Nat Pendleton, A.S.)

Musical comedy. Pat Wayne (Jessie Matthews) is a newspaper reporter who poses as a lady's maid and becomes involved with a gang of crooks. Locations move from Fleet Street to New York via an ocean cruise.

Sim plays Taggett, an undercover detective for an insurance company on the trail of a jewel thief. At last he appears in a more high profile production which exposed him to wider audiences both at home and in the U.S.A.. *The Monthly Film Bulletin* thinks his 'very secret detective walks away with the picture in the few short scenes in which he appears'; *Film Weekly* concurs, calling Taggett his 'first important crazy part'. [21] However, notices are mixed, especially for Matthews - a fading star by this time - and her husband Sonnie Hale who directs. [VID-OA]

The Squeaker (William Howard, 1937) [Joshua Collie]

(Edmund Lowe, Sebastian Shaw, Ann Todd, Tamara Desni, Robert Newton, Allan Jeayes, A.S.)

Detective melodrama. The head of a respectable shipping firm is unmasked as a notorious jewel 'fence'.

Sim is cast as Joshua Collie, a crime reporter who eventually gets the scoop he has been working for. One critic thinks he presents 'a young man's impersonation of the man we have come to know in later films'. [22] He certainly seems more visible and confident than ever before and allows the humour to tell rather than relying on an excess of mugging for the camera. His scenes are short, but whether clashing with his exasperated editor or dictating copy to a typist he contributes to driving along the narrative. Indeed it is he who initially refers to the film's title, and his presence somehow lends him a possession over the ultimate destination of the story, simultaneously functioning as both facilitator of the action and commentator upon it. [VID-OA]

A Romance in [of] Flanders (Maurice Elvey, 1937) [Colonel/Captain Wexton]

(alternative titles: *Lost on the Western Front*, *Widow's Island*, *Romance on the Western Front*)

(Paul Cavanagh, Marcel Chantal, Garry Marsh, Olga Lindo, A.S.)

Romantic melodrama set at the time of the First World War and its aftermath. Army sergeants John Morley (Paul Cavanagh) and Rodd Berry (Garry Marsh) both fall for Belgian farmer's daughter Yvonne (Marcel Chantal). She truly loves Morley but believing him dead marries Berry.

Sim plays Colonel [sometimes billed as Captain] Wexton. There is no current print at the BFI.

Melody and Romance (Maurice Elvey, 1937) [Professor Williams]

(Hughie Green, Margaret Lockwood, Jane Carr, A.S., Garry Marsh, C. Denier Warren)

Musical comedy woven around the talents of Hughie Green and his Gang. Hugh Hawkins (Hughie Green), a young bargee with musical aspirations manages to prevent disaster when fire breaks out during a rehearsal at the Crystal Palace.

Sim is cast as a professor with an uncertain memory. One of his two daughters is portrayed by Margaret Lockwood in an early role. There is no current print of *Melody and Romance* at the BFI. [23]

Sailing Along (Sonnie Hale, 1938) [Sylvester]

(Jessie Matthews, Roland Young, Barry Mackay, Jack Whiting, Noel Madison, A.S., Athene Seyler, Frank Pettingell)

Musical Comedy. Bargee's adopted daughter Kay (Jessie Matthews) gives up the prospect of stardom for the love of his son Steve (Barry Mackay).

Sim is Sylvester, a wild-eyed painter of abstracts, a character apparently inspired by Salvador Dali. Apart from his natural ability for clowning around, Sim's value to the industry at this point in his career is clearly his professionalism and versatility. The studio publicity considers him 'in the enviable position of being six types at once', and Sim comments: 'I've played a Scottish reporter at Denham in the morning, had lunch as my normal self and motored three miles over to Pinewood to go 'nuts' for the afternoon'. [24] [VID-OA]

The Terror (Richard Bird, 1938) [Soapy Marks]

(Wilfrid Lawson, Bernard Lee, Arthur Wontner, Linden Travers, Henry Oscar, Iris Hoey, Stanley Lathbury, Lesley Wareing, A.S., Richard Murdoch)

Crime Thriller. A master criminal, who betrayed his colleagues to the police, known as 'The Terror' and posing as an organ-playing monk, is revealed to be Mr Goodman (Wilfrid Lawson). Sim plays another criminal, Soapy Marks, just released from prison and bent on revenge against his former crime boss ('The Terror'). Although he appears ninth on the cast list he is given superior dialogue (by William Freshman, based on Edgar Wallace) and the added incentive of a disguise as an ingratiating priest, to say nothing of an extraordinary final scene when he emerges semi-conscious from a tomb in the crypt of a creepy old house! Latterly the film has been reclaimed by enthusiasts for vintage British horror. [25] [BFI-VC]

Alf's Button Afloat (Marcel Varnel, 1938) [Eustace - the Genie]

(The Crazy Gang - incl. Flanagan and Allen, Nervo and Knox, Naughton and Gold, A.S.)

Farce. At sea, the Crazy Gang encounter a Genie (Sim) who grants their wishes, to their delight and embarrassment.

Sim is the Genie of the Button. As a fan of Flanagan and Allen, with whom he is reunited from *A Fire Has Been Arranged*, Sim is said to have regretted the need to film most of his scenes separately from them due to the technical trickery involved. However, like the earlier film, it is significant that despite the surrealism of the plot, including the lovers being eaten by a bear (off screen!), and the frantic music-hall antics of the Crazy Gang team (which quickly become wearisome), it is Sim who steals the film almost effortlessly. It should be noted that it is this film which presented the young George Cole with his first impression of Alastair Sim. Apparently Cole was so fascinated by the Genie that he waited until the end of the film to see the name of the actor who played him, little imagining he would be working with Sim in two years time both on stage and screen. [VID-OA]

This Man is News (David MacDonald, 1938) [Lochlan Macgregor]

(Barry K. Barnes, Valerie Hobson, A.S.)

Comedy. Newspaper reporter Simon Drake (Barry K. Barnes) plays a trick on his editor MacGregor (Sim) by giving him a false story when drunk, only to discover it is true. Like its successor, *This Man in Paris* (1939), the film is loosely modelled on the 'Thin Man' Hollywood productions which had begun in 1934 starring William Powell and Myrna Loy as amateur sleuths.

Sim excels as a permanently harrassed newspaper editor hungry for the latest scoop. Writing in *The Motion Picture Herald*, Aubrey Flanagan praises his 'joyously etched study in Scottish skepticism'. [26] The part is an extension and refinement of Joshua Collie in *The Squeaker* (1937), but here Sim is allowed far more leeway by director David MacDonald to develop his performance without being side-lined as a secondary character. As *Today's Cinema* affirms: 'Acting honours are secured by Alastair Sim...he dominates the action throughout and contributes a good deal to the prevailing hilarity'. [27] [VID-OA]

Climbing High (Carol Reed, 1939) [Max Tolliver]

(Jessie Matthews, Michael Redgrave, Noel Madison, A.S., Margaret Vyner, Francis Sullivan)

Farcical Comedy. Nicky (Michael Redgrave) is a young man of independent means who (literally!) bumps into Diana (Jessie Matthews), a model. He is also involved with a society girl, Lady Constance Westacre (Margaret Vyner). After numerous complications, all is resolved on a Swiss mountain top.

Sim has an engagingly offbeat role as a communist forced to pose as the 'before' model for a male health and beauty product in order to pay the rent. With hindsight some of his lines are unfortunate in the historical context of Stalin's gulag - Sim calls himself the 'iron commissar' - and the coming horrors of Dachau, Auschwitz and Belsen - He jokes to his landlord: 'Didn't I promise to send your wife to a concentration camp?' Well-conceived as Sim's character is, it does rather cast doubt on his relevance to the scenario, and also draws attention to the perceived complacency of Jessie Matthews' films in the face of the realities of a changing world. [28] A young Carol Reed seems out of his depth in comedy and Jessie Matthews' last film as a major star opened to poor notices. [VID-OA]

Inspector Hornleigh (Eugene Forde, 1939) [Sergeant Bingham]

(Gordon Harker, A.S., Miki Hood, Wally Patch)

Detective Drama. Inspector Hornleigh (Gordon Harker) solves the mystery of the Chancellor's stolen budget case, encounters several murders along the way, and unmasks the culprit and his motive. Developed from a successful radio series by Hans Priwin, which was first broadcast during Coronation week in 1937.

In the first of three popular comedy-dramas Sim portrays the dimwitted Sergeant Bingham. He forms an effective and complementary screen partnership with Gordon Harker's sterner inspector. *Kine Weekly* considers that 'Alastair Sim more than adequately completes the team', while *Variety* likes his 'unconscious and typically British bon-mots'. [29] [BFI-VC]

This Man in Paris (David MacDonald, 1939) [Lochlan MacGregor]

(Barry K. Barnes, Valerie Hobson, A.S., Naomi Plaskitt)

Comedy. Reporter Simon Drake (Barry K. Barnes) his wife (Valerie Hobson) and editor MacGregor (Sim) relocate to Paris trying to clear a peer accused of possessing forged bank notes.

The team from *This Man is News* reunite for a sequel some critics find disappointing. The importance of Sim's contribution to the film is acknowledged by his on-screen billing which is amended from the supporting 'with' of the first film to the more inclusive, starrier 'and' of the second. The publicity notes the 'enlarged opportunities for his heaven-beseeching despair and his crocodile smile', and the critics cannot disagree: Graham Greene considers that he is 'again acting everybody else off the set', and Aubrey Flanagan thinks his 'confused and confounded Scots editor runs away with the film', noting that at a trade screening 'Sim's grimacings and incoherent gesticulations evoked reiterated laughter'. [30] Naomi Sim makes a delightfully playful unbilled cameo appearance as Sim's landlady Colette MacKintosh.

[BFI-VC]

Inspector Hornleigh on Holiday (Walter Forde, 1939) [Sergeant Bingham]

(Gordon Harker, A.S., Linden Travers, Wally Patch, Edward Chapman)

Detective Drama. Bored on their seaside holiday, Inspector Hornleigh (Gordon Harker) and his sergeant (Sim) find time to solve a murder and unmask a criminal gang involved in an insurance scam.

Sim and Harker reprise their roles from *Inspector Hornleigh*; this time the duo visit a cemetery, a bridge club and a hospital where the unlucky Bingham has to pose as a corpse! If anything the second film in the series appears to be an improvement on the first - see Geoff Brown's opinion below - the story deriving from a novel by Leo Grex developed into an admired screenplay by Frank Launder and Sidney Gilliat, important figures in Sim's future development as a film actor. The British Walter Forde replaces his American namesake Eugene Forde (no relation) as director. Geoff Brown comments: 'Dramatically the story is ingenious, even if the directorial camping has transcended the bounds of plausibility with

occasional enthusiasm...The yarn...extracts the utmost comedy'. [31] There is no current viewing copy at the BFI. [BFI-PP]

Law and Disorder (David MacDonald, 1940) [Samuel Blight]

(Barry K. Barnes, A.S., Diana Churchill, Edward Chapman)

Espionage Comedy Melodrama. Larry Preston (Barry K. Barnes), a young solicitor, takes to successfully defending a number of thugs accused of sabotage, much to the horror of his senior partner Blight (Sim) and the annoyance of the police. However, Larry is determined to win the gang's confidence.

Sim is reunited with David MacDonald and Barry K. Barnes from the 'This Man' films. Like them, it has 'Thin Man' parallels, this time set in the legal world. Themes of espionage and sabotage and the outbreak of World War Two ensure topicality, and notices for the film are generally positive. Sim receives his now customary plaudits, although one reviewer feels that the narrative is unnecessarily stalled by an excess of clowning and wisecracking, perhaps a hint that the formula is beginning to wear thin. [32] There is no current print at the BFI.

Nero (Fiddling Fuel) (Alexander Mackendrick, 1940) [Nero]

(A.S., George Cole)

Ministry of Information short film about wartime fuel conservation. A schoolboy (George Cole) wanders around a museum where a statue of Nero (Sim) comes to life and boasts of his crimes. Next to Hitler's misdeeds the schoolboy remains unimpressed until roused by Nero's burning of Rome.

The end caption of this 90-second gem reads: 'Don't be like Nero - be a good citizen and SAVE FUEL', a neat juxtaposition of a fictional encounter with a historical figure and the present day documentary reality of the war. Philip Kemp observes that: 'Throughout this bizarre trifle Sim hams outrageously, while the camera jumps from one fixed position to another. It would take the most fanatical auteurist to detect a major directorial talent in the making here'. [33] [VID-OA]

Her Father's Daughter (Desmond Dickinson, 1941) [Mr McForrest]

(A.S., Jennifer Gray, Viola Lyel, Sidney Monckton, Edward Borrow)

Ministry of Information short to encourage women to train as engineers. An intolerant managing director, Mr MacForrest (Sim), is struggling to fulfil a new contract with a reduced workforce, but dogmatically opposes the training of women. His arrogant sexism is mocked especially when he intones his catchphrase: 'as a practising engineer of 33 years experience'. His daughter Mary (Jennifer Gray) challenges him to a bet that she can become an engineer with only two months training, and surprises him by appearing at a lathe in his own factory.

This 8-minute dramatic sketch is a characteristic wartime integration of fictional and documentary generic conventions where scenes of factory and home life alternate unproblematically with information and advice underpinned by commentary on the soundtrack. Sim exhibits a marvellous range of moods, gestures and facial expressions.

[BFI-VC]

Inspector Hornleigh Goes To It (Walter Forde, 1941) [Sergeant Bingham]

(alternative title: *Mail Train*)

(Gordon Harker, A.S., Phyllis Calvert, Edward Chapman, Raymond Huntley, Wally Patch)

Espionage comedy thriller. Inspector Hornleigh (Gordon Harker) and Sergeant Bingham (Sim) join the army to track down a fifth columnist.

The third and final film in the series is marked by another unlikely plot in which Harker assumes the mantle of history master while Sim has a hilarious scene as a dental assistant. The film is as much a tribute to their inventive and resourceful partnership as to the direction of Walter Forde. [34] [BFI-VC]

Cottage To Let (Anthony Asquith, 1941) [Charles Dimble]

(alternative title: *Bombsite Stolen*)

(Leslie Banks, A.S., John Mills, George Cole, Michael Wilding, Wally Patch)

Espionage Comedy Melodrama. An inventor, John Barrington (Leslie Banks) is engaged in

work on bomb guidance plans at his estate in Scotland, unaware that his house and the cottage in its grounds are a hive of espionage activity. Freely adapted from a recent West End stage success.

Sim's Charles Dimble, eventually revealed to be a British agent, is aided by Ronald (George Cole), a schoolboy evacuee, to foil a gang of fifth columnists. With characteristic generosity, Sim allows Cole to steal every scene in which they appear together, and although this has the effect of drawing attention away from his own performance, it is negotiated with a greater subtlety than ever before. *Variety* applauds his 'smooth mixture of chill and cheer', while *The Monthly Film Bulletin* finds him 'surprisingly convincing when serious to those who always think of him as funny'. [35] The merits of Sim's performance are all the more salient in the context of reviews which find fault with the adaptation of Geoffrey Kerr's stage play and Asquith's direction. [VID-OA]

Let the People Sing (John Baxter, 1942) [Professor Ernst Kronak]

(A.S., Fred Emney, Edward Rigby, Patricia Roc, Oliver Wakefield)

Comedy. An ex-comedian, Timmy Tiverton (Edward Rigby), meets a Czech professor (Sim), both of them in hiding from the police. They decide to join forces and gain employment under a travelling showman, Mr Hassocks (Robert Aitken). At Dunbury, their performance is hindered by a legal dispute. Adapted from the novel by J.B. Priestley.

Despite heading the bill in a feature-length film for the first time since *The Big Noise*, Sim seems uncomfortably miscast. Geoff Brown and Tony Aldgate even consider him 'the film's biggest handicap', while Caroline Lejeune notes the limitations of his 'Czech professor with a Scottish accent'. [36] He is lumbered too by pompous dialogue and a grotesque appearance complete with prosthetic beard, and his character's humourless sermonising is no match for the spirited eccentricity of Fred Emney's larger than life Sir George Denberry-Baxter. The effect of his performance is also diminished by the film's execution in cinematic language when the adaptation has clearly not escaped from Priestley's original theatrical conception. [VID-OA]

Waterloo Road (Sidney Gilliat, 1944) [Doctor Montgomery]

(alternative title: *Blue for Waterloo*)

(John Mills, Stewart Granger, A.S., Joy Shelton)

Drama. Jim Colter (John Mills) deserts the army to track down his lonely wife Tillie (Joy Shelton) who has fallen for draft dodger and local Lothario Ted Purvis (Stewart Granger). The action takes place (largely in flashback) against the background of the rumbling uncertainty of the 1940/41 air raids.

Sim's Doctor Montgomery presents a kind of chorus figure of peripheral importance to the main narrative, benignly overseeing and observing everything, his patriarchal voiceover lending him the gloss of moral authority. He operates too as a kind of catalyst for the approaching confrontation between Jim and Ted. Robin Cross describes his 'orchestrating events like an eccentric *deus ex machina*' and believes him to be 'a portent of the Labour government of 1945 - austere in the fashion of Stafford Cripps but caring none the less, not without humour and knowing in paternalistic fashion what's best for the workers', placing him 'among the radical middle class...the gentle standard-bearer of the philosophy which Michael Frayn brilliantly characterised as belonging to the post-war 'herbivores''. [37] Sim's character, created by Val Valentine, upon whose story Sidney Gilliat bases his script, is modelled on the pre-National Health Service 'penny' doctors who charged little or nothing for their services and enjoyed a reputation as the local philosopher. But Sim's doctor is not universally admired. *The New Statesman* dislikes his 'philosophical musings' and Gilliat later considered him miscast, citing his eccentricity and the fact that 'he wasn't regarded primarily as a comedian', an extraordinary assessment in view of Sim's earlier work. [38] Although the role is not large it is important in Sim's career as its gravitas suggests he can accommodate more serious characters into his acting repertoire; it also signals the end of a long apprenticeship as a supporting player. [VID-OA]

Green For Danger [39] (Sidney Gilliat, 1946) [Inspector Cockrill]

(Sally Gray, Trevor Howard, Rosamund John, A.S., Leo Genn, Megs Jenkins)

Thriller. Inspector Cockrill (Sim) is called to Heron's Park Hospital - a converted Elizabethan manor in the country - to investigate the death of a local postman in suspicious circumstances on the operating table. Reconstructing the operation, the inspector traps the murderer, Nurse Sanson (Rosamund John), but not before she has ingested the pills that kill her.

Sim was not the director's first choice for the inspector and one wonders how differently his part might have been played by Robert Morley who declined the role due to theatre commitments. Sim's eccentric nonconformist detective exhibits a mischief which clearly delighted post-war weary audiences and critics, although his parody is never achieved at the expense of a lessening of dramatic tension. Richard Winnington believes it is Sim's character 'on whose expert flippancy the film entirely depends for survival', while co-star Trevor Howard declares that 'it wouldn't have been worth making without Alastair'. [40] Paul Holt's comments are typical of contemporary admiration for Sim: 'So lovely is this man's timing, so wonderful his grasp of the deep foolishness of man's dignity, that a little ripple of clapping broke out [at the press screening]'; he concludes: 'Always my eyes went back to Alastair Sim'. [41]

[VID-OA]

Hue and Cry (Charles Crichton, 1947) [Felix H. Wilkinson]

(A.S., Valerie White, Jack Warner, Harry Fowler, Frederick Piper)

Adventure. Fifteen-year-old Joe Kirby (Harry Fowler) and his friends discover that a criminal gang is using their favourite weekly magazine to pass on information. With the aid of a reclusive author, Felix Wilkinson (Sim), they round up the crooks.

Sim's role is restricted to only two scenes [a brief third is a single shot], but such is their impact that he heads the cast and is billed above Jack Warner and the teenage Fowler. Sim's fastidious and slightly sinister author receives mixed notices: *Variety* thinks he will disappoint his public and *Kine Weekly* that he tends to overact; however, it is this 'magnificent...overplaying' which screenwriter T.E.B. Clarke most admires, and in the context of a simple story Helen Fletcher finds 'his cynicism delectable'. [42] [VID-OA]

Captain Boycott (Frank Launder, 1947) [Father McKeogh]

(Stewart Granger, Kathleen Ryan, Cecil Parker, Mervyn Johns, A.S.)

Drama. Set in County Mayo around 1880, the story concerns the rebellion of poor Irish tenant-farmers against their oppressive English landlords, in particular Captain Boycott (Cecil Parker) who is shunned by local villagers led by Hugh Davin (Stewart Granger). Their peaceful protest is ultimately successful as Boycott is driven away.

Sim portrays an even-handed priest, and studio publicity of the time makes much of his quiet humour and theatrical pedigree in a determined attempt to internationalise his appeal. Indeed it is an American commentator who considers his performance 'outstanding', while *The News Chronicle's* Eric Watkins thinks 'acting honours go to Alastair Sim as the priest. His few moments in the pulpit, striving to make the best of both worlds, are more memorable even than Robert Donat's brief appearance as Parnell'. [43] Others disagree, although, like part of the acting furniture, they seem to welcome his presence in the film. *Variety*: 'Good actor as Alastair Sim is, he is still a Scot, and his humour is not that of the Irish parish priest'; Fred Majdalany of *The Daily Mail*: 'Alastair Sim does an Alastair Sim', and Caroline Lejeune in *The Observer* concludes that 'although Alastair Sim does not look nor sound for one instant like an Irish priest, he gives a very engaging exhibition of Simmery and mummery'. [44] [VID-OA]

London Belongs To Me (Sidney Gilliat, 1948) [Henry Squales]

(alternative title: *Dulcimer Street*)

(Richard Attenborough, A.S., Fay Compton, Stephen Murray, Joyce Carey)

Comedy Drama. Set in a typical South London boarding house just before the outbreak of World War Two, the film centres on its residents who rally to the defense of Percy Boon (Richard Attenborough), a garage mechanic, when he is arrested on a murder charge.

Sim plays a fake medium - an echo of his earlier role as Mr Nebulae in *The Private Secretary*, to say nothing of Margaret Rutherford's rather more *bone fide* Madame Arcati in *Blithe Spirit* (1945). Studio publicity quotes him as considering the role 'the most exciting and exacting of his screen career' and that 'Mr Squales was only funny because he had no sense of humour'. [45] However, critical response to his performance is tempered by the

unconvincing mix of genres, a commonly noted drawback in post-war British cinema. *Time and Tide* finds Sim's character 'symbolic of the whole film's frustration, being by turns almost equally irresistible and irritating', while *The News of the World's* critic thinks that 'without him I should not have found the film...half as entertaining as it was...He dominates a picture which sways uneasily between comedy and drama, and which at times sinks into bathos'. [46] At least one scene featuring Sim and Joyce Carey, as the lonely landlady Mrs Vizzard, seems to be parodied in *The Ladykillers* (1955), although when questioned about the similarities director Alexander Mackendrick had no recollection of Sidney Gilliat's film. [VID-OA]

The Happiest Days of Your Life (Frank Launder, 1950) [Wetherby Pond]

(A.S., Margaret Rutherford, Joyce Grenfell, Richard Wattis, Guy Middleton)

Farcical Comedy. Due to a war-time ministry error, the girls of St. Swithin's school and their staff - headmistress, Miss Whitchurch (Margaret Rutherford) - are billeted with the boys of Nutbourne College and their staff - headmaster, Wetherby Pond (Sim). Coincidentally it has already been arranged for some parents of St. Swithin's and governors of the boys' school to visit Nutbourne for an open day. Adapted from John Dighton's successful West End play which opened at the Apollo Theatre in March 1948 and ran for 605 performances.

Sim's harassed headmaster more than meets his match in Rutherford's formidable Miss Whitchurch. Naomi Sim thinks they 'matched each other perfectly during their scenes together when you felt that their mutual anger might cause them to ignite at any minute. I always felt those two had a lot in common in that their playing of anything at all was so highly individual. You couldn't employ a Margaret Rutherford 'type' or an Alastair Sim 'type'. [47] In retrospect the film seems to look forward to the St. Trinian's series, their connection underlined by the director's use of Ronald Searle's drawings to adorn the title sequence.

[VID-OA]

Stage Fright (Alfred Hitchcock, 1950) [Commodore Gill]

(Jane Wyman, Marlene Dietrich, Michael Wilding, Richard Todd, A.S., Sybil Thorndike)

Thriller. Jonathan Cooper (Richard Todd), a former dancer, seeks help from former girlfriend

and RADA student Eve Gill (Jane Wyman) when he is suspected of the murder of musical comedy star Charlotte Inwood's (Marlene Dietrich) husband. Eve decides to help him, but after numerous adventures it is revealed that Jonathan is the murderer after all.

Alongside the cinematic heavyweights (Dietrich and Wilding especially) Sim's performance - and that of Sybil Thorndike - is especially welcomed. *Sight and Sound* declares: 'it is enough for Alastair Sim to stroll on to the screen in a character part...and the air begins to crackle'; *The Daily Telegraph* thinks: 'Alastair Sim gives us one of his most gorgeous creations, eccentric but not beyond belief', while *The Times'* critic appreciates his 'rich relish for the oddities and quirks of character'. [48] Francois Truffaut, in conversation with Hitchcock, 'didn't care for Alastair Sim in the role of Jane Wyman's colourful father. I objected to the actor as well as to the character'. [49] Unfortunately he fails to give a reason for his opinion, and instead of defending the actor as one might expect, Hitchcock blames persuasive casting agents for Sim's inclusion in the film. Richard Todd enjoyed making the film and particularly loved to watch Sim and Thorndike whom he describes as 'beautifully dotty but totally controlled in their work'. [50] Certainly their naturalness on screen, exemplified best by Sim's relaxed delivery, his old pullover and playing of the accordeon, contrasts sharply with Dietrich's theatrical facade. Sim's blunt: 'If there's one thing I can't bear it's insincerity' perfectly encapsulates Commodore Gill's integrity. In all probability his words are written by Sim's great friend, the playwright James Bridie, who is responsible for 'additional dialogue' in the film. [VID-OA]

Mr Gillie (BBCTV, Kevin Sheldon (prod.), 25/7/50) [Mr Gillie]

Television production of James Bridie's stage play. Mr Gillie (Sim), a village schoolteacher, is accidentally killed and finds himself between a Heavenly Judge and Procurator. His life and attitudes to his pupils are then scrutinised.

Bridie's play opened in March 1950 at the Garrick Theatre with Sim in the title role and directing. It seems likely that at least some of the theatre cast appear in this television version. Writing in *The Observer*, Caroline Lejeune considers the result 'a brave try and well worth doing, but the stage actors seemed jumpy in their new surroundings and needed a more

ruthless producer...to control them'; she continues: 'Again and again Alastair Sim's quick movements made his face lack stereoscopy' which is probably less the fault of the actor than the limitations of the technology and the pressures of appearing in a live television play. [51] According to Naomi Sim this was her husband's own particular favourite among Bridie's plays, a sentiment confirmed by the appearance of a new production for the BBC ten years later again featuring Sim (see below). No copy survives.

Laughter in Paradise (Mario Zampi, 1951) [Deniston Russell]

(A.S., Fay Compton, Beatrice Campbell, Guy Middleton, George Cole, Joyce Grenfell)

Comedy. An eccentric old practical joker dies leaving £50,000 to each of four relatives on condition that they complete certain stipulated tasks. A timid bank clerk, Herbert Russell (George Cole) must hold up the bank manager with a water pistol; Agnes (Fay Compton), a domestic tyrant, should find a job as a maid for a month; Simon (Guy Middleton), a playboy and gambler is to propose to and marry the first girl he meets; and Deniston (Alastair Sim), a writer of cheap thrillers, has to commit a crime which will incarcerate him for a month.

The difficulty with the film is revealed in the unevenness of its episodic structure, and the almost universal praise for Sim's acting is always at the expense of the writing and direction. William Whitebait remarks: 'Thank heaven for Mr Sim. But he must be getting tired of that flattery which requires him to save films from being too awful'; and *The Monthly Film Bulletin's* critic thinks him 'rich, outsize and comic' and continues: 'His best scene, in which he vainly tries to be noticed stealing from a department store, is extremely funny, and he manages to make much of his material sound rather better than it probably is'. [52] [VID-OA]

Lady Godiva Rides Again (Frank Launder, 1951) [Hawtrey Murington]

(alternative title: *Beauty Queen*)

(Pauline Stroud, Dennis Price, John McCallum, Stanley Holloway, Kay Kendall, Diana Dors)

Comedy. Marjorie Clark (Pauline Stroud), a pretty waitress in a provincial town, wins a beauty contest and imagines she is on her way to fame and fortune, only to end up about to strip in a third-rate touring revue when her parents arrive to rescue her.

This mild satire on the ethics of those who create charm school starlets boasts an extraordinary cast including Dora Bryan, Richard Wattis, Sid James, Googie Withers, Trevor Howard, Joan Collins and Jimmy Young! However, this hardly compensates for a script which needs a crisper satirical edge. The exception is a marvellous unbilled cameo from Sim as a bankrupt film producer happy to share his bun and milk with Marjorie, whom in better times he might have pursued around his desk! Caroline Lejeune comments: 'For one glorious moment under his hands the whole screen blossoms, as he huddles closer into his greatcoat, regards the Beauty Queen with an eye of fatherly lacklustre, and utters the coronach of [the] British film industry in the accent...of darkest Caledonia: "What with Hollywood to the right of us and the Government behind us, our position is, as ever, on the brink"'. [53] [VID-OA]

Scrooge (Brian Desmond Hurst, 1951) [Ebenezer Scrooge]

(alternative title: *A Christmas Carol*)

(A.S., Kathleen Harrison, Jack Warner, Michael Hordern, Mervyn Johns, Hermione Baddeley, George Cole, Rona Anderson)

Drama. Dickens' famous morality tale of Ebenezer Scrooge (Sim), a miserly businessman, who is reformed after nightmares at Christmas-time.

The film, or at least Sim's characterisation, has attained something approaching classic status and is now often spoken of as the definitive version of Dickens' story. But this was not always the case. *The Monthly Film Bulletin's* review is critical of the director's overall lack of style and suggests that the casting (including Sim's Scrooge) is frequently inappropriate; *Variety* goes further, and at only 86 minutes calls the film 'long, dull and greatly overdone', and that Sim 'without directorial or script restraint, stalks through the footage like a tank-town Hamlet'. [54]

There may be some truth in this as there is evidence that Hurst and Sim did not always agree about the shooting of particular scenes, and another account which sheds doubt on whether Hurst actually directed the whole film. [55] Despite *Variety's* review the balance of opinion on Sim's performance is weighted in his favour, and it remains ironic that with repeated television screenings in the U.S. the film eventually enjoyed greater success abroad than at home. Whatever the merits of Hurst's direction, his intentions have not been more fully realised in

recent years by the issue of a colorized version. If anything this clumsy attempt to link the film with such 'heritage' Dickens as Christine Edzard's *Little Dorrit* (1987) merely serves to draw attention to its defects. [VID-OA]

Folly To Be Wise (Frank Launder, 1952) [Captain Paris]

(A.S., Roland Culver, Elizabeth Allan, Martita Hunt, Colin Gordon, Janet Brown, Miles Malleon)

Comedy. Captain Paris (Sim), an army chaplain and entertainments officer, decides to liven up the entertainment on offer by staging a 'brains trust', with uncomfortably personal results. An adaptation by Launder and John Dighton of James Bridie's stage play *It Depends What You Mean* which opened in October 1944 at the Westminster Theatre. Sim starred, directed and took the play on tour.

Neither Launder's rather pedestrian direction nor his and Dighton's less than filmic adaptation of Bridie's play is much admired. However, as Daniel Farson of *Sight and Sound* observes, the film does have 'the advantage of Bridie's wit delivered by Alastair Sim. This above all sustains the film. Sim's timing is masterful; his control of the part of a jovial bumbling army chaplain...is hilarious and yet consistent. It is a fine, unfaltering comedy creation'. [56]

[VID-OA]

Innocents in Paris (Gordon Parry, 1953) [Sir Norman Barker]

(A.S., Ronald Shiner, Claire Bloom, Margaret Rutherford, Claude Dauphin, Jimmy Edwards, Lawrence Harvey)

Comedy. Various passengers assemble at Northolt Airport about to board a flight to Paris. Seven separate narrative threads present their escapades in a city which most of them are visiting for the first time.

With a large cast and studio publicity which promises the resumption of Sim and Rutherford's screen partnership, much might reasonably have been expected of *Innocents in Paris*. And although Sim and Rutherford emerge with credit from the unevenness of the film's episodic structure, there is no opportunity for them to resume their partnership since they have no

scenes together - a missed opportunity (of many!). Sim's solemn Treasury official somehow rises above the mediocrity of the script and is memorable enough to be hugely missed when he is off the screen. [VID-OA]

An Inspector Calls (Guy Hamilton, 1954) [Inspector Poole]

(A.S., Arthur Young, Olga Lindo, Eileen Moore, Bryan Forbes)

Drama. In 1912, a prosperous provincial family is visited by a mysterious police inspector (Sim) who tricks confessions from each of them that they were partly responsible for the suicide of a young girl. An adaptation, by Desmond Davis, of J.B. Priestley's celebrated play. As in so many British films of the period the adaptation is too reliant on the theatrical origins of the material, with a resulting static quality and the presentation of stereotypical stock characters. Sim's bogus policeman is the exception. Caroline Lejeune thinks he 'does practically nothing, very charmingly', while William Whitebait considers that he 'makes an angel of an inspector: he coos and smiles, gently insists, pushes across the awkward question as it might be the decanter, brings back the annihilating image of the dead girl on the slab'. [57] [VID-OA]

The Belles of St. Trinian's (Frank Launder, 1954) [Millicent Fritton/Clarence Fritton]

(A.S., Joyce Grenfell, George Cole, Hermione Baddeley, Beryl Reid, Irene Handl, Guy Middleton)

Comedy. The story of St. Trinians, a bankrupt and unruly school for girls who become involved in a horse racing scam. Launder, Sidney Gilliat and Val Valentine's screenplay is inspired by the original drawings of Ronald Searle.

Sim portrays two characters, the magisterial headmistress and her crooked bookmaker brother. Both the accuracy of the former and 'her' stately languor are admired by contemporary critics. Virginia Graham finds Sim 'quite superb, his comedy timed with exquisite precision, his appearance both repulsive and compelling'; Caroline Lejeune dislikes female impersonation as a rule but thinks Sim succeeds because he is 'so much more concerned with creating character than establishing gender'. [58] Honourable mentions must

also be made of George Cole's spiv Flash Harry and Joyce Grenfell's Sgt. Ruby Gates as important factors in the series' continuing success. [VID-OA]

Escapade (Philip Leacock, 1955) [Doctor Skillingworth]

(John Mills, Yvonne Mitchell, A.S., Jeremy Spenser, Andrew Ray, Peter Asher, Colin Gordon)
Comedy-Drama. John and Stella Hampden (John Mills, Yvonne Mitchell) have three sons at boarding school. They come into conflict with the headmaster Dr Skillingworth (Sim) when it appears that their sons have stolen a plane. All is resolved when it transpires that the boys are on a peace mission.

Once again, in a British film of this period, it is the adaptation - of Roger MacDougall's popular stage play - that works to the film's disadvantage, as does the character of John Mills, in an unsympathetic role, who, the script suggests, is oddly pompous and only intermittently believable as a world peacemaker with a volatile temperament. Sim plays another headmaster, although perhaps one less harassed than Wetherby Pond in *The Happiest Days of Your Life*. *The Monthly Film Bulletin* notes that his part 'has been expanded to provide some skilful but irrelevant comic interludes', but most reviews are more positive including *Today's Cinema* which believes he 'has never done better than his truthful observation of a headmaster humbly, patiently and with dry humour carrying out his job of education'. [59] The BFI holds a draft shooting script but no current print of the film.

Geordie [60] (Frank Launder, 1955) [The Laird]

(A.S., Bill Travers, Raymond Huntley, Miles Malleon)

Drama. Geordie (Bill Travers), a Scottish weakling, becomes a great athlete and after winning the hammer-throwing event at the Highland Games represents Britain at the Olympics in Australia.

There is a conscious attempt at internationalising the appeal of the film in its publicity material which prints the blurb in French, Spanish and Italian; indeed *Geordie* positively oozes charm in its determination to please. However Launder's treatment is disappointingly cosy and lacks a cynical bite which might have given the story a much needed edge. Sim plays Geordie's

employer the laird in a part one reviewer calls a cameo even though he heads the cast, billed above Bill Travers' more substantial starring role. [61] Unsurprisingly Sim captures the best notices. *The Times*' critic finds him 'splendidly authentic', *The News Chronicle* 'a tower of wholly expected strength', while *The Financial Times* concludes that he is 'delightful throughout. Eccentric Highland landowners are nothing new of course...and there are moments when Mr Sim might seem to be struggling with a character cliché. But he manages beautifully to create a genuine figure and he is both comic and touching when nearly braining the minister with his hammer-throwing or refusing to acknowledge the wicked habits of the kestrel'. [62] [VID-OA]

The Green Man (Robert Day/Basil Dearden, 1956) [Hawkins]

(A.S., George Cole, Jill Adams, Terry-Thomas, Avril Angers, Dora Bryan, Colin Gordon, Raymond Huntley)

Comedy. Hawkins (Sim), a professional assassin, is prevented from blowing up Sir Gregory Upshott (Raymond Huntley), a pompous government official, at a seaside hotel by the intervention of William Blake (George Cole), a vacuum salesman. Adapted from the stage play *Meet a Body* by Launder and Gilliat.

Apparently Sim was originally slated to co-direct the film with Robert Day but withdrew after disagreements over casting. Launder and Gilliat, who produced, were then unhappy with Day's inexperience directing this kind of comedy and thus brought Basil Dearden on board. Dearden receives no on-screen credit, neither do the producers who helped to shoot some of the exteriors. With such a collective authorship it is amazing that the film emerges so satisfactorily. The mix of farce and drama is not to every critic's taste but there is little doubt that Sim's assassin steals the show. *The Monthly Film Bulletin* thinks he 'extracts the maximum amount of ghoulish humour from a sketchily written part'; Dilys Powell likes his 'fine abandon', while *The Times*' reviewer applauds his 'alternating between an unctuous and slightly sinister joviality and the manner and look of one who has found a cockroach in his soup'. [61]

This is Scotland (ScottishTV, Rai Purdey, 31/8/57) [participant]

The opening night of Scottish Television, broadcast live from the Theatre Royal, Glasgow. Sim is described in the (BFI SIFT Catalogue) credits as an 'on-screen participant'. It is possible that this event survives in some archive but I have not seen it, nor have I unearthed any further information on Sim's contribution to the proceedings.

Blue Murder at St. Trinian's (Frank Launder, 1957) [Amelia Fritton]

(Terry-Thomas, George Cole, Joyce Grenfell, A.S., Sabrina, Lionel Jeffries)

Comedy. St. Trinians school wins a UNESCO prize of a trip to Rome and the pupils become involved with Joe Mangan (Lionel Jeffries), a jewel thief.

In the sequel to *The Belles of St. Trinian's* Sim makes only two brief appearances as the now incarcerated headmistress, Miss Fritton, inexplicably billed and referred to as Amelia, rather than Millicent of the first film, even though she is ostensibly the same character. While the brevity of his role is a cause for regret - his first scene is merely a wordless shot behind bars - there is comic compensation in the encounters between Terry-Thomas and Joyce Grenfell.

[VID-OA]

The Doctor's Dilemma (Anthony Asquith, 1958) [Cutler Walpole]

(Leslie Caron, Dirk Bogarde, A.S., Robert Morley, John Robinson, Felix Aylmer)

Comedy. When Sir Colenso Ridgeon (John Robinson) discovers that Louis Dubedat (Dirk Bogarde), the artist he is about to treat for consumption, has been unfaithful to the woman he passes off as his wife, Jennifer (Leslie Caron), he (Ridgeon) decides to use his limited serum on a more deserving case. Adapted by Anatole de Grunwald from the play by George Bernard Shaw.

Neither de Grunwald's adaptation of Shaw nor Asquith's rather stodgy direction receives much critical enthusiasm, and it is left for a trio of Harley Street doctors - including Sim, Morley and Aylmer - to garner the best notices. *The Times'* critic describes Sim's Cutler Walpole as 'wicked of eye and rolling of tongue'; Campbell Dixon in *The Daily Telegraph* appreciates his 'buffoonery' and 'requisite authority and style', while Jympson Harman in *The*

Evening News notes Sim's 'licking his lips with anticipated pleasure at the prospect of "having a peep" at somebody's inside'. [64] [VID-OA]

Left Right and Centre (Sidney Gilliat, 1959) [Lord Wilcot]

(Ian Carmichael, A.S., Patricia Bredin, Richard Wattis, Eric Barker)

Comedy. TV personality and Tory candidate Robert Wilcot (Ian Carmichael) falls in love with Stella Stoker (Patricia Bredin), representing Labour, during a by-election campaign.

Sim's final film for Launder and Gilliat is a characteristically gentle satire on politics and the media which might have benefited from more savage wit. Sim is much admired as Carmichael's impoverished aristocratic uncle forced to commercialise his stately home. *Variety* finds him 'richly funny', and William Whitebait 'dazzling', while Isabel Quigley recognises that it is the minor roles which make the film, and Caroline Lejeune declares: 'I should have liked more of Alastair Sim's dry, fruity peer'. [65] [VID-OA]

School For Scoundrels (or How To Win Without Actually Cheating)

(Robert Hamer, 1960) [Stephen Potter]

(Ian Carmichael, Terry-Thomas, A.S., Janette Scott, Dennis Price)

Comedy. Having graduated from a college of Lifemanship Henry Palfrey (Ian Carmichael) cures his inferiority complex without losing his conscience. Based on the one-upmanship books by Stephen Potter.

Both direction and script are flawed, and although the film undoubtedly belongs to Carmichael and Terry-Thomas, Sim's impersonation of author Stephen Potter's college principal is rewarded with appreciative notices. There is a marvellous, almost Brechtian, moment at the end of the film when the lovers are reunited, and as the romantic score swells on the soundtrack, Sim, embarrassed by sincerity rearing its ugly head, addresses the camera directly, demanding: 'Stop that music! Orchestra...stop that infernal din'. *Variety* finds him 'the perfectly equipped actor' to portray Potter's cunning; *The Times* notes his 'impressive display of erudition and an almost mystical detachment'; *Time and Tide's* Chas. MacLaren thinks he 'brings...an authority that is rich...precious, individual and extremely rare', while Caroline

Lejeune, writing in *The Observer*, concludes that the film's 'best pleasure is the brooding presence of Alastair Sim...a mystical mixture of Mr Bolfray, a Scots dominie, Merlin and the man from Cook's'. [66] [VID-OA]

Mr Gillie (BBCTV, James McTaggart (prod.), 12/6/60) [Mr Gillie]

(see 1950 TV production (above) for plot summary)

Sim again takes the title role in a second television production of Bridie's stage play which he also adapts for the newer medium, maintaining a concentration that the author himself sometimes failed to achieve. *The Daily Mail's* Peter Black considers the result '80 minutes of civilised and intelligent light comedy'; *The Observer's* critic, however, finds it 'none too convincing and slow off the mark', seeming disappointed that Sim plays it 'very quietly', while *The Times'* reviewer cites this as a virtue, praising 'a performance richly quiet, humorous, and of great integrity...Mr Sim not only presented the comedy of this but also saw in it a certain human greatness. After the greatest of disappointments, Mr Gillie's hopes are still inextinguishable. It was from this strength, and not from the eccentricities of the character, that Mr Sim built his performance'. [67] No copy survives.

The Millionairess (Anthony Asquith, 1960) [Julius Sagamore]

(Sophia Loren, Peter Sellers, A.S., Vittorio de Sica, Dennis Price, Gary Raymond)

Comedy/Drama. Epifania (Sophia Loren), an heiress, has considerable difficulty winning the affections of the altruistic Doctor Kabir (Peter Sellers). Wolf Mankowitz's screenplay is an adaptation by Riccardo Aragno of George Bernard Shaw's stage play.

In his last cinema film for over a decade, Sim plays the wily Sagamore, lawyer to Sophia Loren's heiress, and although it is an important international vehicle for Peter Sellers, the critical affection for Sim makes one regret his decision to abandon the big screen until 1972. William Whitebait calls him 'immaculate as ever' stealing 'his scenes early on with ruthless and ingratiating charm...his smile lingers like music, but the part dies too soon'; Dilys Powell bemoans Loren's lack of 'comic authority' - 'one has to console oneself with...Alastair Sim's sly portrait of the imperturbable lawyer', and Clancy Sigal, who is bored by the film, declares

that 'as usual, Alastair Sim steals every scene he is in and half of those he is not while we wait for him to show up again'. [68] [VID-USA]

The Anatomist (TV, Leonard William, 1961) [Doctor Knox]

(A.S., George Cole, Jill Bennett, Margaret Gordon)

Doctor Knox (Sim), a respected surgeon, encourages the stealing of corpses for his experiments, leading to a series of murders. Adaptation from Bridie's stage play.

This production is significant in that it represents Sim's final attempt to translate Bridie's work on to the large or small screen - and incidentally his last performance with George Cole in either medium. Apparently it was screened on US television as a feature film at the time but has been rarely seen since. In his guide, Leonard Maltin describes Sim as 'wry' in a 'tame spooker' and indicates that *The Anatomist* has been available on video in the U.S.A.. [69] [VID-USA]

Misleading Cases (BBCTV (19), Michael Mills/John Howard Davies, 1967, 1968, 1971)

[Mr Justice Swallow]

(A.S., Roy Dotrice, Avice Landon, Thorley Walters)

Every week, Albert Haddock (Roy Dotrice) appears before Mr Justice Swallow (Sim) to debate moral issues such as rights of way and whether Englishmen and women are really free. Invariably, the judge finds in his favour and against opposing QC Sir Joshua Hoot (Thorley Walters). Based on stories by A.P. Herbert.

Sim enjoys himself hugely as the judge in his only television situation comedy. In retrospect its quaintness seems like a reaction against the prevailing popular culture of the day; character and eccentricity are celebrated over youth and empty glamour. And yet its brilliance lies in its continual ability to function in both conservative and radical fashion at the same time. Sim shifts delightfully between benevolence and frustration at Haddock's courtroom shenanigans, and although now noticeably older appears unaffected by being restricted behind his desk - his face, voice and hand gestures now all-important. Reviewing the second series, *Variety* comments on its 'sharp dialog and skilled thesping by Dotrice, Walters and

Sim [which] makes for a rewarding experience and gives the series a solid base for longterm, if not widespread, appreciation', noting Swallow's 'tolerant admiration' for Haddock's 'unorthodox jurisprudence' and praising Sim's urbanity. [70] [BBC/BFI-VC]

Cold Comfort Farm (BBCTV(3), Peter Hammond, 1968) [Amos Starkadder]

(A.S., Fay Compton, Sarah Badel, Rosalie Crutchley, Peter Egan)

Flora Poste (Sarah Badel), an orphan from London, decides to live off and reform her relatives, the Starkadders, who live in a decaying farmhouse in Howling, Sussex. Based on Stella Gibbons' satirical novel.

Sim's portrayal of Amos, the farmer whom Badel's Flora persuades to follow his true calling as an itinerant preacher, receives mixed reviews. *The Sunday Telegraph's* critic thinks he savours 'the fumes of damnation with melancholy satisfaction'; Julian Critchley considers him 'always a pleasure, although his accent...would not have deceived a soul in Crowborough or Clun'; Sylvia Clayton appreciates his 'wonderfully pious phoney, although he had not quite the family air of doom and despair' of the others, notably Judith (Rosalie Crutchley), while Harry Jackson concludes that 'Alastair Sim's Amos, however, left me distinctly dissatisfied'. [71] [VID-USA]

A Christmas Carol (Animation, Richard Williams, 1971) [voice of Scrooge]

(Michael Redgrave, Michael Hordern, Joan Sims)

An adaptation of Dickens' famous story (see above for synopsis).

Sim was persuaded by the producers to repeat his performance as Scrooge on the strength of their dedication to Dickensian authenticity. Apparently he reasoned that if the result was indeed as definitive as they claimed then at least he would never have to play the part again! The producers' claims are more than justified, and although the narrative is compressed into 26 minutes, Richard Williams' pen-and-ink style period drawings, made for American television, won the 1972 Oscar for Best Animated Short and numerous other awards.

The Ruling Class (Peter Medak, 1972) [Bishop Lampton]

(Peter O'Toole, A.S., Arthur Lowe, Harry Andrews, Coral Browne, Michael Bryant, Carolyn Seymour)

Black Comedy. Jack Gurney (Peter O'Toole) inherits an Earldom after years in an asylum, believing himself to be Jesus Christ. His unamused aristocratic family are only too anxious to disinherit him and regain control of the estate. Based on the stage play by Peter Barnes.

Most critics agree that the film is not improved by its excessive length, nor its stagey adaptation. However, the performances, particularly of O'Toole in the central role, Arthur Lowe and Sim, returning to the big screen after more than a decade, are warmly welcomed. David McGillivray considers Sim 'still on top form as a preposterous old bishop'; Derek Malcolm thinks him 'freshly marvellous'; Dilys Powell comments on the excellence of 'two superlative comedians. Arthur Lowe as the butler who stops showing deference, Alastair Sim as the bishop distraught by the flouting of ecclesiastical propriety - I have seen the film twice and would see it again for these two performances', while Ron Thompson believes that 'Peter O'Toole dominates every scene with his eloquence and magnetism, even when set against more experienced scene-stealers such as Alastair Sim and Arthur Lowe'. [72] [VID-OA]

The General's Day (BBCTV, John Gorrie, 20/11/72) [General Suffolk]

(A.S., Annette Crosbie, Dandy Nichols)

General Suffolk (Sim) fights his last battle when sinister charlady Mrs Hinch (Dandy Nichols) decides to move in.

Written by William Trevor especially for the 'Play For Today' slot, *The General's Day* marks one of Sim's greatest triumphs on small or large screen as he is caught between the affections of Nichols' char with whom he once had an affair and Annette Crosbie's eternal spinster whom he pursues in vain. The notices are so enthusiastic that it makes one bemoan the paucity of single dramas on television today. Sylvia Clayton finds Sim's characterisation 'faultless in his whole style of speech and gesture and his sudden transitions from easy courtesy to impotent rage'; Leonard Buckley concurs, savouring Sim's movement 'from a military crispness through explosive moments to a crumbling ebullience as the events of the

day and the drink [take] their toll'. [73] [BBC]

The Prodigal Daughter (AngliaTV, Alistair Reid, 5/1/75) [Father Perfect]

(A.S., Jeremy Brett, Carolyn Seymour, Charles Kay, Karl Howman)

When their housekeeper deserts them, three priests - including Father Perfect (Sim) - decide to take on an attractive young woman (Carolyn Seymour).

David Turner's play is not the equal of William Trevor's *The General's Day* (above) but it does provide Sim with another opportunity for ripe portraiture. *The Morning Star's* Stewart Lane considers the play's theme unoriginal, but thinks it emerges as a 'moving and believable account of flesh versus faith, not memorable but engaging', while *The Evening Standard's* Christopher Hudson finds enormous pleasure watching Sim in 'a vintage example of this raffish old prelate whose wicked, child-like glee is barely disguised under the mien of sober benediction'. [74] [BFI-VC]

Royal Flash (Richard Lester, 1975) [Mr Grieg]

(Malcolm McDowell, Alan Bates, Florinda Bolkan, Oliver Reed, Lionel Jeffries, Joss Ackland, Tom Bell, Roy Kinnear, A.S., Michael Hordern, Christopher Cazenove, Britt Ekland)

Comedy Adventure. The adventures of Harry Flashman (Malcolm McDowell), reluctant hero and Captain in the 11th Hussars, in Europe and Ruritania. Screenplay by George MacDonald Fraser, based on his novel.

In this rather unsatisfactory Victorian adventure spoof, Sim has little to do in his few minutes on screen; as Lola Montez' (Florinda Bolkan) legal advisor he is anxious for her as she duels with a Wagnerian opera diva; and then, acting as her emissary, he visits Harry in a Turkish Bath. Most critics can only extend their sympathy. John Coleman thinks him 'utterly wasted'; Pauline Kael objects to Richard Lester's use of celebrated stars 'as if they were barely competent bit players to be got offscreen as quickly as possible. Alastair Sim, the great dissembler himself, turns up..., is given nothing to do, and is gone'; *Variety* agrees, noting that 'the players are as competent as the film allows, and their work in other films is proof of their talent'; *The Hollywood Reporter* salutes Sim's 'delightful scene as an ancient lawyer'. [75]

[VID-OA]

Escape From the Dark (Charles Jarrott, 1976) [Lord Harrogate]

(alternative title: *The Littlest Horse Thieves*)

(A.S., Peter Barkworth, Maurice Colbourne, Susan Tebbs, Geraldine McEwan, Prunella Scales, Joe Gladwin)

Period Drama. In 1909, the new manager of an unprofitable Yorkshire coal mine, Richard Sandman (Peter Barkworth), decides to replace the pit ponies with machinery. Three children then struggle to save the ponies from the slaughterhouse.

Sim's final role for the big screen is as a rather unlikely mine owner whose conscience is pricked by a pit disaster, and while the Disneyfication of Edwardian Yorkshire via *Upstairs, Downstairs* remains unconvincing, Sim heads an impressive British cast. Lord Harrogate is not very prominent in the story, but Sim does not go unnoticed. *Variety* considers his contribution 'brief but effective', *The Evening News* 'improbably villainous', and *The Sunday Telegraph* that he appears 'twinkling as scene-stealingly as ever'. [76] [VID-USA]

Rogue Male (BBC TV, Clive Donner, 22/9/76) [The Earl]

(Peter O'Toole, John Standing, A.S., Cyd Hayman, Harold Pinter, Hugh Manning, Mark MacManus)

In the late 1930s Sir Robert Hunter (Peter O'Toole), a British aristocrat, tries to assassinate Hitler and is hounded across Europe by the Gestapo. Frederic Raphael's screenplay is adapted from the novel by Geoffrey Household.

This fine BBC film benefits from a superior script by Raphael and an excellent central performance by O'Toole. Sim portrays O'Toole's establishment uncle in two Turkish bath scenes. Clearly unwell, Sim growls credibly through his lines; he would die of cancer shortly after filming on August 19th. Posthumous critical reaction is affectionate: Richard Last (*The Daily Telegraph*): 'It was worth watching just to hear Alastair Sim, in his last role alas, shrug off the line, "I'm a member of the Government - how should I know what people ought to do?"; Alexander Walker (*The Evening Standard*): 'Raphael has also invented a dotty Earl played

with delicious relish for his pedigreed eccentricities by the late Alastair Sim whose dottiness contains flashes of mordant wit - "It's never open season for shooting Heads of State. [They're protected...like Ospreys.]" he warns Sir Robert. A minor but masterly piece of Simian comedy'; Peter Dunn (*The Sunday Times*): 'Another character inserted into the plot - again with total conviction - was the late Alastair Sim's Earl, an admonishing figure boiling gently like an amiable lobster'. [77] [VID-USA]

Alastair Sim: a qualified fool 1900-1976 (BBCTV, Geoff Baines, 11/1/83) (documentary)

Probably the best of the three television documentaries about Sim, it includes interviews and reminiscences from Naomi Sim (his wife), Merlith McKendrick (his daughter), George Cole, Ian McKellen, Janet Brown, Peter O'Toole, Christopher Fry and Patricia Routledge. [BBC]

Breakfast Time (BBCTV, 7/10/87) (item about A.S.)

Short item about Sim. Naomi Sim is interviewed about their life together, her husband's status as a great entertainer and the indistinguishability of the characters he portrayed and the real person, in the context of the appearance of her memoir *Dance and Skylark: Fifty Years with Alastair Sim*, published by Bloomsbury. [BBC]

Those British Faces: A Tribute to Alastair Sim (Channel 4, John Ellis, 20/6/93) (documentary)

Useful short introduction to Sim's work, written by Ellis and narrated by Richard Todd.

[VID-OA]

Heroes of Comedy: Alastair Sim (Channel 4, John Fisher (prod.), 30/4/97) (documentary)

Updated interviews with Naomi Sim (her final television interview), Merlith McKendrick, George Cole, Ian McKellen and Patricia Routledge, along with fresh comments from Stephen Fry, Nigel Hawthorne, Ron Moody, Alistair McGowan, Karl Howman and John Howard Davies. [VID-OA]

Notes

1. Most sources list *Riverside Murder* as Alastair Sim's first film. However, several, including Halliwell and Quinlan (see bibliography), attribute his initial cinematic appearance as a character in *The Case of Gabriel Perry* (Albert de Courville, 1935). Unfortunately, until prints of the latter become available - or other more detailed information - it is impossible to verify this, let alone identify Sim's contribution (if any) to the film.
2. BFI Pressbook.
3. Newnham, J.K. 'Highbrow Turned Lowbrow', *Film Weekly*, 20/483, 15/1/38, p. 29.
4. The studio - Ambassador Film Productions - calls Flanagan and Allen the 'Kings of Krazy Komedy'; Sim sneaks into two of the seven publicity stills. (BFI Pressbook)
5. *The Sunday Times*, *The Sunday Express*, both 8/12/35. (BFI Press Cuttings) Despite the impact of Sim's performance, his character and his own first name are given incorrectly in the film's publicity material (Putte for Cutte, Alistair for Alastair), a matter of small importance perhaps in the greater scheme of things, but maybe it partly explains Sim's later reluctance to co-operate with the studio's insatiable need to make available information about their stars, and his refusal (after 1953) to give interviews. As a private man he loathed all forms of unnecessary publicity and self-promotion, believing that the end result - the performance itself - was the only criterion by which the press and the public should judge him. From the biographical reminiscences of those who knew him, it seems likely that studio 'misinformation' would have amused but not surprised him.
6. *Film Weekly*, 14/363, 27/9/35, p. 28; *The Sunday Times*, 22/9/35. (BFI Press Cuttings)
7. Low, R. (1985) *Film Making in 1930s Britain*, Allen and Unwin, p. 187. In his biography of James Mason, Sheridan Morley provides an interesting account of the director's working methods: 'These quota quickies had by their very nature to be made at the rate of at least two a month, and Parker was in the habit of shooting them back-to-back, cutting his schedules and therefore his overhead costs so fine that if a film overran by even a day or two he would simply shoot all through the night in order to make up time before the sets were struck to make way for the next picture'. Morley, S. (1989) *James Mason: Odd Man Out*, Weidenfeld

and Nicolson, p. 34. The pressure on the actors and crew can be imagined, placing them at the sharp end of the commercial imperative of the industry. However, Sim seems to have thrived on this and worked for a fourth time under Parker's direction on *Strange Experiment*.

8. *Kine Weekly*, 228/1503, 6/2/36, p. 35.

9. *Kine Weekly*, 229/1508, 12/3/36, p. 25.

10. The film is unusually co-directed, a practice which became more common in British cinema during World War Two (Powell/Pressburger, Launder/Gilliat, Lean/Coward et al.). In addition, it features a delightful performance by Sim's wife Naomi as Jessie the maid. Most sources attribute this as her only appearance alongside her husband, overlooking her equally assured cameo in *This Man in Paris*. It should be noted, with some regret, on the strength of these two performances, that her decision to abandon acting robbed the cinema of a wonderfully eccentric character actress.

11. Currently the BFI has no print of *The Big Noise*, however the *Heroes of Comedy* documentary (Channel 4, 30/4/97) includes a short clip.

12. BFI Pressbook.

13. BFI Press Cuttings, sources all unattributed.

14. Quinlan (see bibliography) attributes *She Knew What She Wanted* (Thomas Bentley, 1936) as Sim's next film. There is no current print held by the BFI. Publicity material and reviews do not mention Sim which makes it impossible to verify the extent of his participation (if any) in the film.

15. Newnham, J.K., 15/1/38, p. 29.

16. It comes as little surprise to learn that this turned out to be French director Claude Autant-Lara's only British film, or that it remained unreleased until 1940!

17. Shipman, D. (1982) *The Great Movie Stars: The International Years*, Angus and Robertson, p. 549.

18. Opinion is divided about Elvey's ability as a director. Linda Wood in her survey of his vast output of over 300 features sums him up as 'the careful artisan rather than the instinctive director'. Wood, L. (1987) *The Commercial Imperative in the British Film Industry; Maurice Elvey, a case study*, BFI, p. 38. The industry liked him because he could be relied upon to

deliver a film on time made under the most difficult circumstances which they could still market. Unfortunately the slim budgets and rapidity of turnover meant an extremely variable quality of product, although *Man in the Mirror* finds him at his best. Certainly he gave Sim much-needed experience as an actor and presumably inspired Sim's confidence by working on three films with him. It is unfortunate that prints of their subsequent collaborations, *A Romance in Flanders* and *Melody and Romance*, are currently unavailable. Other actors have been less charitably disposed towards the director. Rosamund John - later to star with Sim in *Green For Danger* - recalled working for Elvey on *The Lamp Still Burns* (1943): 'I was appalled. He had no idea of what to do or how to do it. The electricians would shout, "Print Number Three, Maurice!" He was unbelievable'. McFarlane, B. (ed.) (1992) *Sixty Voices: Celebrities Recall the Golden Age of British Cinema*, BFI, p. 142

19. *Kine Weekly*, 239/1553, 21/1/37, p. 36; *The Monthly Film Bulletin*, 4/37, Jan. 1937, p. 11; John Oliver in *NFT Programme*, Oct. 2000, p. 47.

20. *Kine Weekly*, 245/1557, 8/7/37, p. 45.

21. *The Monthly Film Bulletin*, 4/44, Aug. 1937, p. 166; , 15/1/38, p. 29. See the latter for an account of contemporary audiences' reaction to Sim's delivery of a particular line. When he explains his odd appearance to the ship's captain: 'My father was frightened just before I was born!', the following exchanges were often obscured by audiences' laughter. "'Your father?' asks the ship's captain. "You mean your mother." Sim shakes his head. "Oh no - nothing could frighten mother!" He comments: "I've seen the film two or three times...and I haven't been able to hear that line myself'.

22. *Film Information* (New South Wales Federation), Aug. 1967, p. 152. (BFI Press Cuttings)

23. Hughie Green was only 17 at the time, having made his debut in *Midshipman Easy* (1935) at 15! However the studio publicity already bills him as 'The Country's Most Novel Radio Act' and 'The show you've heard and can now SEE!'. (BFI Pressbook) After the war he reached his largest audience on television as host of shows like *Double Your Money* and the long-running *Opportunity Knocks*.

24. BFI Pressbook. It should be noted that Sim's first name is actually given incorrectly in the on-screen credits for *Sailing Along* - Alistair for Alastair - see note 5.

25. See review in *The Missing Link*, 4, Autumn 1995, p. 7.
26. *The Motion Picture Herald*, 133/1, 1/10/38, p. 42.
27. *Today's Cinema*, 51/4004, 31/8/38, p. 12.
28. Robert Moss, for example, discussing *Climbing High*, talks of the 'never-never land of farce. The realities of the Depression scarcely intrude'. Moss, R. (1987) *The Films of Carol Reed*, Macmillan, p. 100. It is ironic that only a year or two later farcical comedies like *Quiet Wedding* (1940) and *Spring Meeting* (1941), in which Margaret Rutherford appeared, were actually welcomed as distractions from the day to day privations of the war.
29. *Kine Weekly*, 265/1664, 9/3/39, p.49; *Variety*, 21/6/39.
30. BFI Pressbook; Graham Greene in *The Spectator*, 30/6/39 (BFI Press Cuttings); Aubrey Flanagan in *The Motion Picture Herald*, 136/2, 8/7/39, p. 38.
31. Brown, G. (1977) *Walter Forde*, BFI, pp. 40-41.
32. The BFI has no current print of *Law and Disorder*, nor any available publicity material.
33. Kemp, P. (1991) *Lethal Innocence: The Cinema of Alexander Mackendrick*, Methuen, p. 9. Regrettably, Sim never worked with Alexander Mackendrick again, although he had the opportunity as he was offered the roles of Joseph Macroon in *Whisky Galore!* (1948) and Professor Marcus in *The Ladykillers* (1955), both of which he turned down. Alec Guinness's performance in the latter is such an accurate impersonation of Sim that many are convinced it is Sim who stars in the film! Sim's daughter, Merlith Mackendrick (no relation to the director) refers to this common misappropriation in the *Heroes of Comedy* documentary (Channel 4, 30/4/97). The BFI has no current copy of the film although it was transmitted at least twice on Channel 4 in the 1980s, but the *Heroes of Comedy* documentary includes most of it.
34. Geoff Brown calls it a 'modest film (shot in three weeks) [which] presents Forde at his most attractive - deftly engineering the film from comedy to suspense and rounding off the entertainment with yet another rollicking train ride'; and 'a typical example of his unpretentious art: fast, economical direction and good humour triumph over modest resources'. Brown, G. in *NFT Programme Notes* (BFI Pressbook); Brown, G. (1977), p. 8.
35. *Variety* 10/9/41; *The Monthly Film Bulletin*, 8/92 Aug. 1941, p. 97.
36. Brown, G. and Aldgate, T. (1989) *The Common Touch: The Films of John Baxter*, BFI,

- p. 88; Caroline Lejeune in *The Observer*, 26/4/42. (BFI Press Cuttings)
37. Cross, R. (1984) *The Big Book of British Films*, Sidgwick and Jackson, pp. 46, 97.
38. *The New Statesman*, 20/1/45 (BFI Press Cuttings); Sidney Gilliat quoted in Brown, G. (1977) *Lauder and Gilliat*, BFI, p. 111.
39. Quinlan (see bibliography) attributes *Journey Together* (John Boulting, 1945) as Sim's next film, but although George Cole makes an appearance there is no sign of Sim.
40. Richard Winnington in *The News Chronicle*, Feb. 1947 (BFI Press Cuttings); Knight, V. (1986) *Trevor Howard: A Gentleman and a Player*, Muller, Blond and White, p. 65.
41. Paul Holt in *The Daily Express*, 7/2/47. (BFI Press Cuttings)
42. *Variety*, 26/2/47; *Kine Weekly*, 360/2077, 6/2/47, p. 28; Clarke, T.E.B. (1974) *This Is Where I Came In*, Michael Joseph, p. 156; Helen Fletcher in *The Sunday Graphic*, 23/2/47. (BFI Press Cuttings)
43. Fred Hift in *The Motion Picture Herald*, 169/9, 29/11/47, p. 59; Eric Watkins in *The News Chronicle*, 30/8/47. (BFI Press Cuttings)
44. *Variety*, 10/9/47; Fred Majdalany in *The Daily Mail*, 29/8/47, Caroline Lejeune in *The Observer*, 4/8/47. (BFI Press Cuttings)
45. BFI Pressbook.
46. *Time and Tide*, 20/8/48; *The News of the World*, 15/8/48. (BFI Press Cuttings)
47. Sim, N. (1987) *Dance and Skylark: Fifty Years with Alastair Sim*, Bloombury, p. 132.
48. *Sight and Sound*, 19/5, Jul. 1950, p. 207; *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Times*, 29/5/50. (BFI Press Cuttings)
49. Truffaut, F. (1984) *Hitchcock by Truffaut*, Paladin, p. 276.
50. Todd, R. (1986) *Caught in the Act*, Hutchinson, p. 242.
51. Caroline Lejeune in *The Observer*, 6/8/50. (BFI Press Cuttings)
52. William Whitebait, possibly in *The Times* (source unattributed in BFI Press Cuttings); *The Monthly Film Bulletin*, 18/209, Jun. 1951, p. 275.
53. Caroline Lejeune in *Britain Today*, Jan. 1952. (BFI Press Cuttings)
54. *The Monthly Film Bulletin*, 18/214, Nov. 1951, p. 359; *Variety*, 14/11/51.
55. Brian Desmond Hurst vetoed an idea of Sim's concerning the location of a scene

featuring Kathleen Harrison. 'He put on his Scottish face and I put on my Ulster face but I had my way and it remained Kathleen's best scene'. Hurst, B.D. (1986) *Brian Desmond Hurst: an autobiography*, unpublished, p. 149. In an interview conducted in 1994, Rona Anderson who played Alice, the woman the younger Scrooge (George Cole) might have married, revealed: 'I have to tell you, I was never directed by Brian Desmond Hurst; Alastair Sim directed the scenes between George Cole and me'. McFarlane, B. (1997) *An Autobiography of British Cinema*, Methuen, p. 19.

56. Daniel Farson in *Sight and Sound*, 22/3, Jan./Mar. 1953, p. 130.

57. Caroline Lejeune in *The Observer*, 14/3/54; William Whitebait in *The New Statesman*, 20/3/54. (BFI Press Cuttings)

58. Virginia Graham in *The Spectator*, 1/10/54; Caroline Lejeune in *The Observer*, 3/10/54. (BFI Press Cuttings)

59. *The Monthly Film Bulletin*, 22/260, Sep. 1955, p. 135; *Today's Cinema*, 85/7310, 15/7/55, p. 12.

60. David Quinlan (see bibliography) attributes Sim's next film as *Festival in Edinburgh* (Douglas Clarke, 1955), a short documentary about the festival, evidently designed as publicity for the overseas market; and although studio publicity and at least one review state that it is Alastair Sim who provides the commentary, a viewing of the film - held by the BFI - reveals that it is spoken by Geoffrey Sumner.

61. *Kine Weekly*, 461/2511, 11/8/55, p. 15.

62. *The Times*, 5/9/55; Paul Dehn in *The News Chronicle*, 2/9/55; Derek Granger in *The Financial Times*, 5/9/55. (BFI Press Cuttings)

63. *The Monthly Film Bulletin*, 23/273, Oct. 1956, p. 125; Dilys Powell in *The Sunday Times*, 16/9/56; *The Times*, 17/9/56. (BFI Press Cuttings) Not everyone is so convinced. In his autobiography Terry-Thomas calls it 'an experience to collaborate with Alastair Sim. You never knew exactly what he was going to do, and neither, I felt, did he. My personal opinion was that half the time he couldn't make up his mind how to play the part with the result that his performance was rather fey'. Terry-Thomas and Daum, T. (1990) *Terry-Thomas Tells Tales: an autobiography*, Robson Books, p. 91.

64. *The Times*, 21/4/59; Campbell Dixon in *The Daily Telegraph*, 25/4/59; Jympson Harman in *The Evening News*, 23/4/59. (BFI Press Cuttings)
65. *Variety*, 24/6/59; William Whitebait in *The New Statesman*, 25/7/59; Isabel Quigly in *The Spectator*, 31/7/59; Caroline Lejeune in *The Observer*, 19/7/59. (BFI Press Cuttings)
66. *Variety*, 26/10/60; *The Times*, 24/3/60; Chas. MacLaren in *Time and Tide*, 2/4/60; Caroline Lejeune in *The Observer*, 27/3/60. (BFI Press Cuttings)
67. Peter Black in *The Daily Mail*, 13/6/60; M. Richardson in *The Observer*, 19/6/60; *The Times*, 13/6/60. (BFI Press Cuttings)
68. William Whitebait in *The New Statesman*, 22/10/60; Dilys Powell in *The Sunday Times*, 23/10/60; Clancy Sigal in *Time and Tide*, 5/11/60. (BFI Press Cuttings)
69. Maltin, L. (ed.) (2003) *Leonard Maltin's 2004 Movie and Video Guide*, Plume, p. 40. In his autobiography, Nicholas Parsons mentions a radio version of *The Anatomist* from 1944 in which Sim again plays the lead. Unfortunately it does not survive in the BBC archives. Parsons, N. (1994) *The Straight Man*, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, p. 51.
70. *Variety*, 16/10/68. The 1971 series went into colour. However, of the nineteen episodes produced overall, only four survived the BBC's early 1970s purge of its back catalogue when hundreds of editions of classic shows were indiscriminately wiped - with hindsight an unforgiveable act of corporate blunder. The BBC archive retains three episodes (one from 1967, two from 1971), while the BFI holds one from 1968.
71. P. Purser in *The Sunday Telegraph*, 7/4/68; Julian Critchley in *The Times*, 24/6/68; Sylvia Clayton in *The Daily Telegraph*, 24/6/68; Harry Jackson in *The Guardian*, 10/1/70. (BFI Press Cuttings)
72. David McGillivray in *Focus on Film*, 10, Summer 1972, pp. 8-9; Derek Malcolm in *The Guardian*, 25/5/72; Dilys Powell in *The Sunday Times*, 28/5/72; Ron Thompson in *The Evening Post and Chronicle*, 27/5/72. (BFI Press Cuttings) O'Toole himself disagrees with Thompson's assessment and is well aware of being upstaged. He tells Nicholas Wapshott: 'I've gathered these lunatics just to ruin me...I stand no chance. First Arthur Lowe steals the scene, then Sim. I'm just the feed. They're all pissing on my grave'. Wapshott, N. (1983) *Peter O'Toole: a biography*, New English Library, p. 165.

73. Sylvia Clayton in *The Daily Telegraph*, 21/11/72; Leonard Buckley in *The Times*, 21/11/72. (BFI Press Cuttings)
74. Stewart Lane in *The Morning Star*, 8/1/75; Christopher Hudson in *The Evening Standard*, 6/1/75. (BFI Press Cuttings)
75. John Coleman in *The New Statesman*, 11/7/75; Pauline Kael in *The New Yorker*, 13/10/75 (BFI Press Cuttings); *Variety*, 1/10/75; *The Hollywood Reporter*, 238/18, 30/9/75, p. 10.
76. *Variety*, 16/6/76; Felix Barker in *The Evening News*, 27/5/76; Tom Hutchinson in *The Sunday Telegraph*, 30/5/76. (BFI Press Cuttings)
77. Richard Last in *The Daily Telegraph*, 23/9/76; Alexander Walker in *The Evening Standard*, 23/9/76; Peter Dunn in *The Sunday Times*, 26/9/76. (BFI Press Cuttings)

Margaret Rutherford - Annotated Filmography

Dusty Ermine (Bernard Vorhaus, 1936) [Miss Butterby]

(alternative title: Hideout in the Alps)

(Ronald Squire, Jane Baxter, Arthur Macrae, Anthony Bushell, Athole Stewart, Katie Johnson, M.R., Felix Aylmer)

Crime Drama. Jim Kent (Ronald Squire), a forger just released from prison, discovers that his nephew Gilbert (Arthur Macrae) is involved with an international counterfeit ring. To complicate matters, his niece Linda (Jane Baxter) falls in love with Inspector Forsyth (Anthony Bushell) who is in charge of the investigations.

Rutherford plays the agent to a gang of forgers, a part specially created for her which was not in the original stage play from which the film was developed. Talking to Gwen Robyns she comments that 'it was the kind of role that was to pursue me all my career...and the part was written up each day to make it more important'; director Bernard Vorhaus adds that when casting the film 'I had encountered Margaret Rutherford and was delighted by her eccentric personality. I provided her first film role as one of the counterfeiters, playing her as an ultra genteel crook, a characterization she repeated for many other directors'; *Kine Weekly's* reviewer considers that she gives 'the best individual contribution'. [1] [VID-OA]

Talk of the Devil (Carol Reed, 1936) [housekeeper]

(alternative title: A Man With Your Voice)

(Ricardo Cortez, Sally Eilers, Randle Ayrton, Basil Sydney, Fred Culley, Charles Carson, Gordon McLeod, Dennis Cowis, Langley Howard, Quentin McPherson, M.R., Moore Marriot)

Melodrama. Ray Allen (Ricardo Cortez), who has a gift for impersonating other people's voices, pins a crooked deal on shipping magnate John Findlay (Randle Ayrton) who commits suicide.

The film bears the distinction of being the first ever shot at Pinewood, to say nothing of its status as one of Carol Reed's early features. However, the rather convoluted plot, the confusing mixture of genres - character study, melodrama, comedy, thriller - and a new

technique called overdubbing (which necessitated some of the cast and crew travelling to France!) did not help its cause. Rutherford remembers Reed as 'a charming young man' who demonstrated 'not only his immense technical skill but understanding of the actors and actresses he chose to work with him'. [2] In her only scene, with Basil Sydney, as his housekeeper, she bizarrely empties the contents of her vacuum cleaner through a hole in the floor, to the consternation of her employer, who mimicks her Cockney 'h' dropping. It seems a pity in retrospect that her likeable char is not allowed to develop any further; maybe Reed and his writers considered an overabundance of humour unsuitable in the context of a rather grim narrative which includes two suicides! [BFI-VC]

Troubled Waters (Albert Parker, 1936) [?villager]

(James Mason, Virginia Cherrill, Alastair Sim, Sam Wilkinson, M.R. - billing unknown)

Crime Drama. James Mason plays a government agent who saves a villager's liquid explosives from smugglers.

An early vehicle for new star James Mason, *Troubled Waters* exists only as a preservation print at the BFI; there is also no surviving publicity material. Contemporary reviews do not mention Margaret Rutherford, although it is possible she plays a villager. The scarcity of other prints is unfortunate in the context of this survey as it marks the first of only three occasions when Rutherford worked with Alastair Sim who is cast as a Scottish innkeeper. [BFI-PP]

Beauty and the Barge (Henry Edwards, 1937) [Mrs Baldwin]

(Gordon Harker, Judy Gunn, Jack Hawkins, M.R., Ronald Shiner, Frank Bertram)

Farce. Captain Barley (Gordon Harker), a truculent bargee, becomes embroiled in the romantic complications of Ethel Smedley (Judy Gunn) who is running away from a loveless marriage. Adapted by Edwin Greenwood from the popular stage play by W.W. Jacobs and Louis Parker.

As in so many British films of the period, publicity centres on Gordon Harker's characterful study of a roguish bargee rather than the romantic leads, Judy Gunn and a young Jack Hawkins. The studio describes Harker as a 'notorious' scene-stealer, an attribute Rutherford

was not slow to copy. She plays a widow fending off the advances of two suitors (Gordon Harker and Frank Bertram). As in *Talk of the Devil* she is cast as a housekeeper with a rather affected Cockney accent which does not quite suit her, although her often-repeated refrain "ow strange!" is fashioned into an amusing catchphrase. Contemporary reviews warm to her performance; *Kine Weekly* thinks her among 'the best of the supporting players'. [3] [BFI-VC]

Big Fella (J. Elder Wills, 1937) [nanny]

(Paul Robeson, Elizabeth Welch, Eldon Grant, M.R. unbilled)

Drama. Joe (Paul Robeson), a dockside worker in Marsailles, helps the police to trace kidnapped child Gerald Oliphant (Eldon Grant).

Rutherford has little to do as a tearful and caring nanny to Eldon Grant in two brief scenes. The film is a light vehicle for Robeson - and, to a lesser extent, Welch - who both sing; it is disappointing that Rutherford does not play either scene with Robeson nor is she given the opportunity to demonstrate her French, thanks to the scissors of the editor. [VID-OA]

Catch as Catch Can (Roy Kellino, 1937) [Maggie Carberry]

(alternative titles: Atlantic Episode/Crooked Passage)

(James Mason, Viki Dobson, Eddie Pola, Finlay Currie, John Warwick, M.R.)

Comedy Crime Drama. A tale of smuggling and jewel thieves set on board a transatlantic liner.

Rutherford is cast as 'Crafty' Maggie Carberry, again part of a criminal gang - as in *Dusty Ermine*. *Today's Cinema* describes her character as 'formidable yet kindly-hearted', and she is at least allowed to extend her acting range away from the more cardboard characters she has portrayed so far in her screen career; in addition, the film gives her the opportunity to work with James Mason for the second time - they are both featured in *Troubled Waters* (see above) - and he later pronounced her his favourite actress. [4] [BFI-VC]

Missing Believed Married (John Paddy Carstairs, 1937) [Lady Parke]

(Julien Vedey, Wally Patch, Hazel Terry, Peter Coke, M.R., Charles Paton, Emilio Cargher,

Irene Handl)

Farcical Comedy. Society heiress Hermione Blakiston (Hazel Terry) learns that the man with whom she has agreed to elope - Emilio Graffia (Emilio Cargher) - is a fraud. Making her escape from him, she is knocked down in a street brawl and cared for by Mario Maroni (Julien Vedey) and 'Flat Iron' Stubbs (Wally Patch), two street traders, with whom she recuperates as she recovers her memory.

In her final film of the 1930s, Rutherford portrays her first aristocrat, the imperious, overdressed Lady Parke, irritable grandmother of the heroine (Hermione), whom she helps to protect from Graffia. At every appearance Rutherford dominates the proceedings with consummate skill, whether squabbling with her diminutive and deferential solicitor Mr Horton (Charles Paton), passing out advice to her granddaughter's friends or cutting a maid down to size. A publicity still shows her brandishing a cane, to the muted amusement of the lovers, as her faithful solicitor cowers behind her. She is the caricature of an aristocrat, her obnoxiousness redeemed only by her concern for Hermione's welfare. The film is not critically admired: *The Monthly Film Bulletin* considers that 'the whole thing is casually put together, and the different elements are mixed but not blended'; however, the director recalls 'a very good cast for a small picture', including 'the superb Margaret Rutherford'. [5] [BFI-VC]

Quiet Wedding (Anthony Asquith, 1940) [Second Magistrate]

(Margaret Lockwood, Derek Farr, Marjorie Fielding, A.E. Matthews, Athene Seyler, Jean Cadell, Margareta Scott, David Tomlinson, Sidney King, Peggy Ashcroft, Frank Cellier, Roland Culver, Michael Shepley, Muriel Pavlow, Margaret Halston, Roddie Hughes, Muriel George, O.B. Clarence, M.R., Wally Patch, Bernard Miles, Martita Hunt)

Comedy. The wedding preparations of Janet Royd (Margaret Lockwood) and Dallas Chaytor (Derek Farr) are disrupted and their romance almost wrecked by innumerable preliminaries and complicated by the intervention of family guests. The screenplay by Terence Rattigan and Anatole de Grunwald is based on the stage success by Esther McCracken.

Rutherford's first film for three years, due to theatre commitments, although made during the war, belongs with her 1930s work both stylistically and in terms of its subject matter. There is

no hint of the Blitz, for instance, and its escapism - welcomed by critics at the time - completely disguises the difficult conditions in which it was made. [6] One advantage of wartime meant that the director could assemble an impressive cast even in the smaller roles, which include Bernard Miles and Martita Hunt. Rutherford only participates in a couple of courtroom scenes as a magistrate, sharing the bench with Wally Patch and O.B. Clarence, but still makes an unmistakable impression, wearing an absurd, patterned pillbox hat and observing the proceedings through an elaborate pince-nez with a handle! Carol Reed apart, it was the first time she was working with a noted director, Anthony Asquith, with whom she would make four more films. [BFI-VC]

Spring Meeting (Walter Mycroft, 1941) [Aunt Bijou]

(Enid Stamp-Taylor, Michael Wilding, Basil Sydney, Sarah Churchill, Nova Pilbeam, W.C. Fay, M.R., Henry Edwards)

Comedy. Set in Ireland, Tiny Fox-Collier (Enid Stamp-Taylor), an impecunious widow, visits wealthy old flame Sir Richard Furze (Henry Edwards) with the intention of encouraging a match between her son Tony (Michael Wilding) and Furze's eldest daughter Joan (Sarah Churchill). However Tony falls instead for younger daughter Baby (Nova Pilbeam) who will inherit none of her father's money. The script, by the director and Norman Lee, is adapted from the stage play by M.J. Farrell and John Perry.

Like *Quiet Wedding* (above), *Spring Meeting* is more characteristic of Rutherford's work of the 1930s. Indeed she appeared in a very successful theatre production in 1938, directed by John Gielgud, which toured the following year. [7] While the flimsy nature of the story seems too artificially 'constructed' to ring true and the film relies too heavily on the *bon mots* of the play, Rutherford's characterisation of a 'decrepit, censorious old maid who backs horses on the sly' is widely praised; *Today's Cinema* thinks she 'secures the acting honours with a telling study of the greedy Aunt Bijou', while *The Monthly Film Bulletin* finds her simply 'outstanding'. [8] Most striking is the ease with which the character moves from humour to pathos, a performance undoubtedly honed from countless nights in the stage version. [BFI-VC]

Yellow Canary [9] (Herbert Wilcox, 1943) [Mrs Towcester]

(Anna Neagle, Richard Greene, Nova Pilbeam, Albert Lieven, Lucie Mannheim, M.R., Claude Bailey, Patric Curwan, Marjorie Fielding, Aubrey Mallalieu, Valentine Dyall, Leslie Dwyer, Cyril Fletcher)

Spy Drama. Sally Maitland (Anna Neagle) openly affects Nazi sympathies and is sent to Canada. She is in fact a British agent and succeeds in foiling a Nazi plot.

Once again in a British film, small character parts triumph over an unconvincing narrative.

[10] Rutherford accepted her role of Mrs Towcester, a passenger aboard the S.S. Karina, while resting after the extended run of *Blithe Spirit* in the theatre. Originally it was to have been a cameo appearance of one day's filming, but she and the director worked so productively together that - like Miss Butterby in her first film, *Dusty Ermine*, 'the part [was] written up every day until it extended to three weeks...[Herbert Wilcox] was very kind to me and let me add my own little bits here and there as I usually do'. [11] One of these 'little bits' involves her kicking a Nazi officer, an incident not in the original script, but a moment whose effect upon soldiers watching the film was to inspire admiration for her bravery. [12] [VID-OA]

The Demi-Paradise (Anthony Asquith, 1943) [Rowena Ventnor]

(alternative title: *Adventure For Two*)

(Laurence Olivier, Penelope Dudley-Ward, Marjorie Fielding, M.R., Leslie Henson, Guy Middleton, Felix Aylmer, Joyce Grenfell, Edie Martin)

Drama. Ivan Kouznetsoff (Laurence Olivier), a young Soviet marine engineer, invents a new type of propellor and visits Britain early in 1939 and again in wartime 1941 when his prejudices and misconceptions of the British are largely overturned. He leaves for home firmly endorsing the need for Anglo-Soviet friendship.

Rutherford portrays Rowena Ventnor, doyenne of the village and organiser of the local pageant. Exhausted by theatre work, she arrived on the set 'nervous and uneasy', but Asquith reassured her with a glass of whisky and 'was gentle and comforting - gave me tremendous courage. I went on, still a little nervous, but they say my entrance was most effective: that was entirely due to him'. [13] It is not a large role but her own assessment of her performance

is affirmed by the critical reaction. *The Motion Picture Herald* considers that she 'contributes exceptional comedy', and *The Monthly Film Bulletin* thinks her 'inspired...her appearances are sheer joy from start to finish'. [14] [VID-OA]

English Without Tears (Harold French, 1944) [Lady Christobel Beauclerk]

(alternative title: Her Man Gilbey)

(Michael Wilding, Penelope Dudley-Ward, Lilli Palmer, Claude Dauphin, Albert Lieven, Roland Culver, M.R., Felix Aylmer)

Romantic Comedy. Rich ATS girl Joan (Penelope Dudley-Ward) falls for her butler Tom Gilbey (Michael Wilding) who becomes a lieutenant in wartime.

Rutherford's second aristocrat for the cinema is Lady Christobel Beauclerk, aunt of the heroine, who has a passion for migratory birds. Unlike the imperious Lady Parke of *Missing Believed Married* Lady Christobel is a much more rounded and eccentric figure, still forceful, as demonstrated in her strongly worded - and misconstrued - speech to the pre-war League of Nations, but softened by the exigencies of war when she opens up her grand London home to allied refugees. Studio publicity enthuses that it is 'the part of her life' and she is 'a joy to watch before the cameras. Her scenes are so surely, so nimbly drawn'; a more recent assessment finds her 'the film's primary pleasure'. [15] [VID-OA]

Blithe Spirit (David Lean, 1945) [Madame Arcati]

(Rex Harrison, Constance Cummings, Kay Hammond, M.R., Hugh Wakefield, Joyce Carey, Jacqueline Clarke)

Comedy Fantasy. At a seance conducted by Madame Arcati (Rutherford), cynical novelist Charles Condomine (Rex Harrison) is distracted by the appearance of his first wife Elvira (Kay Hammond) who materialises and makes mischief.

Although not devised with her in mind, once the play was finished Noel Coward thought of her and added extra dialogue - 'Margaret took possession of my pen' as he put it. [16] Rutherford's eccentric medium Madame Arcati steals the film version, garnering her an international reputation and the best notices of her career so far. *The Times* considers the part

'a gloriously comic parody and yet [Rutherford] keeps her a shrewd and likeable woman'; *The Daily Telegraph* thinks she has achieved 'that hardest of all feats in acting - she portrays a character absurd without being ridiculous, a woman who...hides both sense and heart'; Dilys Powell has reservations about the film but enjoys Rutherford's 'naturally comic performance' which works because the actress does not play it 'with the seeming awareness of being funny'; *Time and Tide's* critic remarks insightfully that 'her genius pierces the Coward tinsel. In the world of cinema in which there are few real characters, Madame Arcati is breath-takingly four-square...one of Coward's cruellest creations and yet there are moments in which she eludes our mockery and mocks us, when if she could speak for herself she would be cruel to Coward...it's not only the arty-craftiness and the heartiness that Margaret Rutherford gets so right, it's the faith behind them'. [17] [VID-OA]

Meet Me At Dawn (Thornton Freeland, 1946) [Madame Vermorel]

(alternative title: *The Gay Duellist*)

(William Eythe, Hazel Court, M.R., Stanley Holloway, Basil Sydney, Irene Browne, George Thorpe, Beatrice Campbell, Katie Johnson, Wilfred Hyde White, O.B. Clarence, Aubrey Mallalieu, Charles Hawtrey - unbilled)

Romantic Comedy. Professional swordsman Charles Morton (William Eythe) makes his living duelling on behalf of others who have enemies.

Rutherford portrays a fiercesome but kindly French aristocrat in this lacklustre period comedy by an American director (Freeland) and star (Eythe) out of their depth and well past their best work. Disappointed with the film *The Motion Picture Herald* hails 'accomplished players of little bits like Margaret Rutherford, whose gusty furbelows and vast skill just serve...to show up in grim silhouette the melancholy bareness of the remainder'; *The Monthly Film Bulletin* finds Rutherford and Stanley Holloway 'pillars of strength' and *Variety* praises 'these two...scene-stealers par excellence [who] dominate the screen at every opportunity'. [18] [VID-OA]

While the Sun Shines (Anthony Asquith, 1947) [Dr. Winifred Frye]

(Barbara White, Ronald Squire, Brenda Bruce, Bonar Colleano, Ronald Howard, Miles Malleon, M.R., Joyce Grenfell, Michael Allan)

Comedy. Lord Harpenden (Ronald Howard), an ordinary seaman, befriends American officer Joe Mulvaney (Bonar Colleano) who competes with voluble Monsieur Colbert (Michael Allan) for the attentions of the indecisive Lady Elizabeth Randell (Barbara White). Screenplay by Terence Rattigan, adapted from his play.

A hit on the London stage, Rattigan's play flopped on Broadway and critical reaction to the subsequent film is one of disappointment. [19] However most are agreed on the excellence of a sterling, largely British, cast, 'but the character actors, partly from long experience and partly from the way their parts are written, are better than anybody'. [20] Rutherford contributes a marvellous (all too brief) cameo as a Freudian psychiatrist who interrupts lovers Joe and Lady Elizabeth on a tube train with her own unwanted observations. [BFI-VC]

Miranda (Ken Annakin, 1948) [Nurse Cary]

(Glynis Johns, Googie Withers, Griffith Jones, John McCallum, M.R., David Tomlinson)

Comedy Fantasy. On holiday in Cornwall, Harley Street doctor Paul Marten (Griffith Jones) catches a mermaid, Miranda (Glynis Johns), who returns with him to London disguised as an invalid. Screenplay by Peter Blackmore, adapted from his stage play.

Rutherford plays the only nurse eccentric enough to be considered suitable to look after Glynis Johns' husky-voiced mermaid. Director Ken Annakin calls Rutherford 'a complete original, she had no technique at all that she admitted to...you had to shoot until you caught what you wanted from her. What she did have was an original zany quality'. [21] Critical reaction to Nurse Cary delights in 'a characteristically exuberant performance [whether she is] dancing the Mazurka or carrying out more domestic duties with equal zest'. [22] A lesser sequel, *Mad About Men*, followed in 1954. [VID-OA]

Passport to Pimlico (Henry Cornelius, 1949) [Professor Hatton-Jones]

(Stanley Holloway, Hermione Baddeley, M.R., Paul Dupuis, Betty Warren, Barbara Murray, Raymond Huntley)

Comedy. The inhabitants of Pimlico discover they are part of Burgundy and consequently declare their independence from Britain and its post-war rationing. Original script by T.E.B. Clarke.

The effectiveness of this cosy but timely Ealing comedy is down to Clarke's script, for which he was nominated for an Academy Award, and the numerous character parts. Rutherford plays a professor of medieval history who confirms the Burgundian heritage on which hangs the crux of the story. Her multi-scene cameo enlivens a potentially tedious historical explanation by sheer force of personality with her familiar vocal mannerisms and body movements now aided by a tinkling glockenspiel watch! *The Times's* critic finds her 'superbly eccentric', while Caroline Lejeune enthuses: 'I could have done with a good deal more of Margaret Rutherford...what a woman she is for hugging a grotesque part to her bosom and giving it back again with warmth and generosity!' [23] Alastair Sim was originally cast in the role but was unavailable, probably due to commitments in the theatre. [VID-OA]

The Happiest Days of Your Life (Frank Launder, 1950) [Miss Whitchurch]

(Alastair Sim, M.R., Joyce Grenfell, Richard Wattis, Guy Middleton)

Farcical Comedy. Due to a war-time ministry error, the girls of St. Swithins and their staff - headmistress, Miss Whitchurch (Rutherford) - are billeted with the boys of Nutbourne College and their staff - headmaster, Wetherby Pond (Alastair Sim). Coincidentally it has already been arranged for some parents of St. Swithins and governors of the boys' school to visit Nutbourne for an open day. Adapted from John Dighton's successful West End play which opened at the Apollo Theatre in March 1948 and ran for 605 performances.

Rutherford's formidable Miss Whitchurch - a part she had already fashioned on the stage - encounters Alastair Sim's harrassed headmaster in a hilarious battle of the sexes which evolves into mutual cooperation. Rutherford tells Gwen Robyns she had never before lent herself 'to a more disgraceful exhibition of ruthless feminism' and comments modestly: 'I

merely translated my technique to the film medium'. [24] Frank Launder considers that she 'can always make any line sound funnier than it really is' and 'embodies that type of headmistress as no other actress could. She would never do one take the same, but I like an artist like that'. [25] However it is in her scenes with Sim that the film crackles to life, and it is not too fanciful to suggest that his Miss Fritton in the St. Trinian's films, which the narrative seems to anticipate, is based, at least in part, on a version of Rutherford's character.

[VID-OA]

Her Favourite Husband (Mario Soldati, 1950) [Mrs Dotherington]

(alternative titles: *The Taming of Dorothy*/*Quel bandito sono io*)

(Jean Kent, Robert Beatty, Gordon Harker, M.R., Rona Anderson)

Comedy-Drama. Antonio (Robert Beatty), a timid Neopolitan bank clerk, is henpecked by his English wife Dorothy (Jean Kent) and bullied by her mother (Rutherford). Unknown to Antonio he is the double of notorious gangster Leo L'Americano (also Robert Beatty) who kidnaps him as part of his plan to rob a bank. The result is a profusion of mistaken identities. Screenplay by Noel Langley, based on a stage comedy by Pepino de Filippo.

Rutherford resumes her screen partnership with Gordon Harker - from *Beauty and the Barge* thirteen years earlier! - and makes the most of the opportunities presented to her as Jean Kent's mother. Unfortunately a weak script and Soldati's heavy-handed direction fails to disguise a narrative which tries too hard to amuse, and despite enthusiastic studio publicity which considers her 'once again at the top of her form', 'funnier than ever' and an actress who 'has never done anything better on the screen', even Rutherford herself describes *Her Favourite Husband* as 'not a very good film'. [26] [BFI-VC]

Miss Hargreaves (BBCTV, Michael Barry (prod.), 17/12/50) [Miss Hargreaves]

(M.R., Andrew Osborn, Arthur Wontner, Mary Mackenzie, William Mervyn, Stringer Davis)

Norman Huntley (Andrew Osborn) and a friend invent an imaginary character, Miss Hargreaves (Rutherford), to amuse themselves. They imagine her as an eccentric old lady, a poetess who travels around with a bath and an aviary; they construct her lifestyle, friends,

relatives and somewhere for her to live. As a joke they send her an invitation to stay in their cathedral town; unexpectedly they receive a reply. Adapted by Frank Baker from his novel of the same name.

The Listener's reviewer is less than impressed by the early scenes of this television play until 'salvation appeared...(as it so often does) in the person of Miss Margaret Rutherford...grotesque and briskly competent, with a cape and a magistral cane...Miss Hargreaves was a splendid performance...her ease, authority, enthusiasm and timing were wonderful, and one of the best moments I have encountered in television was her recital, at once imagination-stirring and absurd, of [a]...poem in the last act...[this] creation had a life of its own; and this life Miss Rutherford gave more and more abundantly'. [27] A version of the story was staged at the Royal Court in 1952 and while Rutherford was admired, to her disappointment, the play was panned. No copy of the television production survives.

The Magic Box (John Boulting, 1951) [Lady Pond]

(Robert Donat, Margaret Johnston, Maria Schell, Robert Beatty, Michael Denison, Joyce Grenfell, Miles Malleson, Bernard Miles, Laurence Olivier, Michael Redgrave, Eric Portman, Emylyn Williams, Richard Attenborough, Basil Sydney, M.R. billed alphabetically amongst a cast of 80!)

Biographical Drama. The life story of British cinema pioneer William Friese-Greene (Robert Donat), who died in poverty.

This sincere tribute to Friese-Greene moves some and embarrasses others. Rutherford contributes a cameo as the type of no-nonsense aristocrat her public had come to expect. Lady Pond highlights the narrow-mindedness of conventional photographers and salutes Friese-Greene's vision of briefer exposure times which would produce better results from more relaxed sitters. She also demonstrates a softer side, and all within two minutes and 15 seconds of screen time. Rutherford hated work on the film which was 'overloaded with far too many stars with nothing to do...it was like a huge meringue hidden under layers of whipped cream. None of us liked the taste much'. [28] [VID-OA]

Curtain Up (Ralph Smart, 1952) [Catherine/Jeremy St. Clare]

(alternative title: *On Monday Next*)

(Robert Morley, M.R., Olive Sloane, Joan Rice, Charlotte Mitchell, Kay Kendall)

Comedy. The rehearsals of the Drossmouth repertory are disrupted when the producer Harry Blacker (Robert Morley) crosses swords with the author of next week's play, Catherine (Rutherford). Adapted by Michael Pertwee and Jack Davies from Philip King's 'On Monday Next'.

Neither the adaptation nor the rather slight story is much liked by critics who tend to find the film routine and stale. Of her role Rutherford comments to Gwen Robyns: 'I was the tiresome amateur author Catherine [nom de plume Jeremy]...I had to make the part of nothing. But it did increase my prestige in America'. [29] Her opinion is endorsed by more than one reviewer. *The American Star* believes that 'this film will be greeted with wild enthusiasm by the growing membership of the Margaret Rutherford cult', while *The Motion Picture Herald* is similarly upbeat: 'In a happy stroke, two of England's eminent players are cast together [and]...the supreme mastery with which Robert Morley and Margaret Rutherford go through their acting chores is a pleasure to behold, and puts the film among the superior importations of the season'; and even at home, whatever their reservations about the film, critics acknowledge that 'the laurels go to Margaret Rutherford...her personality endows this film with a striking comedy performance'. [30] [VID-OA]

Castle in the Air (Henry Cass, 1952) [Miss Nicholson]

(David Tomlinson, Helen Cherry, M.R., Barbara Kelly, A.E. Matthews, Brian Oulton)

Comedy. The impoverished Earl of Locharne (David Tomlinson) fails to turn his castle into a hotel but is unprepared for the ensuing battle between an American cousin, Mrs J. Clodfelter Dunne (Barbara Kelly) who wants to buy the property and Mr Phillips (Brian Oulton), a Coal Board official, who hopes to requisition it as a miners' hostel. Alan Melville and Edward Dryhurst's script is adapted from Melville's stage success.

Cass's uninspiring direction of a topical stage play is further weakened by an adaptation which fails to escape from its theatrical origins. With nods to Professor Hatton-Jones (*Passport to*

Pimlico) and *Madame Arcati (Blithe Spirit)*, Rutherford's historian, who aims to prove that the Earl is the rightful heir to the Scottish throne, is clearly written especially for her as the film's publicity material is only too eager to affirm. And yet she is considered 'rather wasted' and 'made to look foolish'; *The Monthly Film Bulletin's* critic concludes that 'only Margaret Rutherford, clad in full Highland regalia and her own sublime brand of humour, lends life to a joke which otherwise falls flat'. [31]

The Importance of Being Earnest (Anthony Asquith, 1952) [Miss Letitia Prism]

(Michael Redgrave, Richard Wattis, Michael Denison, Walter Hudd, Edith Evans, Joan Greenwood, Dorothy Tutin, M.R., Miles Malleon, Aubrey Mather)

Comedy Drama. In the 1890s, two wealthy and eligible bachelors, Jack Worthing (Michael Redgrave) and Algernon Moncrieff (Michael Denison), encounter problems with their prospective marriages. Adapted by Asquith from Oscar Wilde's celebrated play.

The dilemma for critics is to set Asquith's faithful adaptation of Wilde against the superb, now classic, performances of the cast. Whatever the director's faults at least he makes no attempt to disguise the film's famous theatrical forerunner. Rutherford brings to her Miss Prism a special understanding, having portrayed it (and Lady Bracknell) on the stage; and opposite the scene-stealing Edith Evans she commands attention by underplaying her part. In her delightful low-key flirtations with Miles Malleon's Canon Chasuble one senses her holding something in reserve, so that when Jack wrongly assumes her to be his mother, her flustered 'Mr Worthing, I am unmarried!' and waving of her hands in the air is a wonderfully judged exuberance in the context of a subtly underemphasized performance. Penelope Houston finds her partnership with Malleon 'admirable', while Caroline Lejeune thinks they 'staunchly prop up the weaker corners of the picture'; Karel Reisz considers her 'suitably grotesque' and Virginia Graham that the small part of Miss Prism is filled 'to an ebullient overflowing'. [32]

[VID-OA]

Miss Robin Hood (John Guillermin, 1952) [Miss Honey]

(M.R., Richard Hearne, Michael Medwin, Peter Jones, Sid James, Dora Bryan, James Robertson Justice)

Comedy. Miss Honey (Rutherford), an eccentric devoted to children and birds, enlists the help of magazine writer Henry Wrigley (Richard Hearne) to recover a whisky formula. The script, by Val Valentine, is based on a story by Reed de Rouen; Patrick Campbell is responsible for the dialogue. [33]

The first of two failed attempts to provide Rutherford with a starring vehicle in the early 1950s, *Miss Robin Hood* suffers from an uncertain narrative thrust where farce and fantasy are uneasily compromised, and a director who lacks discipline. Rutherford's character emerges as 'excessively grotesque' as she 'forces the pace'; Terence Pettigrew concludes insightfully: 'The film seems to have been based on the rather dangerous notion that anything Margaret Rutherford does will raise a laugh and, though she flashes around in that brilliantly eccentric bossy way that endeared her to millions, the film cries out for a stronger plot and better support'. [34] [VID-OA]

Innocents in Paris (Gordon Parry, 1953) [Gwladys Inglott]

(Alastair Sim, Ronald Shiner, Claire Bloom, M.R., Claude Dauphin, Jimmy Edwards, Laurence Harvey)

Comedy. Various passengers assemble at Northolt Airport about to board a flight to Paris. Seven separate narrative threads present their escapades in a city which most of them are visiting for the first time.

The opportunity for the resumption of Rutherford and Sim's screen partnership in *The Happiest Days of Your Life* - is not taken since they have no scenes together in this episodic film with its mediocre [^]mélée of tired old jokes. However the reputations of both actors remain untarnished by their individual contributions. Rutherford has some effective moments as an artist who is content to buy a copy of the Mona Lisa from a painter (Stringer Davis) who has created over 300 likenesses of the same subject! [35] [VID-OA]

Trouble in Store (John Paddy Carstairs, 1953) [Miss Bacon]

(Norman Wisdom, M.R., Moira Lister, Derek Bond, Lana Morris, Jerry Desmonde, Megs Jenkins, Joan Sims)

Comedy. Norman (Norman Wisdom), diminutive and ambitious employee of a large department store, causes chaos and captures some crooks in his attempts to become a window-dresser.

Rutherford plays a professional shoplifter in Wisdom's first, and arguably best, vehicle. However, despite her relatively small role, critical reaction compares the two unfavourably. In contrast to Wisdom's rather obvious slapstick Virginia Graham finds Rutherford 'the very essence of sophisticated comedy...Mr Wisdom could learn much from her. Her timing is exquisite, there are no loose ends, her humour is a blend of tones and half-tones graded with infinite cunning'. [36] [VID-OA]

The Runaway Bus (Val Guest, 1954) [Cynthia Beeston]

(alternative title: *Scream in the Night*)

(Frankie Howerd, M.R., Petula Clark, George Coulouris, Toke Townley, Terence Alexander, Belinda Lee)

Comedy. Percy Lamb (Frankie Howerd), the driver of a London Airport bus, becomes stranded in the fog with an assortment of passengers on their way to Blackbushe.

Once again, Rutherford is on hand, as a battleaxe waving her umbrella, to usher in a comic (Howerd) new to the cinema, even though her 'support' rather upstages him. However, more than one reviewer finds her 'subdued'; this is countered by others who consider her performance 'grand', 'both amusing and disarming, [and] worth her weight in gold'. [37] In his autobiography the director, Val Guest, notes that Howerd would only do the film under the condition that Rutherford received top billing. But during shooting she insisted it revert to Howerd. [38] Despite some poor notices and the misgivings of the new star, the film did well at the box office. [VID-OA]

Mad About Men (Ralph Thomas, 1954) [Nurse Cary]

(Glynis Johns, Donald Sinden, Anne Crawford, M.R., Dora Bryan, Nicholas Phipps, Joan Hickson, Irene Handl)

Comedy Fantasy. Miranda (Glynis Johns), a mermaid, and her cousin Caroline (also Johns), a sports mistress, agree to swap identities for a while. Soon Barclay Sutton (Nicholas Phipps), the squire, and fisherman Jeff Saunders (Donald Sinden) are competing for Miranda's attention.

Rutherford reprises her role as Nurse Cary in an inferior sequel to *Miranda*. As ever, the film is rescued by the performances. Rutherford herself is critically admired but thought to be wasting her talents in a narrative lacking invention and originality. Indeed, like the later Ealing comedies whose themes are recycled, the film illustrates the mid-1950s dilemma of British cinema with its sense of nowhere to go. [39] [VID-OA]

Aunt Clara (Anthony Kimmins, 1954) [Clara Hilton]

(Ronald Shiner, M.R., A.E. Matthews, Fay Compton, Nigel Stock, Jill Bennett, Raymond Huntley)

Comedy. Clara Hilton (Rutherford), a kindly, strait-laced old lady, inherits an uncle's five greyhounds, a pub and a brothel. Kenneth Horne's screenplay is based on a novel by Noel Streatfield. [40]

Like *Miss Robin Hood*, *Aunt Clara* represents another failed attempt to create a star vehicle for Rutherford. The problem lies in Kenneth Horne's script whose treatment of the central character could be construed as excessively whimsical, while he makes little from an initial situation which appears rich with comic potential. *The Monthly Film Bulletin's* critic considers Rutherford 'quite unsuited to the intention of gentle sentimentality of the character'; however, this is a minority opinion and most agree with the reviewer of *The Daily Worker* who thinks the film 'is put in a class of its own by the inspired, faultless comedy of Margaret Rutherford, who goes from strength to strength with advancing years and here acts everyone off the screen with one of the best performances of her career', a comment which would have pleased the actress who told Keown that it was her favourite screen role so far. [41] [BFI-VC]

An Alligator Named Daisy (J. Lee Thompson, 1955) [Prudence Croquet]

(Donald Sinden, Diana Dors, Jean Carson, James Robertson Justice, Stanley Holloway, Roland Culver, M.R.)

Comedy. Songwriter Peter Weston's (Donald Sinden) life is complicated when he inherits an alligator.

The film boasts an extraordinary cast including Joan Hickson, Ernest Thesiger, Richard Wattis, Gilbert Harding, Frankie Howerd, Jimmy Edwards and Nicholas Parsons, but none of their contributions can conceal a rather indigestible narrative hybrid unsure of its function as comedy, romance or musical. Rutherford's pet shop owner, who refuses to buy the eponymous alligator from Sinden, is a totally natural cameo convincing enough to make us believe she has occupied the premises for years. Her winning portrayal is matched by an affectionate on-screen billing as 'our guest star artiste'. [VID-OA]

Time Remembered (?BBCTV, Lionel Harris, 1956) [The Duchess]

(Natasha Parry, Paul Daneman, M.R. - billing unknown)

'A young Paris hatshop midinette [Natasha Parry]...suddenly finds herself in a noble home with the job of distracting a young prince [Paul Daneman] from his grief over his dead love. The milliner is her double'. [42] Patricia Moyes' translation of Jean Anouilh's play is further adapted for television.

The play had a long run on the stage (with Mary Ure and Paul Scofield), and Rutherford's Duchess de Pont-au-Bronc is considered one of her best performances. She describes the character as 'slightly zany yet innocently romantic' but is not happy making a version for television, 'a medium which I find most restricting', and she misses 'the family atmosphere of the theatre and contact with my audience'; critical reaction is mixed, and as if sensing the actress's unease, one writes: 'Eccentricity is Margaret Rutherford's forte, but her ebullient characterisations belong to the stage or the wide cinema screen, not to the narrow confines of the television screen'. [43] No copy survives.

The Smallest Show On Earth (Basil Dearden, 1957) [Mrs Fazackerlee]

(alternative title: Big Time Operators)

(Virginia McKenna, Bill Travers, Peter Sellers, M.R., Leslie Phillips, Bernard Miles)

Comedy. Matt and Jean Spencer (Bill Travers, Virginia McKenna) inherit a decaying fleapit cinema, the Bijou, and manage to make it pay before selling it on at a profit. Screenplay by William Rose and John Eldridge from an original story by Rose.

This charming, sentimental, Ealingesque paean to old-fashioned cinema-going may not be to everyone's taste, but it does provide Rutherford with one of her best roles on the big screen for some time. She is cast as Mrs Fazackerlee, the belligerent cashier, who is also allowed moments of nostalgia, the most notable being the scene she shares with the Bijou's other old relics, Quill (Peter Sellers), the drunken projectionist and Old Tom (Bernard Miles), the Commissionaire, when she plays the piano for a silent film. In fact these three character performances carry the film. *The Monthly Film Bulletin* considers that 'each have the gift of making absurdity and pathos momentarily indistinguishable; and the success of such a scene as [the one described above]...is due entirely to them and not at all to the script'. [44] [VID-OA]

Just My Luck (John Paddy Carstairs, 1957) [Mrs Dooley]

(Norman Wisdom, M.R., Jill Dixon, Leslie Phillips, Delphi Lawrence, Edward Chapman, Joan Sims)

Comedy. Norman (Norman Wisdom), a jeweller's assistant, places an accumulator bet on six races at Goodwood to enable him to buy a diamond necklace for his girlfriend, Anne (Jill Dixon). Despite innumerable handicaps and misunderstandings Norman collects his winnings and announces his engagement.

Critical opinion of the latest Wisdom vehicle is mixed. The presence (again) of Rutherford in a cameo as an Irish (!) racehorse owner leads more than one critic to suggest that *Just My Luck* represents Wisdom's best film since his debut. One senses an irritation with the film's popularity. Caroline Lejeune observes wearily: 'Norman Wisdom is a problem. He recurs'. [45] Unfortunately critical disaffection for Wisdom and his films spills over into comments on Rutherford's character. *The Times'* reviewer thinks she 'suffers from the film's determination

to make her a self-conscious eccentric', while Philip Oakes dislikes her 'ill-judged slab of sentiment' and Anthony Bairstow actually considers her performance 'unnecessary'; Nina Hibbin, however, believes that: 'Only Margaret Rutherford, in a brief appearance, is allowed to present a rounded characterisation. She gives a delicious portrayal of a rich, eccentric widow, who peoples her mansion with elephants, chimpanzees and parrots, and only races her horses when they feel depressed and need a little exercise'. [46] [VID-UK]

Frankie Howerd Show (ATV, 17/8/58) [guest star]

No copy of this survives according to the sources I have consulted.

The Noble Spaniard (TV, 1958) [?]

Amazon's Internet Movie Database lists this as a television play. I can trace no further details nor a surviving copy.

I'm All Right Jack (John Boulting, 1959) [Aunt Dolly]

(Ian Carmichael, Terry-Thomas, Peter Sellers, Richard Attenborough, M.R., Dennis Price, Irene Handl, Liz Fraser)

Satirical Comedy. Amiable innocent, Stanley Windrush (Ian Carmichael), enters industry to train for management, but becomes a pawn in the feuding between Big Business and Trade Union officialdom. His installation as a worker in his Uncle Bertram's (Dennis Price) factory leads to a nationwide strike.

The Boulting brothers' film heralds the future mockery of *Beyond the Fringe* and *TW3*, although the humour here is far more affectionate and ambivalent towards its targets. Critical plaudits are largely reserved for Peter Sellers' extraordinary performance as petty union official Fred Kite. Rutherford's Aunt Dolly represents 'the sub-aristocracy...as impregnably smug and reactionary'. [47] It is not a large role, but, unlike the backward-looking and nostalgic *The Smallest Show on Earth*, her appearance in *I'm All Right Jack* at least portrays her in the context of a satire appropriate to the modern world. [VID-OA]

The Day After Tomorrow (BBCTV, Douglas Allen (prod.), 15/4/60) [Amy Carr]

'TV play centring on pensioner Amy Carr [Rutherford] and her day-to-day life and character and her budding friendship with old seaman Peter O'Connor.' [BFI SIFT catalogue]

A decade after *Miss Hargreaves*, Frank Baker wrote this especially for Rutherford. Stringer Davis contributes a cameo as a clergyman. No copy survives.

On the Double (Melville Shavelson, 1961) [Lady Vivian]

(Danny Kaye, Dana Wynter, Wilfrid Hyde White, M.R., Diana Dors)

Comedy. In World War Two American GI, Ernie Williams (Danny Kaye), poses as a British general and hoodwinks the Nazis on the eve of D-Day.

A film which did nothing to arrest the decline of Danny Kaye's career in the cinema. For Rutherford it marks her only Hollywood outing and finds her typecast as an eccentric Scottish dowager and aunt of the General (Kaye). *The Monthly Film Bulletin* considers that 'despite a majestic entrance, [Rutherford] has never appeared quite so panic-stricken', while *Films and Filming* thinks 'The funniest episode is Margaret Rutherford's entrance...Her rough movements unhampered by a pink full-length frock and tartan plaid, she strides into the party thwacking her stole across the shoulders of the waiting flunkey as if about to flagellate him rather than merely surrender the stole to be hung up'. [48] The film is rarely seen on television and currently unavailable on video.

Murder She Said (George Pollock, 1961) [Miss Jane Marple]

(alternative title: *Meet Miss Marple*)

(M.R., Arthur Kennedy, Muriel Pavlow, James Robertson Justice, Charles Tingwell, Thorley Walters, Ronnie Raymond, Joan Hickson, Stringer Davis)

Murder Mystery. Elderly amateur sleuth Miss Marple (Rutherford) sees a woman being strangled through the window of a passing train, and when no body can be found, her suspicions lead her to the nearby Ackenthorpe estate where she poses as a maid and identifies the murderer. Screenplay by David Pursall and Jack Seddon, based on Agatha Christie's novel *'4.50 from Paddington'*.

Neither this rather tame adaptation of Christie nor the routine direction of George Pollock receive much critical approbation. However, as Margaret Hinxman remarks: 'The film's shortcomings are splendidly redeemed by Margaret Rutherford's performance'; Leonard Mosley thinks her 'remarkable, redoubtable and splendidly formidable'; Derek Prouse considers that 'she never topples her characterisation into caricature. She lends distinction to an unpretentious but likeable little film'. [49] The trade press is equally enthusiastic: *Variety* - in their excitement granting the film two reviews - thinks she 'simply does what comes naturally (to comic actresses of her stature that is)' and considers Miss Marple 'a natural role for Margaret Rutherford's eccentricities'; *The Monthly Film Bulletin* praises her 'agreeable vigour and dry humour', while *Kine Weekly* hails 'a cleverly controlled performance'. [50] Finally, Alexander Walker finds her 'hugely enjoyable. With chin wagging like a windsock in an airfield and eyes that are deceptively guileless, she clumps her way through her lines, situations and disguises that would bunker an actress of less imperial aplomb'. [51] After years of supporting character parts this 'little film' propelled Rutherford back to star status, and led to three sequels and a cameo appearance. [VID-UK]

Wednesday Magazine (BBCTV, 31/1/62) [interview with David Jacobs]

A rare and, thankfully, preserved television interview with Rutherford. One is conscious throughout this nine-minute encounter of a more formal style of interviewing, more deferential and less familiar than we are used to nowadays. Jacobs covers fashion, alludes to her film

and theatre roles, and they discuss the relative merits of comedy and drama, and touch on her charity work too! Most significantly she says: 'I seem to see a vista of work...in which I can direct my own way a little more'. She talks of a future stage production of *School for Scandal* directed by John Gielgud, but could have had little idea that her new stardom, thanks to *Murder She Said*, which she coyly mentions as her most recent film, would lead to future collaborations with Orson Welles and Charles Chaplin. [BBC]

The Kidnapping of Mary Smith (AngliaTV, George More O'Ferrali, 2/4/63) [Mary Smith]

(M.R., John Bonney, Tony Beckley, Jill Mai Meredith, Judith Furse, Peter Butterworth)

Mary Smith (Rutherford) witnesses a robbery and is kidnapped by the gang. When she realises Tiny (John Bonney) is essentially decent, she gains his confidence and respect to effect a change in his behaviour. Adapted by Joan Morgan from a novel by L.N. Robertson.

Rutherford's final play for television, and the only one to survive, must have seemed very old-fashioned even at the time. It still has a very fifties feeling about it and it is astonishing to realise that, probably due in part to the influence of the Beatles' popularity, by the end of 1963 Rutherford herself would be dancing 'The Twist' in *Murder at the Gallop*. Critical reaction to the play is scathing: *Variety* considers that the 'idea was limp and its development crammed with incredibilities' and 'this palsied tale was beyond redemption' and Rutherford is 'wholly miscast'; Monica Furlong loathes its 'stomach-turning sentimentality', while L.M. Gander finds it 'entirely predictable' and 'bad corn', all lamenting the wasted opportunity for someone of Rutherford's talents. [52] Rutherford was hurt by the criticism but must have been heartened by nearly a hundred letters written by viewers to *Radio Times* in support of the play and her participation in it; more recently, to accompany a NFT screening in October 2000, Dick Fiddy suggests that Mary Smith represents 'one of her finest small screen performances' and counts it as 'a must-see for Rutherford fans'. [53] [BFI-VC]

The Mouse on the Moon (Richard Lester, 1963) [Grand Duchess Gloriana]

(M.R., Ron Moody, Bernard Cribbins, David Kossoff, Terry-Thomas, June Ritchie)

Comedy. The tiny Duchy of Grand Fenwick discovers that her wine, which provides the national income, will launch a rocket. Despite American and Russian competition, the Duchy's amateur astronauts manage to reach the Moon first and return their competitors to Earth.

Rutherford heads the cast despite her relatively small role in this sequel to *The Mouse That Roared*. Unfortunately the comic inspiration of the original film is lacking here. *Variety* thinks the role 'doesn't extend Miss Rutherford much' and others think her wasted; however, *Kine Weekly* considers that she 'amuses as the dignified, if muddle-headed, Gloriana', Alexander Walker thinks her 'a delight', and Margaret Hinxman that she is 'flawlessly absent-minded', while *The Motion Picture Herald* likes her 'amusing burlesque' and *The Hollywood Reporter* praises 'her incomparable charm and comedy sense'. [54] [VID-OA]

The Tonight Show (NBCTV, host: Johnny Carson, 1963) [guest]

During a visit to the U.S.A. to promote *The Mouse on the Moon* Rutherford appeared on the now legendary chat show. [55] However she was less impressed by the 'Hollywood hokum publicity' than by the opportunity to meet the astronauts at Cape Canaveral in Florida. [56] It is possible, though unlikely, that this broadcast survives in American archives.

Murder at the Gallop (George Pollock, 1963) [Miss Jane Marple]

(M.R., Robert Morley, Flora Robson, Charles Tingwell, Katya Douglas, James Villiers, Stringer Davis)

Murder Mystery. While collecting for her favourite charity Miss Marple (Rutherford) arrives at an old man's house to find him staggering downstairs to his death. When it is discovered that he was apparently frightened to death by a cat, Miss Marple investigates the Enderby family who have gathered at 'The Gallop' hotel. She poses as a guest and eventually uncovers the murderer. James P. Cavanagh's screenplay is based on Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot novel *'After the Funeral'*.

By consensus the finest of the four Miss Marple films, but what soon becomes evident, sifting through the reviews from both sides of the Atlantic, is that *Murder at the Gallop* is brought to life almost entirely by its performances - especially Rutherford's - a factor which occasionally finds critics turning their focus away from the weaker aspects of dialogue, editing and direction. *Variety* enthuses about Rutherford's 'joyous energetic performance' while *The Monthly Film Bulletin* finds her 'constantly delightful, archly scoring off the police or trotting down corridors in a waving cloak like an elderly, earth-bound bat'; amidst a long article of fulsome praise for the actress Leonard Mosley declares that the film 'would be just another routine whodunit if Margaret Rutherford were not there to galvanise it' and Penelope Gilliatt believes 'it is the physical details of Miss Rutherford's performance that are enthralling: she has a skip when she gets off her bicycle that is as expressive as Tati's buoyant walk, as though she were tying a bow with her gardening shoes'; *Time* calls her 'a 71-year-old crock of charm', *The Hollywood Reporter* thinks her 'incomparable', 'sturdy as an English oak' and 'the most popular elderly character actress since the days of Marie Dressier', and *The Motion Picture Herald* concludes that 'in essence it is Miss Rutherford's performance...which makes the film as droll, as amusing and as thoroughly entertaining as it turns out to be'. [57] Agatha Christie was far from happy with the adaptation, which substitutes a Poirot story for one featuring Miss Marple, and the casting of Rutherford. However, she visited the set, warmed to Rutherford and later dedicated a novel, *The Mirror Crack'd*, to her 'in admiration'. [VID-OA]

The V.I.P.s (Anthony Asquith, 1963) [The Duchess of Brighton]

(alternative title: International Hotel)

(Elizabeth Taylor, Richard Burton, Louis Jourdan, Elsa Martinelli, M.R., Maggie Smith, Rod Taylor, Orson Welles)

Drama. A group of top priority passengers are delayed at London airport by fog. Their various problems are resolved as they wait overnight at a hotel.

Asquith's international film is evidently constructed, at least in part, to cash in on the high profile romance of Burton and Taylor, but arguably it is saved by the character performances of Rutherford, Orson Welles and Maggie Smith. For her part Rutherford was happy to be

reunited with Asquith - for the fifth and final time - although at first she turned down Terence Rattigan's script. The result was that Asquith and Rattigan stepped in, 'gave the character more substance - and I won the Oscar' as she modestly told Gwen Robyns. [58] Her impoverished Duchess certainly represents the peak of her international fame and the notices are among the best of her career. *Variety* considers her 'sheer joy as the plane-scared eccentric', *The Times* 'excellent in her usual role' and Raymond Durgnat that she is 'the real V.I.P. of the enterprise...on her tippest-toppest form since *Blithe Spirit*'; for Derek Prouse she is the film's 'one jewel...[and] with the nimble touch of the born shop-lifter, she nips in and out of the picture waltzing away with every scene she plays'; Eric Shorter finds her 'dithering Duchess of Brighton (one of her richest creations)...greatly entertaining...[and] confused by regulations, dependent on pills, nervous of flying, and scornful of its indignities, she hangs gapingly about in the airport precincts in an overbearingly floppy felt hat. She is simply representing Comic Relief. There was never a better representative'. [59] [VID-OA]

Variety Club Awards for 1963 (BBCTV, 20/3/64) [incl. 3 min. speech by M.R.]

(award winners include: The Beatles, Dirk Bogarde, Michael Redgrave, Maggie Smith, Julie Christie, James Fox, Jean Metcalfe, Harry H. Corbett, Wilfrid Brambell, Honor Blackman, Patrick MacNee and Sean Connery)

Amidst this stellar company Margaret Rutherford gives what is sometimes referred to as her 'Grande Dame' speech when accepting her award for Film Actress of 1963, for *Murder at the Gallop* and *The V.I.P.s*. She alternately charms her audience with her warmth and sincerity and amuses them by referring to Harold Wilson, who is presenting the awards, as 'My Right Honourable Friend' and declaring 'dear me, I've never felt so excited since my wedding day'. [BBC]

Murder Most Foul (George Pollock, 1964) [Miss Jane Marple]

(alternative title: *Mrs McGinty's Dead*)

(M.R., Ron Moody, Charles Tingwell, Andrew Cruikshank, Megs Jenkins, Ralph Michael, James Bolam, Stringer Davis, Francesca Annis, Dennis Price, Terry Scott)

Murder Mystery. Miss Marple (Rutherford) is the only member of a jury not to find Mrs McGinty's lodger guilty of her murder. Clues point to a local repertory company which Miss Marple joins posing as an actress and where she eventually unmask the real killer. Screenplay by David Pursall and Jack Seddon adapted from Agatha Christie's Poirot novel '*Mrs McGinty's Dead*'.

Once again the scriptwriters turn a Poirot novel into a vehicle for Miss Marple, but one senses that the film is riding on the successful wave of its predecessors. The majority of critical opinion reflects this concern. *Variety* believes that 'Margaret Rutherford has an audience all her own that gives considerable assurance of success'; *The Monthly Film Bulletin* comments: 'Margaret Rutherford bustles and pouts her way pleasantly through another Miss Marple murder story, this time one unworthy of her talents'; this finds an echo in *The Hollywood Reporter* who thinks the film 'will satisfy the hunger [of fans] until a really good vehicle for Miss Rutherford can be found'; *Kine Weekly* considers her 'naturally entertaining"', Felix Barker in *The Evening News* describes her as 'a galleon under full sail', while for David Robinson of *The Financial Times* she is 'irresistibly funny...she disarms criticism entirely', and *The Motion Picture Herald* concludes that 'with her blithe personality and jutting chin, the charming Miss Rutherford pursues and traps a triple-murderer with such calculated ease that she may just as well be tip-toeing through a field of tulips'. [60] [VID-OA]

Murder Ahoy! (George Pollock, 1964) [Miss Jane Marple]

(M.R., Lionel Jeffries, Charles Tingwell, William Mervyn, Joan Benham, Stringer Davis, Nicholas Parsons, Miles Malleon, Derek Nimmo, Francis Matthews)

Murder Mystery. Miss Marple (Rutherford) solves the murders on board a naval cadet training ship. Original story by screenwriters David Pursall and Jack Seddon based on the character created by Agatha Christie.

The last and least of the Miss Marple series, the film's main difficulty lies in an excess of talk with a corresponding lack of action, and it becomes all too evident that Rutherford carries the narrative almost single-handed. *Variety* fears 'over-exposure' but, as with *Murder Most Foul*, thinks the 'Rutherford name and series itself [have] developed fans'; *Kine Weekly* thinks 'the film really belongs to Margaret Rutherford, whose talents as Miss Marple range...from acute detection to a duel with sabres' (one of the principal scenes to be exploited by the studio publicity); *The Hollywood Reporter* concurs, concluding that 'the burden is almost all on Miss Rutherford, and she does more than any other player could do to make the picture seem more than it is'. [61] [VID-OA]

The Stately Ghosts of England (NBCTV, Frank de Felitta, 1964) [co-presenter]

(co-presenters Tom Corbett and Stringer Davis)

This documentary for American television is based on the experiences of clairvoyant Tom Corbett. Locations include Longleat, Salisbury and Beaulieu.

Rutherford clashed with the director, who was evidently a fan of her screen persona, when he asked her to 'camp it up', preferring to play it straight. *Variety's* review registers disappointment that 'no poltergeists nor ectoplasm made it on this NBC News special and not much else in the way of entertainment materialised either. Even Margaret Rutherford's company proved a limited pleasure for the hour-long tour...Miss Rutherford is at her charming best, as her screen whodunit loyalists can affirm, when she's hamming it through a jape of one sort or another; but [here] she was seriously hemmed in by stagey production and a generally coy script'. [62] It is possible, though unlikely, that this broadcast survives.

Late Night Line-Up (BBCTV, 12/2/66) [interview (+ Stringer Davis) with Michael Dean]

In a pre-recorded interview for the late evening arts programme Michael Dean discusses Rutherford's reading of Beatrix Potter for *Jackanory* (see below), her dislike of television (as a performer), 'the myth' of her eccentricity, her popularity in America, her marriage to an actor, her interest in the young, and her poetry reading. She concludes with a characterful account of Edward Lear's *The Owl and the Pussycat*. [BBC]

Jackanory (BBCTV, Feb. 1966) [week reading Beatrix Potter stories]

Mentioned on the *Late Night Line-Up* programme (above), these readings unfortunately do not survive in the BBC archives.

The Alphabet Murders (Frank Tashlin, 1966) [Miss Jane Marple]

(alternative title: *The ABC Murders*)

(Tony Randall, Anita Ekberg, Robert Morley, Maurice Denham, Guy Rolfe, Sheila Allen, James Villiers, M.R. - unbilled)

Comedy Mystery. Hercule Poirot (Tony Randall) tracks down a killer who is disposing of victims in alphabetical order of their surnames.

The Miss Marple series having folded, MGM turn their attention to Poirot, with disastrous results. The jokes fall flat, the mystery is too elaborate, the narrative dreary, and Randall hopelessly miscast. Rutherford and Stringer Davis contribute a delightful unbilled cameo, accompanied by Ron Goodwin's memorable Miss Marple theme, lasting all of 25 seconds. Meeting Poirot on the steps of the police station Miss Marple declares: 'The solution is ABC for anyone with half a brain cell!', stares at him uncomprehendingly, sweeps past, and is gone. As the *Radio Times Guide to Films* observes: 'Rutherford makes a guest appearance, but even that fails to enliven the proceedings', although its effect is only to recall past glories and make one wish she had been granted a longer scene in a better film. [63] [VID-USA]

Chimes at Midnight (Orson Welles, 1966) [Mistress Quickly]

(alternative titles: *Campanades a Medianoche/Falstaff/Chronicles*)

(Orson Welles, Jeanne Moreau, M.R., John Gielgud, Alan Webb, Norman Rodway, Keith Baxter)

Historical Comedy Drama. Once he becomes King Henry V, Prince Hal (Keith Baxter) rejects his old friend Falstaff (Orson Welles). Screenplay by Orson Welles adapted from Shakespeare's *Richard II*, *Henry IV*, parts 1 & 2, *Henry V* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

The story of Falstaff's rise and fall received mixed reviews when it appeared but its reputation has grown steadily since and is now considered one of Welles' best films, both as actor and

director, and is still much discussed. *Variety* sums up contemporary ambivalence towards the film, calling it 'uneven', although 'it is the playing that counts. This is fairly consistent', but the reviewer also finds it 'irritating, yet sumptuous, too personal, yet knowing'. [64] Margaret Rutherford's scenes were filmed (on location in Spain) in December 1964 although the film was not seen until the 1966 Cannes Festival and did not have a general release until 1967. Some think Rutherford miscast as Mistress Quickly, others wonder why she had wasted so much of her career in mediocre films. Particularly admired is her reflective sorrow at Falstaff's bier - 'he's in Arthur's bosom [his body] cold as any stone'; *The Monthly Film Bulletin* accounts her narration 'superb' while Alexander Walker thinks she reports Falstaff's death 'more touchingly than any camera could record it'; Roger Manvell concludes that it is overall 'a beautifully human, vulnerable, and happy performance'. [65] [VID-OA]

A Countess From Hong Kong (Charles Chaplin, 1967) [Miss Gaulswallow]

(Marlon Brando, Sophia Loren, Sydney Chaplin, Tippi Hedren, Patrick Cargill, Michael Medwin, Oliver Johnston, John Paul, Angela Scoular, M.R.)

Romantic Comedy. Russian émigré princess Nataschia (Sophia Loren) from Hong Kong stows away in the cabin of rich American diplomat Ogden (Marlon Brando). Complications ensue when Ogden's wife Martha (Tippi Hedren) boards the ship at Hawaii.

Old-fashioned, dull, mindless, soporific, disappointing and, worst of all, unfunny, are only a few of the critical broadsides aimed at Chaplin's last film. From the wobbly tracking shot at the opening to its drab decor and the lack of chemistry between the leading players, the film fully merits its poor reputation. Although produced in colour the effect is curiously monochromatic, and despite the hard work of a miscast Brando and Loren they only succeed in generating the theatrical sense of a stage farce rather than anything remotely cinematic. This partly explains the almost universal gratitude for Margaret Rutherford's cameo as an old lady confined to her bed. Nicholas Kostis, a film lecturer at Boston University, comments: 'It was worth sitting through the sheer boredom of *A Countess From Hong Kong* for 2 hours just to see Margaret Rutherford'; David Shipman agrees, calling her appearance 'the sole bright spot' of the film; Alexander Walker thinks she 'heaves and huffs like a mountain in labour as a bedridden

beldam made queasy by a gift of chocolates', while *The Hollywood Reporter* describes her cameo as 'the funniest scene in the picture. Miss Rutherford does what she does best, playing a dotty old dame, and she is totally wonderful'. [66] [VID-USA]

The Wacky World of Mother Goose (Jules Bass, 1967) [Mother Goose - voice/likeness]

Animated Drama for children. When Mother Goose (voice/likeness of Rutherford) has to fly off to visit her sister on the other side of the moon, terrible things start to happen in the land of Old King Cole. Unless the people can get Mother Goose to return in time they are destined to be ruled by the evil crooked man.

In this characteristic tale of good versus evil, it is not difficult to imagine what attracted Rutherford to Mother Goose as the upholder of good and the bearer of moral authority for a world where nursery rhyme characters sing songs and play games. The film appeared on video in the 1980s but is little seen now. I can trace no reviews. [VID-UK]

Arabella (Mauro Bolognini, 1967) [Princess Ilaria]

(alternative title: Ragazza del Charleston)

(Virma Lisi, James Fox, M.R., Terry-Thomas)

Comedy. In the 1920s female confidence trickster Arabella (Virma Lisi) raises money to pay for her grandmother Princess Ilaria's (Rutherford) back taxes.

Rutherford's final film opened in Italy in November 1967 although it seems not to have reached the U.S.A. until September 1969 or to have formally premiered in the U.K. at all! In another international cast, she plays what she herself describes, rather resignedly, as 'my usual taciturn old princess part'. [67] Views of the film and Rutherford's participation in it differ widely. *Variety* finds it only 'mildly amusing [and]...overly-burdened with a script not sufficiently developed and attempting comedy that frequently does not jell', although Rutherford is 'cute as the cigar-smoking princess not quite with it'; Jerry Vermilye considers *Arabella* 'stylish but empty', noting 'sad evidence of Rutherford's all-too obvious decline...her lines are delivered with such solemnity, and with none of the old Rutherford ginger'; *The Hollywood Reporter* concurs, thinking her lines 'slow, methodical, monotonic, simply fitting the words in, without

inflection, emphasis or desired effect'; however, a more recent assessment believes the film to be 'bizarre and often very funny' and Rutherford 'a cigar-chomping joy'. [68] As it has not been seen on terrestrial television for over 20 years, nor has it ever appeared on video, final judgment remains difficult on Rutherford's cinematic swan song.

Notes

1. Robyns, G. and Rutherford, M. (1972) *Margaret Rutherford: an autobiography as told to Gwen Robyns*, W.H. Allen, p. 82; Vorhaus, B. (2000) *Saved from Oblivion: an autobiography*, Scarecrow Press, Inc., p. 83; *Kine Weekly*, 235/1535, 17/9/36, p. 25.
2. Robyns, G. and Rutherford, M., (1972), p. 82.
3. *Kine Weekly*, 240/1557, 18/2/37, p. 27.
4. *Today's Cinema*, 49/3650, 1/7/37, p. 190; Langley Simmons, D. (1983) *Margaret Rutherford - A Blithe Spirit*, Arthur Barker Ltd., p. 159. James Mason writes to the author: 'It is true that I still have the habit of naming her as "the best actress" that I ever worked with. I liked her and I admired her work enormously. In her later days there were many films in which her appearance was the only item which made them worth watching'.
5. *The Monthly Film Bulletin*, 4/45, Sep. 1937, p. 190; Carstairs, J.P. (1942) *Honest Injun!*, Hurst and Blackett, p. 138. A highlight of the shooting was apparently a visit to the set by none other than Jack Benny whom the director had known in America. Margaret Rutherford was to work with Carstairs again on two Norman Wisdom films - *Trouble in Store* and *Just My Luck* - in the 1950s.
6. Margaret Lockwood, playing the bride, is only too aware of the irony of the film's title: 'it was anything but quiet...we were sited at Shepperton very near the Vickers Armstrong factory. Often we got fire bombs intended for them'. Lockwood, M. (1955) *The Autobiography of Margaret Lockwood*, Odhams Press Ltd., p. 81. She goes on to describe how the cast were billeted at the studio and how meal times and work schedules were constantly interrupted by air raids. In one tragic incident two electricians lost their lives in an explosion before the cast had to return to the set to shoot a particularly amusing scene.
7. Joyce Grenfell saw the play on 21st August 1938 and writes to her mother: 'There's an elderly aunt in it - called Bijou - that you'd adore. A little mad, a little sad and wholly delightful to laugh at'. Roose-Evans, J. (ed.) (1988) *Joyce Grenfell: Darling Ma: Letters To Her Mother 1932-1944*, Hodder and Stoughton, p. 52. Grenfell would work with Rutherford in *The Demi-Paradise*, *While the Sun Shines*, *The Magic Box*, and, most memorably, in *The Happiest*

Days of Your Life.

8. *Today's Cinema*, 56/4530, 12/2/41, p. 13; *The Monthly Film Bulletin*, 8/36, Feb. 1941, p. 14.

9. In his autobiography Ken Annakin attributes Rutherford's next film performance as an appearance in a 30-minute drama/documentary *We Serve* (1941), directed by Carol Reed, which he describes as 'a big recruiting film for the women's services'; he says Reed persuaded many actresses including Rutherford 'to work for £5 a day for a good patriotic cause'. Annakin, K. (2001) *So You Wanna Be a Director?*, Tomahawk Press, p. 18. I have viewed a film with this title (without credits!) at the Imperial War Museum, and although there are memorable performances by Googie Withers, Peggy Ashcroft, Celia Johnson and Joyce Carey (amongst others), Margaret Rutherford makes no appearance. Either Annakin is mistaken or maybe Rutherford's part was relegated to the cutting room floor.

10. Reviewers of the time are generally unimpressed by the scenario and the film's attendant publicity, while Herbert Wilcox proves no match for Hitchcock directing this kind of thriller; one critic hints at the real essence of the film by pointing out that 'the incidental scenes on board ship and in Halifax [Nova Scotia, Canada] are well and wittily observed - the facetious scribbles in the margin are, as it were, sometimes of more interest than the text itself'. *The Times*, 8/11/43. (BFI Press Cuttings) This thin and rather obvious premise for a thriller is hardly justified by the production company's statement: 'RKO Radio is departing from the practise of giving the story since to do so would be to spoil the interest of the film. It is hoped that you will assist by not divulging the story contents to your friends who intend viewing this production'. (BFI Press Cuttings)

11. Robyns, G. and Rutherford, M. (1972), pp. 82-3.

12. In his biography of Rutherford Eric Keown notes that: 'Stringer Davis tells the story of how one night in the Western Desert he overheard his men speaking with wonder of his wife in this film. It was a tiny, apparently unimportant shot, just kicking a Nazi deftly on the ankle, but she had printed it indelibly on their memories - a very good example of the vividness of her acting'. Keown, E. (1955) *Margaret Rutherford*, Rockliff, p. 37. Rutherford herself enjoyed shooting the scene, telling Gwen Robyns: 'I was playing my usual dotty old lady stuff' and admitting that: 'It was my own statement on how I felt about everything to do with the war'. Robyns, G. and

27. *The Listener*, 28/12/50. (BFI Press Cuttings)
28. Robyns, G. and Rutherford, M. (1972), p. 92; Eric Keown suggests, rather mischievously, that Lady Pond might be 'a distant relation, one hoped, to the fevered headmaster of Hilary Hall' - that is, of Wetherby Pond, Alastair Sim's character in *The Happiest Days of Your Life*. Keown, E. (1955), p.53.
29. Robyns, G. and Rutherford, M. (1972), p. 97.
30. *The American Star* review is quoted by Dick Fiddy in *NFT Programme*, Oct. 2000, p. 27; *The Motion Picture Herald*, 190/6, 7/2/53, p. 1710; *The Monthly Film Bulletin*, 19/221, June 1952, p. 79.
31. Reg Whitley in *The Daily Mirror*, 11/7/52 (BFI Press Cuttings); *Variety*, 16/7/52; *The Monthly Film Bulletin*, 19/224, Sep. 1952, p. 126.
32. Penelope Houston in *The Sunday Times*, 29/6/52; Caroline Lejeune in *The Observer*, 29/6/52 (BFI Press Cuttings); Karel Reisz in *Sight and Sound*, 22/1, Jul-Sep. 1952, p. 28; Virginia Graham in *The Spectator*, 27/6/52. (BFI Press Cuttings) Years later Dorothy Tutin reminisced to Brian McFarlane: 'Margaret Rutherford was perfection. To be on the set when she was doing that scene with her handbag was such a privilege. She did it in two takes, both of which were wonderful, and I was practically in tears'. McFarlane, B. (1997) *An Autobiography of British Cinema*, Methuen, p. 582.
33. Val Valentine and Patrick Campbell's screenplay comes in for particularly harsh criticism, described variously as 'dishevelled and [the] humour fourth form' and 'slapdash and undergraduatish'. (*Kine Weekly* and *The Monthly Film Bulletin* reviews - see below, note 34) Campbell became a familiar television team captain on *Call My Bluff* opposite Frank Muir in the 1960s and 1970s.
34. *The Monthly Film Bulletin*, 20/229, Feb. 1953, p. 21; *Kine Weekly*, 429/2373, 18/12/52, p. 120; Pettigrew, T. (1982) *British Film Character Actors: Great Names and Memorable Moments*, David and Charles, p. 112.
35. Of her screen partnership with her husband (Stringer Davis) Rutherford tells Gwen Robyns: 'There was a scene we enjoyed playing together [in the Louvre], it had been specially written in for us...I was my usual village spinster'. Robyns, G. and Rutherford, M.(1972), p. 96.

- Rutherford, M. (1972), p. 83.
13. Rutherford quoted in Minney, R.J. (1973) *Puffin Asquith*, Leslie Frewin, p. 138.
 14. *The Motion Picture Herald*, 153/12, 18/12/43, p. 1673; *The Monthly Film Bulletin*, 10/120, Dec. 1943, p. 133.
 15. BFI Pressbook; *Radio Times*, 27th Feb.-5th Mar., 1999, p. 57.
 16. BFI Pressbook.
 17. *The Times*, 5/4/45; Simon Harcourt-Smith in *The Daily Telegraph*, 16/4/45; Dilys Powell in *The Sunday Times*, 8/4/45; *Time and Tide*, 14/4/45. (BFI Press Cuttings) Rutherford comments: 'Underneath the comic facade I saw a real person of flesh and blood with serious beliefs'. She continues: 'I never intend to be a satirist, I never intend to play for laughs [confirming Dilys Powell's impression]. I am always surprised when audiences think me funny at all. I find it hard to even analyse what I do except perhaps in my timing...If my work looks effortless, it is not. It is a question of tireless polishing the whole time'. Robyns, G. and Rutherford, M. (1972), p. 47.
 18. *The Motion Picture Herald*, 166/4, 25/1/47, p. 3434; *The Monthly Film Bulletin*, 14/157, Jan. 1947, p. 3; *Variety*, 15/1/47.
 19. *Time and Tide*'s Helen Fletcher comments that: 'Perhaps part of the trouble is that we no longer laugh at wartime jokes', and William Whitebait in *The New Statesman* dislikes the film's barely concealed theatrical origins whose 'joking remains West End, a genre to me as unappealing as Middle West'. Helen Fletcher in *Time and Tide*, 15/3/47; William Whitebait in *The New Statesman*, 15/3/47. (BFI Press Cuttings)
 20. *The Observer*, 9/3/47. (BFI Press Cuttings)
 21. Ken Annakin in interview with Brian McFarlane in McFarlane, B. (ed.) (1992) *Sixty Voices*, BFI, p. 6.
 22. *The Monthly Film Bulletin*, 15/172, Apr. 1948, p. 47.
 23. *The Times*, 2/5/49; Caroline Lejeune in *The Observer*, 1/5/49. (BFI Press Cuttings)
 24. Robyns, G. and Rutherford, M. (1972), pp. 88, 90.
 25. Frank Launder quoted in *Ibid*, p. 90.
 26. BFI Pressbook; Robyns, G. and Rutherford, M. (1972), p. 87.

Davis had played his first cameo in his wife's films as a museum attendant in *Miranda*.

36. Virginia Graham in *The Spectator*, 25/12/53. (BFI Press Cuttings)

37. Both *The Times*, 15/2/54 and Peter Wilshire in *The Sunday Chronicle*, 14/2/54 find Rutherford 'subdued'; Reg Whitley in *The Daily Mirror*, 12/2/54 (BFI Press Cuttings); *Kine Weekly*, 443/2432, 4/2/54, p. 22.

38. See Guest, V. (2001) *So You Want To Be In Pictures*, Reynolds and Hearn Ltd., p. 127. Talking to Gwen Robyns, Rutherford comments: 'True to form I, of course, played the comic spinster...Frankie was young and nervous, but I thought he gave a very good account of himself'. Robyns, G. and Rutherford, M. (1972), p. 98. For his part Howard invited her on to his television show as guest star in 1958. They remained friends until Rutherford's final illness when he visited her in hospital.

39. I am paraphrasing comments by Gavin Lambert in Stephen Frears' television documentary *Typically British*, broadcast by the BBC in 1995. He says: 'And suddenly, by about the mid-50s, the whole British film industry seemed extremely disappointing. You wondered what was left - if there was any place to go. The only place that people seemed to think they could go was back to World War Two'. Lambert articulates a perfectly valid critique of British cinema after the successes of the 1940s and before the coming of the British new wave. However, more recently, critics have begun to adopt a more appreciative, revisionist attitude towards the 1950s. Indeed, Ian MacKillop and Neil Sinyard's account of the period is subtitled 'a celebration'. The authors believe that 'British cinema was connecting with its home audience more successfully than at any time in its history' and the legacy of the films 'is being felt to this day'. They also answer Lambert's charge that 1950s war films were a retreat into nostalgia by noting the presence in them of 'a proud but restrained Englishness that made a welcome contrast to American brashness'. See MacKillop, I. and Sinyard, N. (eds.) (2003) *British Cinema of the 1950s: a celebration*, Manchester University Press, pp. 1-10. Similarly, Sue Harper and Vincent Porter have drawn attention to the 'complexity' of 1950s British cinema and regard it not as 'an interregnum or a stylistic hiccup' but as 'the last flowering of an authentic British tradition'. See Harper, S. and Porter, V. (2003) *British Cinema of the 1950s: the decline of deference*, Oxford University Press, pp. 1-4, 265-273.

40. Kenneth Horne was more famous as a radio comedian from *Much Binding in the Marsh* and went on to greater success in *Beyond Our Ken* and *Round the Horne*.
41. *The Monthly Film Bulletin*, 21/251, Dec. 1954, p. 176; T. Slaven in *The Daily Worker*, 13/11/54 (BFI Press Cuttings); Keown, E. (1955), p. 65.
42. Robyns, G. and Rutherford, M. (1972), p. 111.
43. Ibid, pp. 111-113; the authors quote a review in *The Wolverhampton Express and Star*.
44. *The Monthly Film Bulletin*, 24/280, May 1957, p. 56. Bill Travers tells Brian McFarlane: 'Margaret Rutherford was quite wonderful to act with - I mean, you didn't know when she was acting or not'. McFarlane, B. (ed.) (1992), p. 222.
45. Caroline Lejeune in *The Observer*, 8/12/57. (BFI Press Cuttings)
46. *The Times*, 5/12/57; Philip Oakes in *The Evening Standard*, 5/12/57; Anthony Bairstow in *The Daily Herald*, 6/12/57; Nina Hibbin in *The Daily Worker*, 7/12/57. (BFI Press Cuttings)
47. *The Monthly Film Bulletin*, 26/309, Oct. 1959, p. 133.
48. *The Monthly Film Bulletin*, 28/331, Aug. 1961, p. 115; *Films and Filming*, 7/12, Sep. 1961, p. 30. Rutherford enjoyed work on the film, telling Gwen Robyns that her role was a Scots noblewoman - tiresome of course'. She liked Kaye, who she describes as 'a pleasant and efficient person...to work with', and was impressed by 'the extreme professionalism' of Hollywood and a crew who appeared 'to communicate by telepathy'. She was also delighted to meet Clark Gable only months before his death, and sample colour television for the first time. Robyns, G. and Rutherford, M. (1972), pp. 164-173.
49. Margaret Hinxman in *The Daily Telegraph*, 29/9/61; Leonard Mosley in *The Daily Express*, 29/9/61; Derek Prowse in *The Sunday Times*, 1/10/61. (BFI Press Cuttings)
50. *Variety*, 17/1/62 and 18/10/61; *The Monthly Film Bulletin*, 28/332, Sep. 1961, p. 131; *Kine Weekly*, 531/2811, 17/8/61, p. 24.
51. Alexander Walker's review is undated and uncredited in the BFI Press Cuttings file.
52. *Variety*, 17/4/63; Monica Furlong in *The Daily Mail*, 3/4/63; L.M. Gander in *The Daily Telegraph*, 3/4/63. (BFI Press Cuttings)
53. See Langley Simmons, D. (1983) *Margaret Rutherford - A Blithe Spirit*, Arthur Barker Ltd., pp. 160-161, who believes that 'the critics wanted their Margaret Rutherford in comedy, not in

a serious play'. The author includes a sample of three letters to *Radio Times* praising the production. Dick Fiddy describes the play as 'a bona fide rarity' in the *NFT Programme*, Oct. 2000, p. 25.

54. *Variety*, 15/5/63; *Kine Weekly*, 552/2900, 2/5/63, p. 11; Alexander Walker in *The Evening Standard*, 2/5/63; Margaret Hinxman in *The Daily Herald*, 4/5/63 (BFI Press Cuttings); *The Motion Picture Herald*, 230/1, 12/6/63, p. 834; *The Hollywood Reporter*, 176/3, 2/7/63, p. 3. At the time David Kossoff (Kokintz) wrote Rutherford a long letter in praise of her acting which begins: 'You are a unique performer. This half lunatic technique which you have made entirely your own is the product of art. You always know precisely what you are doing'; director Richard Lester also commended her 'involvement and devotion to knowledge'. Robyns, G. and Rutherford, M. (1972), pp. 186-187. Lester would go on to direct The Beatles in *A Hard Day's Night* (1964) and *Help* (1965). The circumstances surrounding the shooting of *The Mouse on the Moon* and Rutherford's contribution to the proceedings should also be noted. Due to her high blood pressure at the time - largely thanks to a doctor who considered she was too old to be working so hard - she was found to be uninsurable. The director was further restricted by his star's availability - two days. However, as Neil Sinyard has written: 'Lester's solution was to shoot all her lines in close-up, he and the producer putting up their salary to cover the insurance for those two days' shooting...thus a bemused Rutherford was sat down on a chair and asked to speak her lines, first to one side, then to the other, whilst different backgrounds were wheeled behind her'; Sinyard considers that 'this separation of the performance from its context does not jar, because the Queen herself seems in a different world from her subjects anyway, her isolation further increased by the wooziness caused by her frequent imbibing of the local wine'; he concludes that 'whatever the trials of shooting, it is a nicely conceived and executed comic cameo'. See Sinyard, N. (1985) *The Films of Richard Lester*, Croom Helm, pp. 12-13 for a fuller account.

55. Mentioned in Langley Simmons, D. (1983), p. 144.

56. Robyns, G. and Rutherford, M. (1972), p. 187.

57. *Variety*, 8/5/63; *The Monthly Film Bulletin*, 30/353, Jun. 1963, p. 87; Leonard Mosley in *The Daily Express*, 8/5/63; Penelope Gilliat in *The Observer*, 12/5/63; *Time*, 5/7/63 (BFI Press

- Cuttings); *The Hollywood Reporter*, 176/6, 8/7/63, p. 3; *The Motion Picture Herald*, 230/4, 24/7/63, p. 859.
58. Robyns, G. and Rutherford, M. (1972), p. 192.
59. *Variety*, 14/8/63; *The Times'* comments are quoted in Minney, R.J. (1973) *Puffin Asquith*, Leslie Frewin, p. 204; Raymond Durnat in *Films and Filming*, 10/1, Oct. 1963, p. 21; Derek Prowse in *The Sunday Times*, 8/9/63; Eric Shorter in *The Daily Telegraph*, 6/9/63. (BFI Press Cuttings)
60. *Variety*, 19/8/64; *The Monthly Film Bulletin*, 31/370, Nov. 1964, p. 165; *The Hollywood Reporter*, 181/44, 19/8/64, p. 3; *Kine Weekly*, 569/2976, 15/10/64, p. 9; Felix Barker in *The Evening News*, 22/10/64; David Robinson in *The Financial Times*, 23/10/64 (BFI Press Cuttings); *The Motion Picture Herald*, 232/5, 2/9/64, p. 123.
61. *Variety*, 30/9/64; *Kine Weekly*, 579/3023, 9/9/65, p. 11; *The Hollywood Reporter*, 182/14, 17/9/64, p. 3.
62. *Variety*, 27/1/65.
63. Fane-Saunders, K. (ed.) (2000) *The Radio Times Guide To Films*, BBC Worldwide Ltd., p. 45.
64. *Variety*, 18/5/66.
65. *The Monthly Film Bulletin*, 34/400, May 1967, p. 70; Alexander Walker in *The Evening Standard*, 23/3/67. (BFI Press Cuttings) Manvell, R. (1979) *Theater and Film: a comparative study of the two forms of dramatic art, and of the problems of adaptation of stage plays into films*, Associated University Presses, p. 198. Rutherford evidently enjoyed her time with Welles as revealed in a publicity shot of them kissing on the lips (!) and a comment to Keith Baxter that 'working with him is like walking where there's always sunshine'. Baxter, K. (1998) *My Sentiments Exactly*, Oberon Books, p. 93.
66. Nicholas Kostis in Langley Simmons, D. (1983), p. 147; Shipman, D. (1980) *The Great Movie Stars: The International Years*, Angus and Robertson, p. 522; Alexander Walker in *The Evening Standard*, 5/1/67 (BFI Press Cuttings); *The Hollywood Reporter*, 195/3, 20/3/67, p. 3. Rutherford calls *A Countess From Hong Kong* 'one of those lovely dream films for me. I enjoyed every moment of it. The thing I remember most about Chaplin's direction was his

infinite eye for detail...it was sad that the film did not get better notices but then film critics can sometimes be very tiresome gentlemen'. (!) Robyns, G. and Rutherford, M. (1972), pp. 197, 198. Perhaps Rutherford would have been heartened by Andrew Sarris's reaction to the film. Writing in *The Village Voice* (23/3/67) he considers that it 'generates a surprising amount of charm and wit' and represents 'the quintessence of everything Chaplin has ever felt', concluding that the director's genius 'resides in that secret passageway from the physical to the emotional through which bodies and faces are transformed by grace and expressiveness into universal metaphors'. Sarris, A. (1971) *Confessions of a Cultist*, Simon and Schuster, pp. 292-6.

67. Ibid, p. 208. When she returned to Italy to complete the dubbing Rutherford broke her hip, but managed to finish work on the film whilst recuperating at a nursing home in the U.K..

68. *Variety*, 3/9/69; Vermilye, J. (1990) 'Margaret Rutherford', *Films in Review*, 41/10, Oct. 1990, p. 462; *The Hollywood Reporter*, 207/31, 4/9/69, p. 3; Fane-Saunders, K. (ed.) (2000), p. 72.

Joint Chronological Filmography

Margaret Rutherford

Alastair Sim

1935

Riverside Murder

A Fire Has Been Arranged

The Private Secretary

Late Extra

1936

Dusty Ermine

Talk of the Devil

.....*Troubled Waters*.....

Wedding Group

The Big Noise

Keep Your Seats Please

The Mysterious Mr Davis

The Man in the Mirror

1937

Beauty and the Barge

Big Fella

Catch as Catch Can

Missing Believed Married

Strange Experiment

Clothes and the Woman

Gangway

The Squeaker

A Romance in Flanders

Melody and Romance

1938

Sailing Along

The Terror

Alf's Button Afloat

This Man is News

1939

Climbing High

Inspector Hornleigh

This Man in Paris

Inspector Hornleigh on Holiday

1940

Quiet Wedding

Law and Disorder

Nero

1941

Spring Meeting

Her Father's Daughter

Inspector Hornleigh Goes To It

Cottage To Let

1942

Let the People Sing

1943

Yellow Canary

The Demi-Paradise

1944

English Without Tears

Waterloo Road

1945

Blithe Spirit

1946

Meet Me at Dawn

Green For Danger

1947

While the Sun Shines

Hue and Cry

Captain Boycott

1948

Miranda

London Belongs To Me

1949

Passport to Pimlico

1950

.....*The Happiest Days of Your Life*.....

Her Favourite Husband

Stage Fright

Miss Hargreaves (TV)

Mr Gillie (TV)

1951

The Magic Box

Laughter in Paradise

Lady Godiva Rides Again

Scrooge

1952

Curtain Up

Folly To Be Wise

Castle in the Air

The Importance of Being Earnest

Miss Robin Hood

1953

.....*Innocents in Paris*.....

Trouble in Store

1954

The Runaway Bus

An Inspector Calls

Mad About Men

The Belles of St. Trinian's

Aunt Clara

1955

An Alligator Named Daisy

Escapade

Geordie

1956

Time Remembered (TV)

The Green Man

1957

The Smallest Show on Earth

This is Scotland (TV)

Just My Luck

Blue Murder at St. Trinian's

1958

Frankie Howerd Show (TV)

The Doctor's Dilemma

The Noble Spaniard (TV)

1959

I'm All Right Jack

Left Right and Centre

1960

The Day After Tomorrow (TV)

School For Scoundrels

Mr Gillie (TV)

The Millionairess

1961

On the Double

The Anatomist (TV)

Murder She Said

1962

Wednesday Magazine (interview) (TV)

1963

The Kidnapping of Mary Smith (TV)

The Mouse on the Moon

The Tonight Show (interview) (TV)

Murder at the Gallop

The VIPs

1964

Variety Club Awards For 1963 (acceptance speech) (TV)

Murder Most Foul

Murder Ahoy

The Stately Ghosts of England (TV)

1966

Late Night Line-Up (interview) (TV)

Jackanory (TV)

The Alphabet Murders

Chimes at Midnight

1967

A Countess From Hong Kong

Misleading Cases (series 1, six episodes) (TV)

The Wacky World of Mother Goose

Arabella

1968

Cold Comfort Farm (three episodes) (TV)

Misleading Cases (series 2, seven episodes) (TV)

1971

Misleading Cases (series 3, six episodes) (TV)

A Christmas Carol (TV)

1972

The Ruling Class

The General's Day (TV)

1975

The Prodigal Daughter (TV)

Royal Flash

1976

Escape From the Dark

Rogue Male (TV)

Alastair Sim (1900-1976) - Films and Television Appearances

(The Case of Gabriel Perry (De Courville, 1935) (attrib. Quinlan, Halliwell))

Riverside Murder (Parker, 1935) [Sergeant Mackay]

A Fire Has Been Arranged (Hiscott, 1935) [Cutte]

The Private Secretary (Edwards, 1935) [Mr Nebulae]

Late Extra (Parker, 1935) [Mac]

Troubled Waters (Parker, 1936) [Mac MacTavish]

Wedding Group (*Wrath of Jealousy/A Man of Wrath/Nurse in Grey*) (Gullan/Bryce, 1936)

[Angus Graham]

The Big Noise (Bryce, 1936) [Finny]

(She Knew What She Wanted (Bentley, 1936) (attrib. Quinlan))

Keep Your Seats Please (Banks, 1936) [Drayton]

The Mysterious Mr Davis (*My Partner Mr Davis*) (Autant-Lara, 1936) (rel. 1940) [Theodore G.

Wilcox]

The Man in the Mirror (Elvey, 1936) [Interpreter]

Strange Experiment (Parker, 1937) [Bob Lawler]

Clothes and the Woman (De Courville, 1937) [Francois]

Gangway (Hale, 1937) [Taggett]

The Squeaker (*Murder on Diamond Row*) (Howard, 1937) [Joshua Collie]

A Romance in [of] Flanders (*Lost on the Western Front/Widow's Island/Romance on the Western Front*) (Elvey, 1937) [Colonel/Captain Wexton]

Melody and Romance (Elvey, 1937) [Professor Williams]

Sailing Along (Hale, 1938) [Sylvester]

The Terror (Bird, 1938) [Soapy Marks]

Alf's Button Afloat (Varnel, 1938) [Eustace]

This Man is News (MacDonald, 1938) [Lochlan MacGregor]

Climbing High (Reed, 1939) [Max Tolliver]

Inspector Hornleigh (E. Forde, 1939) [Sergeant Bingham]

This Man in Paris (MacDonald, 1939) [Lochlan MacGregor]
Inspector Hornleigh on Holiday (W. Forde, 1939) [Sergeant Bingham]
Law and Disorder (MacDonald, 1940) [Samuel Blight]
Nero (Fiddling Fuel) (McKendrick, 1940) [Nero]
Her Father's Daughter (Dickinson, 1941) [Mr McForrest]
Inspector Hornleigh Goes To It (Mail Train) (W. Forde, 1941) [Sergeant Bingham]
Cottage To Let (Bombsite Stolen) (Asquith, 1941) [Charles Dimble]
Let the People Sing (Baxter, 1942) [Professor Ernst Kronak]
Waterloo Road (Blue For Waterloo) (Gilliat, 1944) [Doctor Montgomery]
(Journey Together) (Boulting, 1945) (attrib. Quinlan - Sim does not appear.)
Green For Danger (Gilliat, 1946) [Inspector Cockrill]
Hue and Cry (Crichton, 1947) [Felix H. Wilkinson]
Captain Boycott (Lauder, 1947) [Father McKeogh]
London Belongs To Me (Dulcimer Street) (Gilliat, 1948) [Mr Squales]
Mr Churchill Attends Film Premiere (of London Belongs To Me) (BBCTV news item, 16/8/48)
[shot of A.S.]
Here and There: Alastair Sim (BBCTV news item, 2/5/49) [A.S. installed as Rector of
Edinburgh University]
The Happiest Days of Your Life (Lauder, 1950) [Wetherby Pond]
Stage Fright (Hitchcock, 1950) [Commodore Gill]
Mr Gillie (BBCTV, Sheldon, 25/7/50) [Mr Gillie]
Laughter in Paradise (Zampi, 1951) [Deniston Russell]
Lady Godiva Rides Again (Beauty Queen) (Lauder, 1951) [Hawtrey Murington]
Scrooge (A Christmas Carol) (Hurst, 1951) [Scrooge]
Folly To Be Wise (Lauder, 1952) [Captain Paris]
Innocents in Paris (Parry, 1953) [Sir Norman Barker]
An Inspector Calls (Hamilton, 1954) [Inspector Poole]
The Belles of St. Trinian's (Lauder, 1954) [Millicent Fritton/Clarence Fritton]
Escapade (Leacock, 1955) [Doctor Skillingworth]

(Festival in Edinburgh (Clarke, 1955) (attrib. Quinlan & review credits, but Sim does not appear.))

Geordie (Wee Geordie) (Lauder, 1955) [The Laird]

The Green Man (Day/Dearden, 1956) [Hawkins]

This is Scotland (ScottishTV, Purdey, 31/8/57) [participant]

Blue Murder at St. Trinian's (Lauder, 1957) [Amelia Fritton]

The Doctor's Dilemma (Asquith, 1958) [Cutler Walpole]

Left Right and Centre (Gilliat, 1959) [Lord Wilcot]

School For Scoundrels (or How To Win Without Actually Cheating) (Hamer, 1960) [Stephen Potter]

Mr Gillie (BBCTV, McTaggart, 12/6/60) [Mr Gillie]

The Millionairess (Asquith, 1960) [Julius Sagamore]

The Anatomist (TV, William, 1961) [Doctor Knox]

Misleading Cases (BBCTV(19), Mills/Davies, 1967, 1968, 1971) [Mr Justice Swallow]

Cold Comfort Farm (BBCTV(3), Hammond, June/July1968) [Amos Starkadder]

A Christmas Carol (Animation, Williams, 1971) [Scrooge-voice]

The Ruling Class (Medak, 1972) [Bishop Lampton]

The General's Day (BBCTV, Gorrie, 20/11/72) [General Suffolk]

The Prodigal Daughter (AngliaTV, Reid, 5/1/75) [Father Perfect]

Royal Flash (Lester, 1975) [Mr Grieg]

Escape From the Dark (The Littlest Horse Thieves) (Jarrott, 1976) [Lord Harrogate]

Rogue Male (BBCTV, Donner, 22/9/76) [The Earl]

Alastair Sim: a qualified fool: 1900-1976 (BBCTV doc., Baines, 11/1/83)

Breakfast Time (report on A.S.) (BBCTV, 7/10/87)

Those British Faces: A Tribute to Alistair Sim (C4TV doc., Ellis, 1992 (tx. 20/6/93))

Heroes of Comedy: Alastair Sim (C4TV doc., Fisher, 30/4/97)

Margaret Rutherford (1892-1972) - Films and Television Appearances

Dusty Ermine (Hideout in the Alps) (Vorhaus, 1936) [Miss Butterby]

Talk of the Devil (A Man with Your Voice) (Reed, 1936) [housekeeper]

Troubled Waters (Parker, 1936) [?villager]

Beauty and the Barge (Edwards, 1937) [Mrs Baldwin]

Big Fella (Wills, 1937) [nanny]

Catch as Catch Can (Atlantic Episode/Crooked Passage) (Kellino, 1937) [Maggie Carberry]

Missing Believed Married (Carstairs, 1937) [Lady Parke]

Quiet Wedding (Asquith, 1940) [Second Magistrate]

Spring Meeting (Mycroft, 1941) [Aunt Bijou]

(*We Serve* (Reed, 1941) (attrib. Annakin. Rutherford does not appear.))

Yellow Canary (Wilcox, 1943) [Mrs Towcester]

The Demi-Paradise (Adventure For Two) (Asquith, 1943) [Rowena Ventnor]

English Without Tears (Her Man Gilbey) (French, 1944) [Lady Christobel Beauclerk]

Blithe Spirit (Lean, 1945) [Madame Arcati]

Meet Me At Dawn (The Gay Duellist) (Freeland, 1946) [Madame Vermorel]

While the Sun Shines (Asquith, 1947) [Dr. Winifred Frye]

Miranda (Annakin, 1948) [Nurse Cary]

Passport to Pimlico (Cornelius, 1949) [Professor Hatton-Jones]

The Happiest Days of Your Life (Lauder, 1950) [Miss Whitchurch]

Her Favourite Husband (The Taming of Dorothy/Quel bandito sono io) (Soldati, 1950) [Mrs Elsie Dotherington]

Miss Hargreaves (BBCTV, Barry, 17/12/50) [Miss Hargreaves]

The Magic Box (Boulting, 1951) [Lady Pond]

Curtain Up (On Monday Next) (Smart, 1952) [Catherine/Jeremy St. Clare]

Castle in the Air (Cass, 1952) [Miss Nicholson]

The Importance of Being Earnest (Asquith, 1952) [Miss Letitia Prism]

Miss Robin Hood (Guillermin, 1952) [Miss Honey]

Innocents in Paris (Parry, 1953) [Gwladys Inglott]
Trouble in Store (Carstairs, 1953) [Miss Bacon]
The Runaway Bus (Scream in the Night) (Guest, 1954) [Cynthia Beeston]
Mad About Men (Thomas, 1954) [Nurse Cary]
Aunt Clara (Kimmins, 1954) [Clara Hilton]
An Alligator Named Daisy (Lee-Thompson, 1955) [Prudence Croquet]
Time Remembered (?BBCTV, 1956) [The Duchess]
The Smallest Show on Earth (Big Time Operators) (Dearden, 1957) [Mrs Fazackerlee]
Just My Luck (Carstairs, 1957) [Mrs Dooley]
Frankie Howard Show (ATV, 17/8/58) [guest star]
The Noble Spaniard (TV, 1958) [?]
I'm All Right Jack (Boulting, 1959) [Aunt Dolly]
The Day After Tomorrow (BBCTV, Allen, 15/4/60) [Amy Carr]
On the Double (Shavelson, 1961) [Lady Vivian]
Murder She Said (Meet Miss Marple) (Pollock, 1961) [Miss Jane Marple]
Wednesday Magazine (BBCTV, 31/1/62) [interview with David Jacobs]
The Kidnapping of Mary Smith (AngliaTV, More O'Ferrall, 2/4/63) [Mary Smith]
The Mouse on the Moon (Lester, 1963) [Grand Duchess Gloriana]
The Tonight Show [host: Johnny Carson] (NBCTV, 1963) [guest]
Murder at the Gallop (Pollock, 1963) [Miss Jane Marple]
The VIPs (International Hotel) (Asquith, 1963) [Duchess of Brighton]
Variety Club Awards For 1963 (BBCTV, 20/3/64) [incl. 3 min. speech by M.R.]
Murder Most Foul (Mrs McGinty's Dead) (Pollock, 1964) [Miss Jane Marple]
Murder Ahoy (Pollock, 1964) [Miss Jane Marple]
The Stately Ghosts of England (NBCTV docu., DeFelitta, 1964) [co-presenter]
Late Night Line-Up (BBCTV, 12/2/66) [interview (+ Stringer Davis) with Michael Dean]
Jackanory (BBCTV, Feb. 1966) [week reading Beatrix Potter stories]
The Alphabet Murders (The ABC Murders) (Tashlin, 1966) [Miss Jane Marple]

Chimes at Midnight (Campanades a Medianoche/Falstaff/Chronicles) (Welles, 1966)

[Mistress Quickly]

Investiture at Buckingham Palace (BBCTV news item, 7/2/67)

A Countess From Hong Kong (Chaplin, 1967) [Miss Gaulswallow]

The Wacky World of Mother Goose (Bass, 1967) [Mother Goose - voice/likeness]

Arabella (Ragazza del Charleston) (Bolognini, 1967) [Princess Ilaria]

Line-Up: Dame Sybil Thorndike (lecture on Ellen Terry) (BBCTV, 21/10/69) [shot of M.R. in audience]

Funeral (BBCTV news item, 25/5/72)

Memorial Service (BBCTV news item, 21/7/72)

Additional Filmography

Greenan, P. (prod.) *Think of England (for Close Up North)*, BBCTV, 19/10/00.

Frears, S. (dir.) *Typically British*, BBCTV, 2/9/95.

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