

Lance Comfort

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BRIAN MCFARLANE

Lance Comfort

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BRIAN MCFARLANE

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For Tom Ryan, with grateful thanks

also by Brian McFarlane

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CUP, 1992
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Australian Cinema 1970-1985, Seeker and Warburg, 1987

Words and Images: Australian Novels into Film, William Heinemann, 1983

Martin Boyd's 'Langton' Novels, Edward Arnold, 1980

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Series editors' foreword

The aim of this series is to present in lively, authoritative volumes a guide to those film-makers who have made British cinema a rewarding but still under-researched branch of world cinema. The intention is to provide books which are up-to-date in terms of information and critical approach, but not bound to any one theoretical methodology. Though all books in the series will have certain elements in common – comprehensive filmographies, annotated bibliographies, appropriate illustration – the actual critical tools employed will be the responsibility of the individual authors.

Nevertheless, an important recurring element will be a concern for how the oeuvre of each film-maker does or does not fit certain critical and industrial contexts, as well as for the wider social contexts, which helped to shape not just that particular film-maker but the course of British cinema at large.

Although the series is director-orientated, the editors believe that a variety of stances and contexts referred to is more likely to reconceptualise and reappraise the phenomenon of British cinema as a complex, shifting field of production. All the texts in the series will engage in detailed discussion of major works of the film-makers involved, but they all consider as well the importance of other key collaborators, of studio organisation, of audience reception, of recurring themes and structures: all those other aspects which go towards the construction of a national cinema.

The series will explore and chart a field which is more than ripe for serious excavation. The acknowledged leaders of the field will be reappraised; just as important though, will be the bringing to light of those who have not so far received any serious attention. They are all part of the very rich texture of British cinema, and it will be the work of this series to give them all their due.

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Melbourne, January 1999

Brian McFarlane

A place in the field

1

‘Why Lance Comfort?’ This was the question one of his collaborators asked during an interview conducted for this book. The answer is in several parts, but the first must be simply that I have always liked his films since seeing *Great Day* at the age of twelve and being struck by how different it was from the Hollywood films which were what usually - and enjoyably - came my way in rural Australia. It seemed fresh, sharp and truthful, in ways I wouldn’t have been able to articulate then; and it still does. This busy little film, about a village getting ready to welcome Mrs Roosevelt and putting aside but not getting rid of personal problems and animosities, is as good an introduction to Comfort’s work as any. His astute juggling of several concurrent plot strands, his prescient anticipation of postwar disaffection, the invoking of *film noir* techniques to articulate the dilemma of the tormented protagonist, and the willingness to risk his arm melodramatically: these, and other, qualities ensure that it is still a film well worth looking at fifty years later. They are the sorts of qualities one admires elsewhere in his work.

Lance Comfort had been in the film business for twenty years when, in 1946, he directed Margaret Lockwood in *Bedelia*. In that year, she was, for the first of three consecutive years, ‘overwhelmingly voted Britain’s best actress by the readers of the *Daily Mail* and in the same year ‘she replaced Greer Garson as Britain’s favourite female star’.¹ Any director taking on a Lockwood vehicle in 1946 was clearly one who had established his credentials sufficiently to be entrusted with the No. 1 box-office star of the day. By the time of his sadly early death twenty years later, at age fifty-eight,

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Comfort had been making 'B' films or second features, at best co-features, for fifteen years. It will be one of the functions of this book to consider some of the possible explanations for this seemingly disappointing career decline - *and* to insist that the films themselves have received inadequate notice, that the apparent decline is less to be located in his personal and professional capacities than in certain major changes in the contours of the British film industry.

Comfort is not the only director who enjoyed his greatest prestige in the 1940s and drifted into providing fodder for the bottom half of the double-bill in the ensuing decades, though it is at least arguable that he maintained a higher, more uniform level of achievement than such contemporaries as Arthur Crabtree, Leslie Arliss, Lawrence Huntington or Bernard Knowles. To refer briefly to Pierre Bourdieu's idea of the 'field of cultural production'² may suggest ways in which Comfort's predilections as individual artist, and British cinema (embracing production, exhibition, audience reception and critical discourse) as the site of his activity, helped to shape a career lasting four decades, two-and-a-half of these as a director. What follows is not remotely intended as a fully Bourdieu-based, primarily theoretical study of Comfort's films. I want simply to make use of certain of Bourdieu's key distinctions – concepts and terms – which have been hovering behind my thinking about the uneven course and achievements of Comfort's career. Before going further, I shall draw attention to, and make clear how I interpret, those which seem to me most helpful and to which this study will refer from time to time.

In particular, Bourdieu's concepts of *habitus* and *field*, and their interrelationship, work towards positing a more complex understanding of how cultural products are made and received. *Habitus*, tersely summarised by Bourdieu's editor as 'a notion of the agent' (that is, the agent as cultural producer),³ replaces the notion of *auteur*, the Romantic ideal of the artist as individual creator, with the concept of 'systems of dispositions ... realised only in relation to a determinate structure of positions'.⁴ These 'systems of dispositions' act through perceptions which respond to a 'sense of social directions which orients agents'.⁵ Bourdieu's interest is in French

literature and art, not at all in cinema, but the value of the concept of habitus in film study is that it releases us from the unproductive elitism of auteurist criticism. This latter has celebrated the individual film-maker as the author of his films at the expense of those other interacting elements - social, cultural, economic - which elaborate the idea of the agent as being more than an individual film-maker practising his art. In relation to cinema, the agent or habitus may not always refer to a director; it may equally be applied to a producer, or a studio, or a production company or to some combination of these, and this study will take such potential influences into account. Habitus has sometimes been described as 'a feel for the game' and summarised by Bourdieu as a system of 'durable, transposable dispositions'.⁶ The complementary concept of the field implies a context for such 'dispositions' to operate in. It is conceived of as being in a state of constant change, as a site of struggles for dominant 'positions' and is not to be confused with a purely sociological explanation of the workings of cultural production. Not all the elements of Bourdieu's theory of the latter relate neatly to film, which is so immensely more expensive to create than, say, literature or painting, and which is, though criticism has sought at various times to elevate the director, so obdurately a collaborative art. However, the idea of there being, at any given time, certain *dominant positions* in the field and, therefore, a concomitant range of *dominated* ones is easily recognisable in film, and particularly in British cinema during the period in which Lance Comfort was working. Whatever 'disposition' the 'agent' may evince, it will be to little avail if, for one or other reason, no congenial 'position' can be found in the field. I shall suggest that the 'positions' Comfort found for the exercise of his talents and the network of affiliations he had established would alter dramatically from the early 1950s on.

Habitus/field, disposition/position and dominant/dominated are all distinctions worth bearing in mind in examining Comfort's career. So are others such as those between *trajectory* and *strategy*, between *symbolic* and *economic* capital, between the *heteronomous* and the *autonomous* cultural producers, and those among several 'competing principles of legitimacy'.⁷ Whereas strategy 'results from unconscious

disposition towards practice',⁸ and has obvious connections with habitus, trajectory refers to the successive positions occupied by an agent in the field, at various times corresponding to dominant and dominated. Since it is unusual for a film-maker to remain in a fixed position in relation either to his fellows or to his audiences, this concept may be particularly useful. As to the kinds of 'capital' available to the cultural producer, in the production of such expensive 'goods' as film, 'the pursuit of economic profit, which treats the cultural goods business as a business like any other',⁹ must always be an issue. Films must find large audiences to ensure profitability and thereby to ensure continuity of product from the cultural producers. For the artist, another kind of reward is also important: what Bourdieu calls the 'accumulation of symbolic capital', which may involve becoming a recognised name. In the case of film the film-maker could achieve this by being the object of critical approval or attracting the commendation of one's peers. For a short time, as we shall see, Comfort seemed well placed for acquiring both sorts of 'capital', until he lost his privileged position in the field around 1950. He then became one of those heteronomous cultural producers 'who can offer the least resistance to external demands, of whatever sort',¹⁰ and can exercise the least control over their choice of subject or the scope of the enterprises open to them. These are distinct from the autonomous producers, who can call the shots with least regard to economic pressures or to those of popular taste, giving most nearly unfettered heed to their own proclivities, because they are the producers most welcome in the field at the time.

There is no wish on my part to impose, in grid-like fashion, a theoretical apparatus, designed specifically to account for cultural phenomena in other fields, on a field about which its author has expressed little interest. My aim is simply to make use of such concepts when they seem helpful in accounting for the sort of career trajectory mapped out near the start of this chapter. Lance Comfort clearly had the necessary 'disposition', in the sense of both a feeling for film-making, particularly for melodramatic film-making, and a background of technical know-how and of useful collaborators, acquired over the years 1925 to 1940 when he carried out a range of

functions in several dozen films. When he made a success in 1941 of *Hatter's Castle*, his second feature film as a director, he ought to have found a tenable position in the field of production as it was at the time. And so, up to a point, he did: for the next few years he was very busy, making several popular wartime films, but never quite acquiring the symbolic capital that, say, David Lean or Carol Reed did during the period. Their films both carried a more personal stamp and related clearly to the social and cultural climate of their time, attracting both critical cachet (symbolic capital) and widespread popular acceptance (economic capital) as well.

Partly as a result of the work of such directors as Lean and Reed, the critically approved strands of postwar British film-making were those of the prestige literary adaptation and of social realism, the latter often drawing on the techniques of the documentary movement which had first infiltrated fiction film-making during the war. Comfort did virtually no work in these modes that dominated the discourse, if not the production statistics, of the period. Also securing a great deal of economic, if very little symbolic, capital in the mid-1940s was a series of melodramas emanating from Gainsborough studios, beginning with *The Man in Grey* (1943) and providing escapism for war-weary film audiences. Since the 1980s, these films have been critically rehabilitated, for both their cinematic flair and their encoding, in period settings, of the social realities of their time, but in the 1940s one would have searched in vain for serious critical appraisal.

The dominant positions - in terms of either economic or symbolic capital - in the field of cultural production, as it obtained in British cinema in the 1940s, just managed to elude Comfort. His first melodrama, *Hatter's Castle*, came too early to catch the Gainsborough wave, and preceded a burst of much-praised work in the realist vein, described by Dilys Powell as 'the movement towards concentration on the native subject, the movement towards documentary truth in the fiction film.'¹¹ Realism was often construed as offering an honest reflection of the social reality, whereas, in the words of John Hill, 'Realism, no less than any other type of art, depends on conventions, conventions which, in this case, have successfully achieved the status of being accepted as "realistic".'¹² Comfort never did any sustained

work in the conventions that were approved as social realism - not that critics at the time would have written of such films in terms of conventions, but rather saw them as breaking with these. This is not the place for a full discussion of the shifting relations between realism and the British cinema. During the war and just after, it seemed (in Alan Lovell's words) to be 'most often articulated in terms of the cinema having a serious relationship with society',¹³ but later this belief 'was increasingly reduced to the exploration of topical subjects from within a conventional moral/social perspective.'¹⁴ Almost none of Comfort's work (for better and worse) corresponds to accounts such as these. On a simple level, the location shooting he often employed always seems to be there to contextualise or heighten the drama, rather than for its social significance, and his lack of interest in the realist enterprise may help to explain his critical neglect at the time.

During the war, Comfort ventured into historical drama, regional comedy and spy thrillers, but did not again attempt full-blooded melodrama during the period of Gainsborough's commercial ascendancy. When he did embark on a series of such films with *Bedelia* in 1946, the wave had broken, and other films in the melodramatic mode by other film-makers (Charles Frank's *Uncle Silas*, 1947, Lewis Allen's *So Evil My Love* and Marc Allegret's *Blanche Fury*, both 1948), all at least as accomplished as the Gainsborough films, failed to find critical or commercial favour. Further, Comfort's melodramas, including *Temptation Harbour* (1947), *Daughter of Darkness* (1948), *Silent Dust* (1949) and *Portrait of Clare* (1950), were all perhaps too sombre for popular taste. They were not reassuring films. They lacked, too, the sort of panache, deriving partly from costume design and art direction, partly from permutations on the personae of a stable of stars, of the Gainsborough films which exploited so successfully the shifting mores of the mid-1940s, especially in regard to the changing roles of women in the wartime world. His films certainly attracted some critical attention, but they were always at the outer edge of the realist and/or literary strains preferred by the taste-makers of the period. In the mid-1940s, melodrama was a critically unrewarded corner of the field of cultural

production. What is surprising is that more recent theoretical interest in melodrama (see discussion in [Chapter 5](#)), and British film melodrama in particular, has not seized on his films. A case can be made for seeing his as the most consistent body of work in the genre.

The field of cultural production is not of course governed purely by critical or audience reception, and in the case of cinema the conditions of film production, distribution and exhibition all play their influential roles. Unlike, say, Arthur Crabtree or Bernard Knowles, each responsible for several Gainsborough melodramas, or Ralph Thomas with Rank at Pinewood in the 1950s, Comfort seems never to have found for long a strongly supportive studio base or production company. Now when one thinks of the Gainsborough films, one recalls, at least as readily as the directors, the repertory of stars and character players, the costume design of Elizabeth Haffenden, the art direction of John Bryan or Andrew Mazzei, the music direction of Louis Levy, or producers such as Edward Black and R. J. Minney. With this sort of continuity involved in the making of a batch of films, the concept of habitus, the system of dispositions at work in cultural production, is plainly complex but also acquires a patina of recognisability which may be denied to the less firmly-based filmmaker. In his first ten years as a features director, Comfort made fourteen films for seven different companies, including four for RKO's British operation and four for British National. It may thus have been more difficult for him to build up the network of collaborators which buttressed the work of some directors of the period. According to Peter Miller who later wrote two screenplays for him, Comfort was offered a Hollywood contract following the popular success of *Squadron Leader X*, but, feeling himself committed to RKO, as well as having family ties in Britain, he turned it down and later felt he'd made a grave career error.¹⁵

The offer may be seen as acknowledgment of his disposition, of his 'feel for the game'. Certainly, many of those who worked with him felt that he was not ruthless enough to capitalise on the position he had acquired. Among the many actors and other collaborators who talked to me about working with him, there was acknowledgement of his professionalism and his technical expertise, alongside a universally

expressed sense of his being an unusually affable, gentle-mannered man in an industry in which such characteristics were not notably common and in which a streak of ruthlessness might have served him better. Biographical reasons will scarcely influence one's evaluation of the films - no one in the end cares whether a film was shot on schedule or under budget or whether the director was a nice man - they may, however, help to account for a particular film-making trajectory. As a director, whether he was making 'A' films in the 1940s or co-features in the 1950s and 1960s, he seems to have given actors plenty of room to move. He 'was absolutely unpretentious ... he was very gentle; he encouraged you to try things', recalled actor William Franklyn.¹⁶ 'He never raised his voice', recalled Roy Baird,¹⁷ assistant director on several of his films. Greta Gynt said that 'He talked to actors in a very gentle way'.¹⁸ It is not, either, as if he was working with nondescript actors: there were flamboyant players like Robert Newton, Eric Portman and Robert Shaw, and exotics like Simone Simon and Siobhan McKenna, and there is a striking number who worked for him on several occasions, which may be some kind of testimony to his demeanour as a director. As well, editors such as John Trumper and Peter Pitt, who each cut several of his co-features, continuity person Elaine Schreyeck, who worked on three of Comfort's key films of the 1940s, and screenwriter Lyn Fairhurst, who wrote several of his last films, all testified to the efficiency and harmony of his working arrangements.

These admirable qualities were not, however, enough to secure the place in the industry hierarchy, the position in the cultural field of British cinema, to which his undoubted success with *Hatter's Castle* would seem to have pointed. He made other excellent 'A' films in the 1940s, which, as suggested above, may have missed the most propitious timing, and which have rarely, if ever, had the attention they deserve. When he went into 'B' films and co-features (the latter may be distinguished by, say, budget, length, or stars, as Robert S. Baker has pointed out),¹⁹ he was not necessarily doing less effective work, but he was now working in that corner of the field of production least likely to bring him any symbolic -or even much economic - capital. As to the former, his work was unlikely to be

noticed outside the trade papers or the *Monthly Film Bulletin*, which was chronically patronising about such films, and was virtually never reviewed in the newspapers that might have kept a film-maker's name to the fore. The 'B' movie was made cheaply to provide the supporting film in the days when a double-bill was the standard exhibition pattern. Such films were made fast (about three weeks at most) in the expectation of modest profit and critical neglect. Unlike their American counterparts, they have never had a cult following, but, as I wrote in 1996, 'there are British Bs worthy of anyone's attention, both for their intrinsic merits and for what they suggest about the nature of the industry and the society that gave rise to them'.²⁰ Lance Comfort made several of the best of these, including such titles as *Tomorrow at Ten* (1962) and *Touch of Death* (1963).

In the mid-1950s, the field threw up another even less regarded arena in which Comfort also found himself busy. This was the television playlet, which he and his contemporaries (Huntington, Arliss, Crabtree and Knowles) churned out indefatigably. Comfort either produced or directed about seventy half-hour dramas for *Douglas Fairbanks Presents*, made for American television. These were also shown on British television, and, in a few cases, by cobbling together two or three and linking them with a commentary, screened theatrically as the supporting programme on a double-bill. When the latter happened, the resulting 'films' (for example, *The Triangle*, 1953) would be routinely noted in fan and trade journals, but nowhere else. The only sustained account of the Fairbanks enterprise at Elstree stresses the speed and budget of these half-hour dramas: 'The films ... had a five-day shooting schedule. Each Friday, in preparation for Monday's shoot, there would be a script read-through with the director and artistes ... The cost of the films was between £7,500 and £8,500 each, and the directors were paid around £175 per episode.'²¹ This account goes on to say that 'Many directors were used, some of the best films being directed by Lance Comfort and Lawrence Huntington, though the latter became less popular as production costs rose.'²² These are very rigorous film-making conditions, akin to those that prevailed in the making of 'B' films for the cinema, but with at least the freshness of comparative novelty about the procedures. Comfort also directed or co-directed seven

episodes of *Ivanhoe* for Sydney Box Productions (ITV, 1958-59), ten episodes of *The Gay Cavalier* for George King Productions (ITV, 1957), and was one of the three regular directors on *Martin Kane Investigator* (ITV, 1957-58).²³ In addition, he directed or produced episodes for *Crown Theatre* in 1956 and for *Assignment Foreign Legion* in 1956-57. He was finding plenty of work in a developing if not yet highly regarded nook of the field of cultural production, and so were several of those contemporaries already referred to. *Sight and Sound* wrote of Comfort, in a round-up of British directors in 1958, 'Like other directors, he has recently turned to television; and like others he has had difficulty in sustaining the vigour of his early films through a good deal of unrewarding material.'²⁴ True enough in general, but this study will suggest that even with 'unrewarding material', he *did* sustain a good deal of his early vigour.

Genre film-making has not usually been seen as central to the creation of British national cinema. A recent commentator has written that 'The 1940s are characterised by an intensification of debates around national culture and the demand for a quality indigenous cinema that would represent the British character and ideals to both foreign and domestic audiences.'²⁵ No more so than melodrama in particular was genre at large seen to have a role in the construction of a 'quality indigenous cinema', unless it acquired a consecration by virtue of its roots in a certain level of literature (say, *Brighton Rock*) or theatre (*Brief Encounter*, for example) or with an approved realism in its narrational mode (as in *It Always Rains On Sunday* or, even more notably, *The Third Man*, with its panoply of famous credentials, or some of the Ealing comedies). Only by evincing such affiliations was the genre film likely to fall within 'the idea of the "quality film" they [the critics] were constituting ... Crucially, the 'quality' film was something that they passionately hoped the wide public would come to recognise and appreciate.'²⁶ In recent times, there has been more attention given to the kinds of genre film-making which, as a quick flick through Denis Gifford's *The British Film Catalogue 1895-1970* or David Quinlan's *British Sound Films: The Studio Years 1928-1959*²⁷ will verify, clearly outnumber the exemplars of 'quality' filmmaking. Marcia Landy's ground-breaking study of British film genres²⁸ offers a

different way of considering and categorising British cinema. Virtually all Comfort's work falls within clearly defined genre limits, most of it melodrama of various kinds, including family/sexual inflections of the mode, many thrillers, including espionage, kidnapping, wartime and heist varieties, a few regional comedies and musicals. There is the odd film which is harder to classify, such as the strange little drama of postwar malaise and childhood fantasy, *Bang! You're Dead* (1953), but it can't be said that he ever produced a major work *sui generis*. This study is not making claims for remarkable originality - by coincidence, the general release of *Hatter's Castle* in Britain occurred in the same week (2 February 1942) as another study in megalomania, Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane*, and there is an obvious contrast between the genre director (working the genre for all it is worth) and the one-off creator staking out his own dominant position in the field in one superlatively daring stroke.

It may well be a priority for those assessing the work of the field (and, in this function, constituting *part* of the field) to recognise and applaud originality of achievement, but, in relation especially to a popular art form, it should be equally ready to value - and evaluate - what is being done within more conventional parameters. If Lance Comfort's oeuvre is examined in the context of what British cinema had to offer in the period of his productivity, as distinct from what was - more narrowly - sanctioned by contemporary taste-makers, it may be possible to arrive at a juster appraisal. It is not the function of this study to adopt the auteurist's stance of looking for nuggets in every lump of quartz. To see how he dealt with what came his way (or what he sought out); to understand why a career which seemed to show every sign of commanding a respected place in the field should have been derailed into the field's more obscure corners; and to see what there is to value in this context: this seems a potentially more useful approach. My own views on the films discussed will of course emerge, but that is not my primary aim. Instead, it seems more interesting to see how the films came to be as they were, how they were presented to and received by the public and the critics. If the book throws light on such matters, a light which might reflect on to similar career trajectories of the period, it will have fulfilled my intentions.