

**BFI FILM**

**CLASSICS**



# THE NIGHT OF THE HUNTER

.....  
*Simon Callow*





## BFI FILM CLASSICS

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Cinema is a fragile medium. Many of the great films now exist, if at all, in damaged or incomplete prints. Concerned about the deterioration in the physical state of our film heritage, the National Film and Television Archive, part of the British Film Institute's Collections Department, has compiled a list of 360 key works in the history of the cinema. The long-term goal of the Archive is to build a collection of perfect showprints of these films, which will then be screened regularly at the National Film Theatre in London in a year-round repertory.

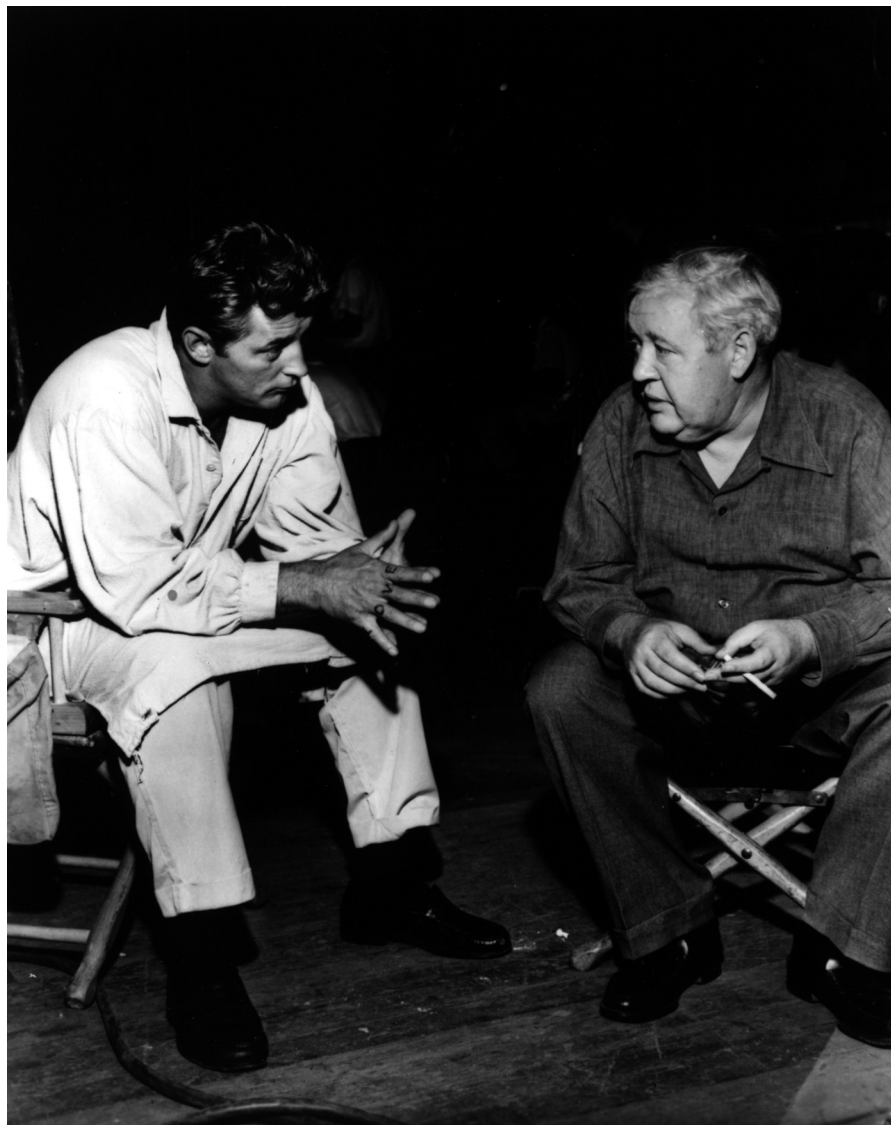
BFI Film Classics is a series of books intended to introduce, interpret and honour these 360 films. Critics, scholars, novelists and those distinguished in the arts have been invited to write on a film of their choice, drawn from the Archive's list. The numerous illustrations have been made specially from the Archive's own prints.

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*This book is for Daniel Kramer, another visionary, with love*

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## INTRODUCTION

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Of all the collaborative arts, film is the most complex, owing the most to the greatest number of people, a river into which many streams flow. *The Night of the Hunter* is a supreme example of this confluence. Charles Laughton put his stamp on his first film in a way that it is given to few directors to do. But, as he would have been the first to acknowledge, in the beginning was the word.

In 1953, Davis Grubb, a thirty-five-year-old advertising man from Moundsville, West Virginia, was about to publish his first novel. Paul Gregory, a pushy young manager who had recently started up a company with Laughton, was tipped off that it might be lively material for a film. He was searching for something for Laughton to direct on the screen. As soon as he read the galleys, he knew he was onto a winner. If Laughton had had any doubts about wanting to direct on film, they were dissolved the moment he read *The Night of the Hunter*. He called Grubb as soon as he'd turned the last page and he said to him, 'Man, who are your masters?'

This reaction was of the essence of the man, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that it was of the essence of the artist. Laughton was



that rare thing, an actor who was also an artist. By 1954 he had already given the world a number of indelible creations, performances of such fullness and audacity that they rightfully take their place with creations of other artists, the great writers, the great painters, the great choreographers. He approached his work as a painter might, observing keenly, then submitting his observations to the crucible of his imagination. Transcending mere verisimilitude, the results were more in the way of archetypes – myths through which we can interpret our own reality. To speak of acting in this way makes many people uncomfortable – not least some very good actors – but it is unavoidable in a discussion of Charles Laughton the director, because this is who he was, and this is why his film is what it is. Mindful of the derision with which the utterances of actors are greeted in the Anglo-Saxon countries, Laughton rarely laid his cards on the table; in the mid-50s however he cast caution to the winds and issued the following remarks as part of a publicity hand-out.

Every actor worth his salt must create the character he plays out of his mind, his perceptions, his experience – otherwise he's not an actor at all. Great acting is like painting. In the great masters of fine art one can see and recognise the small gesture of a finger, the turn of a head, the vitriolic stare, the glazed eye, the pompous mouth, the back bending under a fearful load. In every swerve and stroke of a painter's brush, there is an abundance of life. Great artists reveal the god in man; and every character an actor plays must be this sort of creation. Not imitation – that is merely caricature – and any fool can be a mimic! But creation is a secret. The better – the truer – the creation, the more it will resemble a great painter's immortal work.

Latterly, Laughton had seemed to forsake this ideal in his acting (though it could emerge unannounced at any time), lending his authority and powerful presence to a series of lack-lustre roles it seems he simply could not be bothered to alchemise, as he would say, into creations. Instead, he put his creative energies elsewhere, into his reading tours of America, introducing vast, mainly young, audiences to the idea of the continuity of culture. The readings ranged from the Bible to Plato, Shakespeare to Shaw, ending in a great flourish with the Kerouac of *Dharma Bums*. 'So you see, Ladies and Gentlemen, the Spirit goes *on!*' What he was doing, indirectly, was teaching. And the activity that was closest to his heart at this time was teaching acting. At his house in Curson Avenue in Los Angeles he held classes, sometimes with Charlie Chaplin as guest teacher, for young