

***Producing Outside the Box: Betty E. Box and Post-War British cinema***

© John D. Ayres

On the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> April 2011, the University of the West of England at Bristol will host a conference entitled *Accounting for Creativity – British Producers, British Screens: Reassessing the Creative Role of the Producer* that will focus largely on British film producers of the last century. Of the eighteen papers included in the programme (including my own effort on Sir Michael Balcon), only one will directly address the contribution of women producers to the history of our indigenous industry. Given the revisionist slant of much scholarly work within film studies, the lack of consideration shown to the work of British women off-screen seems somewhat curious, if not regressive.

Whilst admittedly the limited number of significant industry figures compared with their more voluminous male counterparts may be presented as a legitimate reason, it seems all the more important therefore to foreground those individuals who have succeeded in emerging as persons of note. This is even more pressing in the cases of female directors, screenwriters and producers of decades past, the modern relevancy of whose work is often questioned at best, and ignored at worst.

One such figure of the now increasingly distant past whose sustained success makes her worthy of reappraisal is Betty E. Box, who throughout the post-Second World War period in Great Britain succeeded in bringing to fruition (in her partnership with director Ralph Thomas) a programme of films that were to place British masculinity in particular under a microscope, and which in the context of an often backward-looking

industry, served to update the image of stiff upper lips that has prevailed as a lasting and recognised stereotype of the period.

This paper has found its genesis in a chapter by Justine Ashby entitled 'The Lady in Charge' in her co-edited collection (with Andrew Higson) *British Cinema, Past and Present* (2000). Ashby prefaces the majority of her discussion with a quote from actor James Mason in which he said of Box:

'She sailed with her tide and became the most sensible and hard-working producer in the British industry, where she remained one of its few survivors' (2000: 167).

There is much to admire in the intent and execution of Ashby's chapter, and she is correct to postulate as to the fact that it is the very populist nature of Box's work that has resulted in her lack of scholarly currency (though it must be noted that populist success has never stymied the steady flow of work on an individual such as Michael Balcon). Where I wish to depart from, and I hope further, Ashby's explorative work is in her limiting characterisation of Box's lack of artistic and creative ambition, of which she says:

'While Box did not consider herself a 'serious' film-maker, there was little irony about the way in which she set out to make a stream of box-office hits. After all, it was on the strength of this ability to make popular British films that Box sustained her extraordinary career, and it should be on those terms that she secures a place in histories of British cinema' (2000: 177).

Whilst I would not dispute that for Betty Box financial considerations were paramount to her output and longevity as a producer, I believe that there is room for a more inclusive appraisal of her work that places textual analysis at its very heart. In order to facilitate this I will tie Box's work as producer to the on-screen work of her most prolific leading man.

Arguably the most rewarding association, other than that which Betty Box shared with director Ralph Thomas, was with the individual who credited the pair with giving him a career, namely actor Dirk Bogarde. By the time the trio's first and most successful project, 1954's *Doctor in the House*, came into being Bogarde had already fallen into the syndrome of many young actors on contract at the Rank Organisation, that of typecasting. As Bogarde later said:

'There is no question in my mind whatsoever that if they had not taken this courageous stand I should never have had a career in the cinema at all. It was the absolute turning point, and by their action they secured me in my profession, a debt that is impossible to repay' (quoted in Morley, 1996: 51-52).

Across a number of films during the immediate post-war years, Bogarde came to embody youth delinquency and a new breed of insolent criminality in projects such as *The Sleeping Tiger* (Hanbury, 1954), *Hunted* (Crichton, 1952) and most famously of all, Ealing's box-office smash *The Blue Lamp* (Dearden, 1950). Bogarde's highly eroticised portrayal of Tom Riley in the latter earned him 7<sup>th</sup> place in that year's *Picturegoer* fan poll, and what he saw as a frustrating lack of interesting roles in the future.

It was within this context of frustrated ambitions that Bogarde was identified by Box as the man to embody the new, emotionally insecure man of the 1950s, whose comic potential came from his trail and error approach to life and love. Box's selection of Bogarde was a brave decision as it clashed with the assessment of the Rank Organisation executive producer Earl St. John, of whom Sue Harper and Vincent Porter have said:

'In his view, English actors tended to be too short and too lightweight, bordering on the effeminate. He considered that Dirk Bogarde's head and trunk were too small, that his legs were too long, and that there was something wrong with his neck. Moreover, he was totally the wrong person to star in *Doctor in the House*' (2003: 36).

Box disagreed, casting Bogarde in the film that would provide his individual star breakthrough. Yet, for all the characterisations of Simon Sparrow as Bogarde's first romantic role, it seems to have been as much his ability to subvert such a stock character type that interested the producer. The actor provides the narrative counterpoint to the often sexually aggressive and brash figures of Donald Sinden and Kenneth More (fresh from his own triumph in the Oscar-nominated *Genevieve* [Cornelius, 1953]), with Bogarde's complex and uncomfortable playing of the romantic hero serving to problematise the stereotypes of traditional masculinity that were re-emerging in the wave of retrospective war films that kept the British film industry financially afloat during the first post-war decade.

Despite what might be deemed an over-reliance on Bogarde as the leading man in the films she produced, the Betty Box archive at the British Film Institute reveals that on at least two occasions she saw the potential for very different embodiments of the central

male protagonist. The first was for the 1957 Ralph Thomas film *Campbell's Kingdom*, an action romp set in the Canadian Rockies. Bogarde plays Bruce Campbell, grandson of the recently deceased 'King' Campbell, an oil prospector accused of swindling a town out of investment money for a drilling project. Campbell takes on the local business heavyweight and his strong-arm man Owen Morgan (Stanley Baker), attempting to complete his grandfather's vision by discovering oil whilst simultaneously clearing his besmirched name. The film's narrative contains a split between more recognisably masculine themes and some that draw those embodiments into question, and it was the former of which that Box seemed initially to tend towards, evidenced by her contact with James Mason about taking the role.

Mason was a longstanding box-office draw, known most famously for his highly eroticised performances in Gainsborough melodramas of the 1940s and his more challenging roles of pressurised masculinity in films such as Carol Reed's *Odd Man Out* (1947). The urbanity and intelligence of Mason's on-screen persona may well have clashed successfully with the exaggerated, aggressive masculinity of Stanley's Baker's henchmen, but it was not to be. In a letter from Mason to Betty Box the actor explained that:

'I have read *Campbell's Kingdom* and enjoyed it very much. It is a true adventure story in the best sense, & most intriguing. However I am not the man for you because we have made up our minds to do everything ourselves from now on, so that I can slide gracefully out of acting for a livelihood...'<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> From file BEB/22 in British Film Institute Special Collections.

Though *The Blue Lamp* confirmed Bogarde's ability to convey overt eroticism and masculine aggression, the box-office success of *Doctor in the House* and the subsequent neutering of these qualities made his eventual casting a decision that emphasised the suffering of his supposedly terminally-ill character, with the film's Deus ex machina ending providing an opening for a not altogether convincing heterosexual union for Campbell.

Though lacking in thematic ambition, *Campbell's Kingdom* did signal a greater desire on Box's part to increase the scale upon which her directing partner could expand his dependable, if uninspired, talent. Their next project together was to illustrate Box's growing confidence as a producer, though the film was in fact scheduled to be made several years before and by a different filmmaker and star combination altogether. *The Wind Cannot Read* (Thomas, 1958), based on the eponymous novel by Richard Mason, had been shepherded to the brink of production by future Oscar-winning director David Lean, who envisaged Dirk Bogarde's *Doctor in the House* co-star Kenneth More in the lead role of a British R.A.F. officer falling in love with a Japanese interpreter. More, conscious of his boisterous on-screen persona, invoked his earlier project with Box as a stumbling block to his taking the role. As he said in his second autobiography:

'I explained my doubts to (Alexander) Korda. The public had just seen me as a beer-swilling, back-slapping extrovert in *Genevieve*, then as another beer-swilling extrovert medical student in *Doctor in the House*. How could they possibly now accept me as a sensitive young pilot...who had fallen in love with a Japanese girl? Impossible' (1978: 271).

Though More's appraisal of his role in *Doctor in the House* perhaps ignores, as Andrew Spicer has pointed out, the maturing evolution the film offered for his raffish and brusque screen persona (1997: 149-150), his refusal of the role in *The Wind Cannot Read* led to the part passing to Dirk Bogarde, and the film into the hands of Ralph Thomas and Betty Box.

Box decided to emulate David Lean's original intent, with the film being the first British project for over 20 years to be filmed on location in India.<sup>2</sup> In the context of the Suez Crisis of only two years prior, the international nature of the narrative and Bogarde's return to a more comfortable, recognisably romantic mould were not in themselves guarantors of a more confident projection of the British character abroad, and in fact can be seen alongside films such as J. Lee Thompson's 1959 action adventure *North West Frontier* (incidentally starring Kenneth More) as an attempt to reconfigure and problematise British national identity on a more international platform than many films of the immediately preceding years had achieved.

Box's increasing interest in this kind of material and its authentic realisation on screen through location shooting was to be sustained well into the 1960s with her last major project with Dirk Bogarde, the espionage caper *Hot Enough for June* (Thomas, 1964). The film follows the increasingly ludicrous adventures of reluctant spy Nicholas Whistler and his romantic travails with Czech agent Vlasta Simoneva (Sylva Koscina). The producer had hoped to film the picture initially in Prague, even going so far as to comparatively deputise Carol Reed's *The Third Man* (1949) into a letter of the 29<sup>th</sup> February 1960 to a Czechoslovakian government attaché, where she inquires about the

---

<sup>2</sup> From file BEB/26/1 in British Film Institute Special Collections.

possibility of obtaining government permission to film exteriors in the country.<sup>3</sup> That Box was ultimately rebuffed in her attempts to bring the production to Prague does not diminish the reality of her intent, nor her belief that British productions should have been striking out into European location shooting wherever appropriate.

Box's creative ambition for the film did not stop at where it would be shot but also who would appear in it. As originally envisaged, the role of Nicholas Whistler would have gone to actor Tom Courtenay, who at the time was coming off his recent successes in Tony Richardson's *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1962) and John Schlesinger's *Billy Liar* (1963). As Box said in her letter to Courtenay of 20<sup>th</sup> August 1963:

'We (Box and Ralph Thomas) saw you play Billy on the stage, and have admired the other things we've seen you do, and we had hoped to be in a position to discuss *Hot Enough for June* with you. I expect that Dennis Moore has explained the situation to you and explained why we are not able to do this...'<sup>4</sup>

The substitution of Bogarde for Courtenay may seem at first to be a regressive step on Box's part, considering the firm association between Courtenay and the already established British New Wave films that had emerged around the turn of the decade. Yet, despite often being discussed in the same context as actors such as Albert Finney and Richard Harris, both of whom projected a more aggressive incarnation of masculinity than many actors of the 1950s, Courtenay was actually closer to the Bogarde mould of thoughtful, insecure men that the latter had specialised in since his role in *Doctor in the*

---

<sup>3</sup> From file BEB/33 in British Film Institute Special Collections.

<sup>4</sup> From file BEB/33 in British Film Institute Special Collections.

*House*, and as a result the casting was probably not as significant a change as it might have been.

The out-of-depth quality that Bogarde communicates throughout the film can be seen, much like *The Wind Cannot Read*, as a wider textual commentary on Britain's post-Suez position in the world. In the wake of 1956's failed attempt to intervene in Egypt, and the subsequent resignation of Prime Minister Anthony Eden, Britain's position as an influential international power had been somewhat diminished. Bogarde's lack of decisive resolution in the film is demanded by his role as Nicholas Whistler, yet the prolific consistency of his gestural routine of confusion and uncertainty could be seen to speak more generally to the new uncertainty that surrounded British involvement abroad, and in the case of this narrative, Eastern Europe, where the newly created 'Iron Curtain' had drawn a geographical and ideological dividing line between America and the U.S.S.R.

In conclusion, I believe that the often undefined, somewhat mysterious role of producers in the projects they bring to fruition can be better illuminated through the exploration of close working relationships, particularly with on-screen talent whose contribution can be textually deconstructed. In the case of Betty Box in particular, there is scope for the furthering of such an endeavour in her collaborations with both Dirk Bogarde, who has formed the centrepiece of this paper, and Kenneth More, of whom I have only been able to make passing reference to today. Box's most significant contribution to post-war cinema was to consistently, and across a number of different films, bring work to the screen that began to reconfigure a British masculinity that was already under renegotiation in the wake of the Second World War, and in her association

with Bogarde I believe she cultivated a number of selected performances that can be seen as a rudimentary precursor to the ‘Angry Young Man’ cycle which emerged towards the latter half of the 1950s. A combination of archival research and textual analysis has revealed a greater creative ambition than Betty Box has ever been credited with previously, and it is my hope that such work on her, and many other female practitioners in the history of British cinema, will begin to redress the gender imbalance that still exists in scholarship on our indigenous industry.

(My appreciation goes to the British Film Institute’s Special Collections service, whose materials made this paper possible).

### **Bibliography**

Ashby, Justine, ‘Betty Box, ‘the lady in charge’: negotiating space for a female producer in postwar cinema’, in Ashby, Justine; and Andrew Higson (eds.), *British Cinema, Past and Present*, (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 166-178.

Harper, Sue; and Vincent Porter, *British Cinema of the 1950s: The Decline of Deference*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

More, Kenneth, *More or Less*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1978).

Morley, Sheridan, *Dirk Bogarde: Rank Outsider*, (London: Bloomsburg, 1996).

Spicer, Andrew, ‘Male Stars, Masculinity and British Cinema 1945-1960’, in Murphy, Robert (ed.), *The British Cinema Book*, (London: BFI Publishing, 1997), pp. 144-153.

### **Film Bibliography**

*Billy Liar* (Schlesinger, 1963)

*The Blue Lamp* (Dearden, 1950)

*Campbell’s Kingdom* (Thomas, 1957)

*Doctor in the House* (Thomas, 1954)  
*Genevieve* (Cornelius, 1953)  
*Hot Enough for June* (Thomas, 1964)  
*Hunted* (Crichton, 1952)  
*The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (Richardson, 1962)  
*North West Frontier* (Thompson, 1959)  
*Odd Man Out* (Reed, 1947)  
*The Sleeping Tiger* (Hanbury, 1954)  
*The Third Man* (Reed, 1949)  
*The Wind Cannot Read* (Thomas, 1958)