

GIRLS LIKE US: BRITISH WOMEN AND WWII CINEMA



BFI Southbank, 14 April – 31 May

Thursday 16 March, London

Running from **Friday 14 April – Wednesday 31 May** BFI Southbank's *Girls Like Us* season will be an opportunity for audiences to see women shine in front of, and behind the camera, in some of the great British gems of WWII cinema such as *Millions Like Us* (Sidney Gilliat, Frank Launder, 1943), *Went the Day Well?* (Alberto Cavalcanti, 1942) and *In Which We Serve* (Noël Coward, David Lean, 1942), as well as unique wartime propaganda shorts. WWII Britain gave fertile inspiration to emergent women writers, producers and stars, and resulted in some astonishing propaganda movies which merged stark reality with fiction and fantasy, many with a female bias. *Girls Like Us* coincides with the release of **Lone Scherfig's** witty and shrewdly observed film *Their Finest* (2016), starring Gemma Arterton and Bill Nighy, which has been influenced by a number of the films in the season and is produced by the season curator **Stephen Woolley**. Ahead of the season the cast and crew of *Their Finest* will attend a special presentation of the film at **BFI Southbank on Wednesday 12 April**; this will be followed by an extended run at BFI Southbank from **Friday 21 April** when the film is released in cinemas across the UK.

Special events taking place during the season will include an introductory talk from **Stephen Woolley** on **Tuesday 18 April**; a richly illustrated presentation on the propaganda messages behind the films on **Thursday 4 May**; an event to shine a light on the wartime contribution of female directors on **Monday 15 May**; and a talk about *Their Finest* with **Lissa Evans** - who wrote the novel on which the film is based, and screenwriter **Gaby Chiappe** on **Tuesday 16 May**.

The Ministry of Information (MOI) had a big hand in shaping 1940s British cinema, it was firmly stressed that in order to sell their 'propaganda' to women, their lives needed to be reflected honestly, authentically and entertainingly. Filmmakers such as **Carol Reed, Powell and Pressburger, Anthony Asquith** and **David Lean** created works that embraced a conflicted society where the class

system was in flux and the male-female divide was increasingly blurred by women shouldering the burden of what was once perceived as a man's world. The success of British propaganda cinema and its emphasis on female lead stories meant that in 1946, the stars of Margaret Lockwood, Anna Neagle and Deborah Kerr shone as brightly as the likes of Ingrid Bergman and Bette Davis, who previously dominated the popularity polls.

Films screening during this six week long season will include ***Went the Day Well?*** (Alberto Cavalcanti, 1942), a unique WWII Ealing film which shows women taking on a German invasion and co-written by Diana Morgan. Diana Morgan was also an uncredited co-writer on ***The Foreman Went to France*** (Charles Frend, 1942), a prime example of Ealing's dramatisation of the 'people's war' and the strength of ordinary folk; it will play alongside ***Channel Incident*** (Anthony Asquith, 1940) in which a woman decides to join the flotilla of boats rescuing soldiers in Dunkirk, one of the inspirations behind Lissa Evans' *Their Finest Hour and a Half*. An unlikely UK box-office smash in 1943, ***The Gentle Sex*** (Leslie Howard, Maurice Elvey) celebrates the joys of the ATS and was inspired by the need to reassure the public that the organisation was a suitable environment for women of all backgrounds, and not a hotbed of sexual promiscuity.

Three Powell and Pressburger films will screen during the season, each of which embraced the MOI ethos of highlighting new roles for women (and therefore female actors). ***One of Our Aircraft Is Missing*** (1942), is an adventure thriller which traces the journey of a bomber crew trapped in Nazi-controlled Holland, whose escape is made possible by the underground people's network controlled and run mainly by women, while ***A Canterbury Tale*** (1944) focuses on a Land Girl's friendship with an American Soldier and ***The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp*** (1943) features Deborah Kerr as a ATS officer's driver. Frequent collaborator with Powell and Pressburger, Anton Walbrook starred alongside Sally Gray in the hugely successful wartime romance ***Dangerous Moonlight*** (Brian Desmond Hurst, 1941) which was filmed during the Blitz at Denham Film Studios, which was itself caught in the onslaught.

Based on a play by Clemence Dane (who also co-wrote the screenplay), Alexandra Korda's ***Perfect Strangers*** (1945), made towards the end of the war with victory in sight, reveals the transformative powers of conscription. Playing alongside *Perfect Strangers* will be ***A Letter from Home*** (Carol Reed, 1941) featuring the first screen role by Celia Johnson; made exclusively for a US (female) audience, Johnson dramatises London life in the Blitz in a letter to her estranged children in NY. ***Millions Like Us*** (Sidney Gilliat, Frank Launder, 1943) is the story of a young Londoner sent to an arms factory in the Midlands, where she encounters a supportive world of women from across the class system; a brilliantly heart-warming and heart-breaking film, which points out the absurdities and hilarities of wartime austerity. *Millions Like Us* will be preceded by a short documentary about a shift of all-female munitions factory workers ***Night Shift*** (Jack Chambers, 1942), as well as ***A Call For Arms!*** (Brian Desmond Hurst, 1940), a MOI short that disastrously mis-portrays the factory floor and features in the film *Their Finest*.

Piccadilly Incident (Herbert Wilcox, 1946) starts as a light-hearted comedy about a couple who meet during a blackout in London's (then) notorious Piccadilly, but evolves into melodramatic Douglas Sirk territory. ***Unpublished Story*** (Harold French, 1942) is an unusual mix of screwball comedy, conspiracy thriller and battle-of-the-sexes, which boasts an excellent depiction of life in the London blitz and blackout regime. Writer-director Frank Launder originally sent the idea for ***Two Thousand Women*** (1944) – based on the true story of a female internment camp at Vittel, France – to Hitchcock, but then decided to make a more comedic version himself, resulting in sections of the film playing like a precursor to the director's later *St Trinian's* satires. ***Demi Paradise*** (Anthony Asquith, 1943) is a thinly disguised propaganda film to promote better relations with the Soviets, that is also a genuinely funny romantic comedy, and ***In Which We Serve*** (1942) sees directors Noël Coward, and David Lean

reinforce the status quo in a celebration of the British class starring Celia Johnson in her feature debut.

Anna Neagle is extremely convincing as a Mitford-style Nazi sympathiser who migrates to Canada in **Yellow Canary** (Herbert Wilcox, 1943) while **English Without Tears** (Harold French, 1944) stars Penelope Dudley-Ward as a vivacious modern wartime 'lady' who, in joining the ATS, finds herself in opposition to her ex-servant and paramour. The only 1940s British feature about the filmmaking process, **Thursday's Child** (Rodney Ackland, 1943) stars successful 13-year-old ingénue Sally Ann Howes and is a personal essay by the writer-director on the cynical methods the film industry used to exploit young star-struck women. Based on a story by Dorothy Hope and scripted by Katherine Strueby, the US title, *At Dawn We Die*, is a more apt description of **Tomorrow We Live** (George King, 1943), an exciting tale of secret agent espionage and French resistance.

The writing team of Dorothy Hope and Katherine Strueby combined with director George King to tell the story of a British agent and an American sculptor who combine to outwit the Nazis in **Candlelight in Algeria** (1944) while **The Way to the Stars** (Anthony Asquith, 1945) brings to the fore the fatality of British and American pilots in a taut and darkly amusing drama. Reuniting *The Lady Vanishes* (1938) team of Margaret Lockwood and writers Frank Launder and Sidney Gilliat and their creations, the bumbling Charters and Caldicott, the thrilling **Night Train To Munich** (Carol Reed with Margaret Lockwood, 1940) made a big impact in America, where Gordon Wellesley's original story was nominated for an Oscar.

The season aligns with the BFI's new strategy BFI 2022 which commits to drive forward the BFI's Diversity Standards to support greater diversity in the film industry and inform its funding decision making and year-round programming which celebrate the representation of women.

In partnership with:



- ENDS -

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SEASON LISTINGS can be found on the BFI website:

<http://www.bfi.org.uk/sites/bfi.org.uk/files/downloads/bfi-press-release-girls-like-us-seasons-listings-2017-03-16.pdf>

The BFI's regular monthly strand of events, *Woman with a Movie Camera*, continues and upcoming events include a 25th Anniversary Screening of **Gas Food Lodging** (1992) with director **Allison Anders** in attendance and a live recording of acclaimed podcast **CTRL ALT DEL**, hosted by **Emma Gannon**, with guest director **Alice Lowe** (*Prevenge, Sightseers*).

About the BFI

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- Preserving and restoring the most significant film collection in the world for today and future generations
- Championing emerging and world class film makers in the UK - investing in creative, distinctive and entertaining work
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- Growing the next generation of film makers and audiences

The BFI is a Government arm's-length body and distributor of Lottery funds for film. The BFI serves a public role which covers the cultural, creative and economic aspects of film in the UK. It delivers this role:

- As the UK-wide organisation for film, a charity core funded by Government
- By providing Lottery and Government funds for film across the UK
- By working with partners to advance the position of film in the UK.

Founded in 1933, the BFI is a registered charity governed by Royal Charter.

The BFI Board of Governors is chaired by Josh Berger CBE.

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Young people aged 25 and under can buy last minute tickets for just £3, 45 minutes before the start of screenings and events, subject to availability - <http://www.bfi.org.uk/25-and-under>.

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There's more to discover about film and television through the BFI. Our world-renowned archival collections, cinemas, festivals, films, publications and learning resources are here to inspire you.

***** PICTURE DESK *****

A selection of images for journalistic use in promoting BFI Southbank screenings can be found at www.image.net under BFI / BFI Southbank / 2017 / April