

## **The Lavender Hill Mob (1951) Crichton**

P Michell, 2017

One of the great classic British Ealing comedies.. The studio, Ealing, made many, many great comedies before its demise in 1959. (See earlier notes on Ealing.)

### **Summary:**

*Holland, a shy retiring man, dreams of being rich and living the good life. Faithfully, for 20 years, he has worked as a bank transfer agent for the delivery of gold bullion. One day he befriends Pendlebury, a maker of souvenirs. Holland remarks that, with Pendlebury's smelting equipment, one could forge the gold into harmless-looking toy Eiffel Towers and smuggle the gold from England into France. Soon after, the two plant a story to gain the services of professional criminals Lackery and Shorty. Together, the four plot their crime, leading to unexpected twists and turns. Written by Rick Gregory <rag.apa@email.apa.org*

## **Charles Crichton – director (1910-1999)**

Always linked to Ealing studios and when the company closed in 1959 he moved to television. Involved with iconic UK shows The Avengers (1961) and Danger Man (1964). The latter with Patrick McGoohan. (That eventually morphed into a unique TV series: 'The Prisoner' (1967-8) that made the North Wales resort village of Portmeirion world famous.!) Worked with John Cleese's company, Video Arts, making management films. Crichton's last film was the very successful A Fish Called Wanda (1975).

### **Trivia:**

Crichton was the original director of *Birdman of Alcatraz* (1962), but he quit after clashing with **Burt Lancaster**. Crichton was then replaced by **John Frankenheimer**. Crichton said of the experience: "Had I known that Burt Lancaster was to be *de facto* producer, I do not think I would have accepted the assignment, as he had a reputation for quarreling with better directors than I.

## **Alec Guinness (1914-200)**

Acclaimed stage and cinema actor.

Known for his six collaborations with David Lean: Herbert Pocket in *Great Expectations* (1946), Fagin in *Oliver Twist* (1948), Col. Nicholson in *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957, for which he won the Academy Award for Best Actor), Prince Faisal in *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), General Yevgraf Zhivago in *Doctor Zhivago* (1965), and Professor Godbole in *A Passage to India* (1984).

Famous for his multi-roles in *Kind Hearts and Coronets* (1949), Guinness plays 8 characters hilariously!

He preferred working on stage to appearing in films. He also preferred appearing in newer plays rather than the classics, so that his performance would not be compared to how previous actors had played the role.

While filming [The Swan](#) (1956) in Hollywood, Guinness met [James Dean](#), just days before the young actor's death. Sir Alec later recalled predicting that Dean would die in a car crash: when Dean showed Guinness his newly-bought Porsche, Guinness advised him to "Get rid of that car, or you'll be dead in a week!". Guinness unfortunately proved right.

Guinness had a 2.25% interest in the revenue from Star Wars (1977), which would be the highest grossing movie at the time (and second only to *Gone with the Wind* (1939) when adjusted for inflation). Guinness had agreed to a 2% interest to make the film, but he reported that just before release during a telephone conversation [George Lucas](#) had offered an additional 0.5% because of how supportive and helpful Guinness had been (with dialogue, other actors, etc.). After the release and stunning results at the box office, Guinness asked to confirm the additional 0.5% in writing, but was told it was (reduced to) 0.25%, although it is not clear who had decided this. This was revealed by Guinness in the 1977 interview with BBC's Michael Parkinson on the series "Talking Pictures". It was in general supported by many public comments by [Mark Hamill](#), [Harrison Ford](#) and [Carrie Fisher](#) all speaking highly of Guinness' professionalism and impact on the set. Apparently, Guinness did not quibble the 1977 worldwide revenue for Star Wars of \$400+ million making Guinness' 2.25% probably around \$9m for that year alone, with additional revenue well into 1979. In comparison, that exceeds other British actor high-water marks for [Sean Connery](#) and [Roger Moore](#) in the 1970s playing James Bond (\$1m salary + \$3-5m depending on revenue interests per film e.g. 5-12%).

### **His Quotes:**

Failure has a thousand explanations. Success doesn't need one.

Once I've done a film, it's finished. I never look at it again.

Essentially I'm a small part actor who's been lucky enough to play leading roles for most of his life.

An actor is at his best a kind of unfrocked priest who, for an hour or two, can call on heaven and hell to mesmerize a group of innocents.

[One day, director [Ronald Neame](#) found Guinness sulking in his dressing room, refusing to come to the set. According to Neame, Guinness felt he had not been stroked enough and explained] "Actors are emotionally 14-year olds. We need to be chastised like children, and we need to be hugged and told we're doing fine work. We are the children who never grow up."

Flamboyance doesn't suit me. I enjoy being elusive.

### **Stanley Holloway (1890-1982)**

Famous for *Brief Encounter* (1945), *My Fair Lady* (1964) and this film. Made quite a number of comedy recordings.

Lesser known is his work in 'The Titfield Thundebolt' (1953) where local people take over their passenger train service against a bus company. Arguably one of the funniness/peculiar of the Ealing Comedies. In glorious colour.

Trivia - Prior to going into show business, Stanley Holloway worked as a porter on the Billingsgate fish market.

### **Sid(ney) James (1913-1976)**

Famous for his 'Carry On' films. (Remember those?) Born in South Africa as Joel Cohen! Worked very successfully in radio with Tony Hancock - 'Hancock's Half Hour', then on TV with Hancock and others.

Sid was nicknamed "One take James" because he nearly always did it right first time. He was also earning the highest daily rate of any British character actor.

Quotes: "Comedy is hard work and I am not really a comedian ... I need funny people around me to get the best out of myself."

### **Lots of Trivia:**

Only the British would set up a committee - Screenwriter Clarke is said to have come up with the idea of a clerk robbing his own bank while doing research for the film [Pool of London](#) (1951), a crime thriller surrounding a jewel theft. He consulted the Bank of England on the project and it set up a special committee to advise on how best the robbery could take place.

[Audrey Hepburn](#) was considered for a larger role in this film, but stage work made her unavailable. [Alec Guinness](#) was impressed with the young actress and arranged for her to appear in a bit part. This is considered to be Hepburn's first appearance in a major film.

The original film was digitally restored and re-released to UK cinemas on 29 July 2011 to celebrate its 60th anniversary.

Opening credits: The events and characters portrayed in this film are fictitious and any similarity to any incident, name or individual is coincidental.

Ealing Studios, planning a bank-robbery film, asked the Bank of England to devise a way in which a million pounds could be stolen from the bank. A special committee was created to come up with an idea, and their plan is the one used in the film.

Alec Guinness was paid £6000 ; his regular salary at this time was £25000.

One of the rationales the filmmakers considered in not allowing the mob to get away with their crime is that prevailing censorship criteria in the U.S. would have cost them the lucrative American market. (The U.K. had no such rule, and the filmmakers could have had the criminals successful if desired.)

### **Useless Trivia but Fun:**

In the car chase scene at the end of the film, an officer uses a police box to report seeing a police car being driven by a man in a top hat. In fact, the driver is wearing the uniform of the police as originally set up in 1829 by Sir Robert Peel , known as "Bobbies" or "Peelers."

### **Puzzle Time ... Funnikins<sup>1</sup>:**

What very famous and successful film maker refers to an early scene in this film?  
What was the first giant blockbuster to use this?

Major Clue 1 – name of a cinema sound system. There was even a film made with this name ... (do the numbers '138 or 1138' ring a bell? Fun but non-solvable clue for this puzzle – '???138' was used in American Graffiti (1973).

Clue 2 – Science Fiction. 3<sup>rd</sup> Clue read Trivia (below) for another hint! 4<sup>th</sup> Clue – give away time ... "Star ...? (1977)"

### **Reviews:**

David Parkinson, Empire Magazine  
2011, updated 2015.

By 1951, Ealing had established a reputation for the comedies with which its name would eventually become synonymous. However, prompted by a combination of Britain's proud documentary heritage and the current fashion for Italian neo-realism, the studio also felt it had a responsibility to examine the contemporary social scene. But rather than focus on downbeat domestic dramas (which were too close to home for the majority of patrons in those grim post-war times), the front office opted to explore how economic adversity had driven so many youths and returning war heroes to crime and, increasingly, violent crime at that.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a Paul word.

The decision was partly prompted by the success of *The Blue Lamp* (1950), in which Dirk Bogarde's terrified tearaway murdered PC Jack Warner (who would miraculously revive to spend 21 years playing the same character in the BBC's legendary series, *Dixon Of Dock Green*). Indeed, T.E.B. Clarke was working on a similarly gritty crime story for director, Basil Dearden, when he got the idea for *The Lavender Hill Mob*.

Clearly uninspired by *Pool Of London* (1951)'s humdrum account of a doomed robbery, Clarke concocted the tale of the timid, but fastidious bank clerk who executes the perfect bullion heist and smuggles the gold out of the country in the form of seemingly-worthless tourist trinkets.

Studio boss Michael Balcon was reportedly furious when Clarke suggested this new direction. But a cursory perusal of the treatment persuaded him to team Clarke with Charles Crichton, who had directed Ealing's first true "comedy", *Hue And Cry*, in 1947.

Eleven full drafts of the screenplay and four revised endings were submitted, but even then Crichton shaved 27 minutes off the original running time to bring it in at a compact 78 minutes. Keen to ensure the authenticity of his caper, Clarke consulted the Bank Of England on how best to breach its security and a specially-convened committee obligingly came up with the bare bones of Holland's ingenious plan. "Dutch" Holland was played with deceptively innocuous self-assurance by Alec Guinness, who was returning to Ealing for the first time since his triumph in *Kind Hearts And Coronets* (1949). He would be joined in the gang by Stanley Holloway as Pendlebury, the proprietor of the souvenir company that would transform the ingots into Eiffel Towers, and Sid James and Alfie Bass, as the Cockney scamps who would provide the gentlemanly outlaws with a little professional expertise.

While nowhere near as subversive as *Whisky Galore!* (1949), the film was still scathing in its depiction of the forces of law and order. Having demonstrated the technological and forensic armory at the police's disposal, (Clarke and Crichton delighted in debunking its efficacy. Rather than facilitate the pursuit of | villains, in-car radios are shown to be vulnerable to sabotage and capable of causing utter chaos. Similarly, bobbies on the beat are resented as jolly fools, who either ihone in with tall stories about top hats or are too preoccupied with singing *Old Macdonald Had A Farm* to realise the suspects are under their very nose.

But it's not just the law that is subject to ridicule. Just as William Rose would later reveal he had lampooned Clement Attlee's government in *The Ladykillers* (1955), a case can be made for Clarke having taken a pop at them here, too. Like Attlee and his cabinet colleagues, Guinness and Holloway's characters are clearly a couple of rungs up the social ladder from James and Bass' working crooks. Thus, the blind faith the latter two place in their superiors to fence the loot in Paris and still return with their proceeds smacks of the confidence voters placed in Labour in 1945. But Alfie, Sid

and the electorate were all betrayed by their implicitly trusted betters.

Crichton also found room for a dig at Britain's most famous cinematic export. As Guinness and Holloway hurtle down the steps of the Eiffel Tower in pursuit of a lift full of schoolgirls carrying their dodgy golden replicas, it's impossible not to be reminded of one of Alfred Hitchcock's famous landmark set-pieces. Indeed, the action becomes genuinely disquieting as Holloway's hat and coat float like a plunging figure from the twisting staircase, until Crichton deflates the incident by giving both men the giggles.

This enjoyment of their villainy is a key feature of the film's attitude towards morality. It's clear from the bookend sequences in South America that Guinness has been having a high old time (cavorting with a young Audrey Hepburn, no less). There's a trenchant satirical irony in the fact that his ill-gotten gains have helped him become a pillar of the ex-pat community. It's this willingness to seize on any route away from the all-pervading austerity of victory (vital also to 1949's *Passport To Pimlico*) and the disregard for authority that has ensured the Lavender Hill Mob's place in history.

### **Funny, at times hilarious.**

18 January 2005 | by [Robert J. Maxwell \(rmax304823@yahoo.com\)](mailto:rmax304823@yahoo.com)

Ealing Studios turned out a series of comic gems in the late 40s and early 50s and this is a good example. Only a curmudgeon would not laugh aloud during some of the scenes.

The plot, briefly, involves a clever bank clerk (Guinness) developing a plan with a die caster (Holloway) to steal several million pounds of gold bullion, recast it into tourist knickknacks in the shape of Eiffel Tower paperweights, and ship it to Paris to sell on the black market. They recruit two professional thieves to help them.

It may not be Ealing's best comedy (my vote would be for "The Lady Killers") but it's more than funny enough. I'll just give three scenes as examples.

(1) Holloway and Guinness, two honest men, need to recruit what they call a "mob" but have no idea how to go about it. What I mean is -- how would YOU go about recruiting criminal assistants? What they do is go to crowded places of low repute -- saloons, prize fights, the underground -- and shout at each other through the noise about the safe being broken at such-and-such an address and all that money having to be left in it. Then they hole up at the address and wait for the burglars to arrive.

(2) A scene at the Eiffel Tower in which they discover that half a dozen of the gold paperweights instead of the usual leaden ones have been sold to some English schoolgirls. They watch horrified as the door closes and the elevator carrying the girls begins its descent, and they decide to rush down the tightly spiraling staircase

to ground level, trying to beat the elevator. By the time they reach the street they've been spun around so many times that they can't stop laughing and are unable to stop twirling around until they fall down.

(3) After the robbery, in an empty warehouse soon to be searched by the police, Guinness must be tied up, gagged, and blindfolded with tape. Then his clothes must be torn and dirtied so that it appears he put up a fight before the gold was taken. But the police arrive too soon, and the others beat it, leaving Guinness standing alone, tied up, and blindfolded, but not dirty. He stumbles about blindly, trying to blow the tape from his mouth, getting his feet caught in discarded bicycle wheels, until he falls into the Thames.

Probably the weakest part of the movie is near the end, when police cars wind up chasing one another because of confusing messages. The scene could have been lifted from Laurel and Hardy. It's a little silly. (Why didn't Guinness and Holloway park the stolen car, get out, and walk away?) But that's a minor consideration.

What surprises me about some of these comedies is that they're able to make us laugh despite the dreary atmosphere. The streets of London look awfully dismal in this grainy black and white film. Some of them were still charred wrecks left over from the Blitz. But it doesn't dampen the comedy at all. Following the successful robbery a drunken Guinness and Holloway return to their boarding house to be chided by their landlady for being "naughty". One pulls the other aside, chuckling conspiratorially, and the two agree to call each other "Al" and "Dutch" -- two REAL BIG gangsters for you.