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Jack Cardiff: Britain's greatest cinematographer?

Cinematographer Jack Cardiff worked on some of British film's greatest masterpieces. Wally Hammond previews a new retrospective of his work

Quiz time. What links the following? [Roger Deakins](#), [Freddie Francis](#), [Robert Krasker](#), [Douglas Sloccombe](#), [Geoffrey Unsworth](#), [Freddie Young](#). They're a sample roll call of the great British cinematographers and lighting cameramen – and first among equals is [Jack Cardiff](#) (1914-2009), the subject of a retrospective at the BFI Southbank which runs throughout May. Born on the boards – his music hall parents put him in the silent film 'My Son, My Son' in 1918, aged four – he progressed through runner, clapper boy and camera operator, often under Alexander Korda, until two big breaks: being taken on as the first British trainee for Technicolor and embarking on a globetrotting colour-documentary career culminating in the Oscar-winning 'Western Approaches' in 1944.

Then, magic happened. Second unit on one masterpiece, 'The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp', he was invited by its director, Michael Powell, to film the whole of a second. His work on 'A Matter of Life and Death' (1946) – incredibly, his first complete credit – 'Black Narcissus' (also 1946) and 'The Red Shoes' (1948), with Cardiff's versatility and pioneering experimentalism dancing perfectly in tune with the Archers' own, produced a trio of achievements of beauty, impact and emotional meaning that are unsurpassed in British film.

It was a hard act to follow – for British cinema and [Jack Cardiff](#). Both his anecdotes in his autobiography 'Magic Hour', however, and the testimony in Craig McCall's new documentary, 'Cameraman: The Life and Work of [Jack Cardiff](#)', show that during the next six decades, his energy never dimmed.

He collected a tally of great directors: Charles Frend ('Scott of the Antarctic', 1948), Alfred Hitchcock ('Under Capricorn', 1949), John Huston ('The African Queen', 1951), Joseph L Mankiewicz ('The Barefoot Contessa', 1954), before indulging Laurence Olivier's taste for pageantry in 'The Prince and the Showgirl' (1957) and creating the spectacular Norwegian backdrops for Kirk Douglas's Norseman in Richard Fleischer's visually arresting sea-saga 'The Vikings' (1958).

His achievements in the director's chair – which he occupied, on and off, from the late 1950s, helming a dozen pictures – never quite matched those from behind the camera, but two films, included in the season, still stand up. He collaborated with fellow lensman [Freddie Francis](#) for an oddly cast but fully felt and underrated adaptation of DH Lawrence's 'Sons and Lovers' in 1960 and gave colour and wanderlust to playwright Sean O'Casey's early life, taking over the reins from John Ford on 'Young Cassidy' (1965).

A pioneer and a technical master – demanding and designing, typically, special water-cooled 300-amp arc spotlights for the ballet sequences on 'The Red Shoes' – Cardiff worked right up until his nineties. He described his role as 'a diplomatic Jeeves' to the director's Bertie Wooster, but he was no mere gentleman's gentleman. Rather, he was a master in his own right, arguably the finest 'painter with light' Britain has ever produced.

The [Jack Cardiff](#) season is at BFI Southbank throughout May.

Author: Wally Hammond



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