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# Now you do know Jack

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Six cinematographers remember *Cameraman*'s pioneering subject, Jack Cardiff.

As told to David Fear

He started out as a gofer on film sets during the early days of British cinema. By the time Jack Cardiff passed away in 2009 at the age of 94, the Norfolk native had left behind a varied cinematography career that, stunningly, included both *The Red Shoes* and *Rambo: First Blood Part II*. He made Bogie, Marilyn, the Hepburns (Kate and Audrey) and even Ah-nold look great onscreen; his work with the first Technicolor film stocks set the standard for using hues and tones to make a movie come alive. In honor of Craig McCall's doc *Cameraman: The Life and Work of Jack Cardiff*, we've asked a half-dozen cinematographers to talk about this legendary lensman.

**John Bailey** (*American Gigolo, Mishima, Ordinary People*)

The opening scene in *A Matter of Life and Death* (1946), with Kim Hunter talking on the airfield radio to the doomed pilot, David Niven, is a master class for any aspiring cameraman in how intense drama can be created with the simplest of means. I was on the Academy Board of Governors when Mr. Cardiff's name was proposed for a special Oscar; he's the only cinematographer to be given an honorary award. He always spoke of the elements of our job — color, contrast, shot selection, movement, composition — as narrative contributions to the bigger picture. To him, making movies was damned hard work, but his love of the art form coursed through his whole body.

**Harris Savides** (*Elephant, Milk, Zodiac*)

I saw *Black Narcissus* at a formative time in my life, and left thinking: Who made these images? Who shot this?!? That was the moment I became a fan, even before I knew that Jack

shot a number of other films I really loved. There's such integrity to the photography in that particular film, though. Though most of it was shot on a stage, there's such a sense of place he establishes. It feels real in a weird way—he makes you believe you're in those mountains, in that convent—but the look of it is just stunning, in the true sense of the word. And the Technicolor is used so subtly and elegantly; what he got out of that primitive stock is remarkable.

**Seamus McGarvey** (*Atonement, The Hours, World Trade Center*)

The word *artist* gets thrown around a lot in our business, but Jack embodied the concept. Even if you didn't know he was a painter as well, you can still see a whole history of visual art unfolding before you in his films. I once asked him how he lit that shot in *Black Narcissus* of Deborah Kerr holding a candle...was it some sort of postproduction trick? He told me that he essentially made this apparatus that held a half ton of lights and had a staff of electricians pushing it toward the actor, while he controlled with a snoot. All that for just the effect of a tiny, flickering flame illuminating her face.

**Dick Pope** (*Topsy-Turvy, The Illusionist, Vera Drake*)

When I first saw *The African Queen* as a youngster, it had an enormous effect on me. It wasn't as beautiful a film as some of the others he shot; instead it has a hard-edged realism, an almost documentary-like feel to the landscapes. There's a scene where Bogart and Kate Hepburn are pulling the boat along in the water and they get covered in leeches. I remember wondering if the cameraman suffered too, as he was right in the river with them! (I subsequently discovered this scene was partially shot in Turkey and a studio in London!) When the lights came up, I went straight back in line to see it again. Once I saw Jack Cardiff's name on the credits that second time, it stuck forever.

**Michael Ballhaus** (*The Departed, Goodfellas, Quiz Show*)

I had the chance to talk to Michael Powell about his collaboration with Jack and the enormous input he had on the films that Powell and Emeric Pressburger made, especially *The Red Shoes*. That's still my favorite of Jack's work by far—and the way he treated colors in that movie, it was groundbreaking! It feels as if the colors are shining from inside the filmstrip itself, with such expressiveness and warmth. I saw a lot of his early work when I was a youth in Germany, and it affected me profoundly. It still does, really. The man is a legend.

**Robert Elswit** (*Good Night, and Good Luck; Punch-Drunk Love; There Will Be Blood*)

Cardiff was the first one to find that kind of lighting and photography for color films, in terms of not making it garish or relying on pretty-picture approach. He did stylish films that may have not been naturalistic, but they were perfectly realistic in the context of whatever film it was. Even with *The Red Shoes*, where you have these theatrical scenes that are so otherworldly, he's still doing these low-key, moody color scenes for all the backstage stuff. No one saw what he saw, or understood instinctively how to make those things work. In all of his films, there's just brilliant taste—*that's* what separates him from everybody else.

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**THROUGH A LENS FONDLY** Cardiff reminisces about his long career behind the camera.

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