

## Film Review: Cameraman: The Life and Work of Jack Cardiff

The unsurpassed work of cinematographer Jack Cardiff is gloriously featured in one of the best filmmaking documentaries ever made.

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-By David Noh



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A very strong claim could be made for Jack Cardiff as the greatest color cinematographer in film history. Just recall: the virtuosic, choreographed psychological intensity of *The Red Shoes*, the intermingled color and black-and-white of Heaven and Earth in *Stairway to Heaven*, Bogie and Hepburn shooting the rapids in *The African Queen*, Ava Gardner at her most swooningly luscious in *The Barefoot Contessa* and especially *Pandora and the Flying Dutchman*, and, most hair-raisingly of all, that electrifying climax of *Black Narcissus* when

the mad nun tries to kill Deborah Kerr on a Himalayan mountaintop. Even the Oscars, which so rarely get it right, *had* to give him an award for that British film in 1948, when foreign movies rarely even made it into the running.

Craig McCall gives us the man behind the lens in *Cameraman: The Life and Work of Jack Cardiff*, which, to any film fanatic, is the simple equivalent of opium. Cardiff, who died in 2009, was very much alive for the film, an invigorating, eternally curious force of nature, as well as a fantastic raconteur. He recalls getting his start in the business as a child actor and, being largely self-educated, first through the Frank Harris book *My Life and Loves*, which beyond the infamous "dirty" parts provided him with the essential names of writers he proceeded to investigate. Then there were the great painters, Turner, Vermeer and the Impressionists, who would prove invaluable to his camerawork. You can't help but think that if such autodidacticism results in this kind of genius, all colleges should be shut down forthwith.

Cardiff's work with the fabulous team of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressberger is highlighted and, as always with such real working movie guys like Cardiff, there is a bracing lack of pretense or puffery to his recollections. "It's a nonsensical job," he says, "full of hypocrisy and hyperbole." When Powell asked him what he thought about ballet prior to starting *The Red Shoes*, he replied, "Not much—all those sissies prancing about." (He changed his tune.) The huge, unwieldy Technicolor camera of the time was a positive bane, but to hear Cardiff tell it and to see the way he was able to make images dance so liltily across the screen, it would seem to have been featherweight. He was spectacularly ingenious, but in the unforeseeably simplest ways, as when he created mist on the screen by simply exhaling onto the lens, or created scintillating fog and sky effects—and disguised the studio lights—by hand-painting them onto filters. Fantastic on-set stills reveal the amazing work the team performed on *Black Narcissus*, creating a Himalayan convent completely in the studio so convincingly that Indian natives swore they knew the locations.

McCall scored a wonderful bounty of interviewees, all eager to enthuse about Cardiff: Martin Scorsese gives particular insight into how the visuals created psychological depth; great compatriot cinematographer Christopher Challis extols his friend's speed and ability; a still-gorgeous, sunlit Moira Shearer recalls those *Red Shoes*; and Kathleen Byron affirms how with the wet hair and eerie lighting he provided for that mad nun, "he gave me half my performance." Gardner was even more forthright, confiding to him about how he had to be careful lighting her when she had her period ("and we'd just met!").

Cardiff's early work as camera operator on Alexander Korda productions also bring to light those little-known films from the nascent Golden Age of Brit cinema—*As You Like It*, *Wings of Morning* (the first British Technicolor film), *Knight Without Armor* (with Marlene Dietrich, who knew more about lighting than most cameramen)—which,

however indifferent they may have been dramatically, were always visual stunners. Cardiff reveals himself as a superb portraitist as well, when he opens a magic box filled with glorious photos of Marilyn Monroe (who personally requested him for *The Prince and the Showgirl*), Audrey Hepburn and Sophia Loren at their most goddess-like. Also a boon are the home movies he took on his sets with a 16mm camera that will have true buffs drooling.

Cardiff worked almost to the very end; as an interviewer observes, "There are very few who could include both *The Red Shoes* and *Rambo* on their CV." And he was highly aware of the changes in the industry: the kind of authentic, hands-on care he always lavished on his projects was now deemed superfluous by directors who'd tell him not to worry about it, "it would all be done on the computer." The loss of that kind of artistry is cinema's immeasurable loss, and all of ours as well.

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