

Friday, December 5th, 2014

The Innocents (12a)

dir: Jack Clayton

starring: Deborah Kerr, Pamela Franklin, Martin Stephens

Jack Clayton's 1961 film *The Innocents* has a fair claim to be the most terrifying British horror film ever made. Somehow, Clayton's black-and-white adaptation of *The Turn of the Screw*, Henry James's 1898 novella about two children possessed by evil, retains its power even today, in an era in which horror movies have grown ever more extreme. Clayton avoids shock tactics altogether, but the glimpse of a man's face at the window or the fleeting sight of a woman across the water are as unsettling as anything in more conventional bloodcurdlers.

What makes the film doubly chilling is its ambivalence. Are we watching a real ghost story? Is this just the projection of the imagination of the repressed governess Miss Giddens (beautifully played by Deborah Kerr), or of the innocent children themselves? More than 40 years on, it remains impossible to tell.

"I often say it is the best photographed film of mine although it won no photographic awards," remarks its cinematographer, Freddie Francis, now 88, whose other credits include such strikingly shot work as *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and Martin Scorsese's version of *Cape Fear*. The co-writer Truman Capote was equally proud of his contribution, calling *The Innocents* his "best film script". Pauline Kael described the film as "the best ghost movie I've ever seen". The great French director François Truffaut once happened to be eating in the same restaurant as Clayton. He had never met the English film-maker but had a waiter carry him over a napkin on which he had scribbled: "*The Innocents* is the best English film after Hitchcock goes to America."

Despite such plaudits, *The Innocents* has remained relatively neglected. Neither a Hammer horror-style genre piece nor a conventional literary adaptation, the film has always been hard to classify. It must have seemed an especially perverse endeavour when Clayton started shooting it. The early 1960s were the heyday of the "New Wave."

In the UK, film-makers were busy making gritty, realist movies about the experiences of rugby league players, factory workers, pregnant, working-class girls or day-dreaming office clerks. Clayton himself had contributed one of the key "angry young men" films, his 1959 adaptation of John Braine's *Room At The Top*. Set in a dank, industrial, northern town, this was as far away from the rarefied world of Henry James as it is possible to imagine. The Brighton-born Clayton, one of the more contrary



figures in recent British film history, knew he was expected to make another movie in "kitchen sink" vein and therefore decided to do something completely different. "After the success of *Room at the Top*, I was offered dozens of films but they were all carbon copies of that," he told the press.

Clayton, who had first read James's *The Turn of the Screw* when he was 10, decided now that this would be the perfect vehicle with which to wrong-foot the critics. An added attraction was the subtlety and complexity of the source material. "I want to do *The Innocents* because it is just about the most difficult story to tell on screen. And that's a good challenge," he said.

An original script had already been written by William Archibald, based on his Broadway stage play. Clayton wasn't happy with this and drafted in John Mortimer to help with the construction of the story. Then he recruited Capote, whom he had met while working as an associate producer on John Huston's oddball caper, *Beat the Devil*. Capote quickly knocked off his version of the script. Not that the work was easy. "I thought it would be a snap because I loved *The Turn of the Screw* so much. But when I got into it, I saw how artful James had been. He did everything by allusion and indirection," Capote recalled.

Clayton was an arch-perfectionist. To his intense annoyance, his backers Twentieth Century Fox insisted he use the Cinemascope widescreen process, which they owned. This was ideal for sword-and-sandals epics but less suitable for an intimate and brooding English ghost story. It was left to Freddie Francis to customise the Cinemascope equipment so that the desired effects could be achieved. "He [Clayton] wanted the film to have an enclosed and slightly claustrophobic feel and so I devised some special filters [made up by two elderly ladies in Chalfont St Giles] and these managed to blur the sides of the frame so that one was never sure if anything was lurking there. It worked extremely well," says Francis.

Most of the film was shot on sets at Shepperton. The picturesque exteriors were filmed at Sheffield Park near Brighton and on the Bluebell Railway close by. For all his craftsmanship, Clayton wasn't above resorting to trick effects. The music and sound are used throughout to crank up the tension. The early scenes are disorienting precisely because they're shot in sunshine rather than

Synopsis: Victorian England. Miss Giddens, a single woman, applies for a first job as a governess at Bly, a remote country house. Her employer, a wealthy bachelor, is unconcerned with her lack of experience, confessing that he has "no room, mentally or emotionally" for his niece and nephew.

At the house, Miss Giddens forges a friendship with Mrs. Grose, the housekeeper. She is instantly taken with Flora, the niece. The boy, Miles, is away at boarding school, though Flora delightedly insists he is coming home. Miss Giddens receives a letter saying that Miles has been expelled because of his bad influence on the other boys.

When Miles arrives home, Miss Giddens becomes concerned by the children's strange behaviour. She also sees the figures of a man and woman, whom Mrs Grose identifies as Peter Quint and Miss Jessel, former servants at the house. The two had had a relationship. Both are now dead.

Miss Giddens begins to suspect that the children are possessed by the ghosts of the 2 servants. She arranges for Flora to leave the house while she tries to rid Miles of the ghost of Peter Quint. When she confronts Miles, Quint appears. Miles dies in Miss Giddens' arms. She kisses him.

Credits

Miss Giddens: Deborah Kerr

Miles: Martin Stephens

Flora: Pamela Franklin

Mrs Grose: Megs Jenkins

Peter Quint: Peter Wyngarde

Miss Jessel: Clytie Jessop

Anna: Isla Cameron

Uncle: Michael Redgrave

Director: Jack Clayton

DoP: Freddie Francis

Editor: Jim Clark

Music: Georges Auric

UK, 1961. 99 mins

Lincoln Film Society

Patron: Jim Broadbent

the gloomy shadow that one associates with haunted-house dramas. In a disconcertingly distant cameo, Michael Redgrave appears as the children's uncle. The scene in which he hires Miss Giddens is unnerving because there seems to be an unstated sexual tension between them and because he is so indifferent to the fate of the children in his charge.

The film works through a build-up of small, jarring details, insignificant in themselves, but which have a sinister cumulative effect. There is the shot of the precocious boy Miles (Martin Stephens) giving Miss Giddens what appears to be an innocent kiss. The shot is held for so long and Miss Giddens' response is so nervous that the moment somehow seems indecent. And the cheery housekeeper Mrs Grose (Meg Jenkins) becomes evasive as soon as Miss Giddens asks her about her predecessor as governess. The house itself grows ever more oppressive. Whenever we see the children close to water or high up in a tower, we immediately fear that something terrible will happen to them. Perhaps Clayton's biggest coup was to make Peter Wyngarde (later TV's louche sleuth Jason King) appear to be the embodiment of evil.

When *The Innocents* was released in the winter of 1961, even hardbitten Fleet Street hacks admitted that it gave them the collywobbles. "It is at least 20 years since I sat in a cinema and felt the skin crawling on the back of my head through sheer nervous tension, but I felt that creepy sensation once more this week," cowered the Daily Express's veteran reviewer Leonard Mosley. "I was terrified by a film in which no blood is visibly shed and no graves are dug up."

Forty-five years on, the eerie, uncanny quality of *The Innocents* hasn't diminished. In the intervening period, there has arguably been only one other film that matched its understated but all pervasive sense of menace: Alejandro Amenábar's *The Others*. Amenábar, like Clayton (to whom he acknowledged he was paying tribute), realised that the most effective way in which to chill an audience was to play on its emotions. Yes, there was still space for dark corridors, for doors that creak ominously and even for jolting editing tricks, but that was just the window dressing. The real secret was to home in on feelings which every spectator must have shared at one time or another: bereavement, lust, suspicion, confusion and, above all, the child-like sense of dread.

Geoffrey MacNab, The Independent, 2006

PRODUCTION INFORMATION

According to Professor Christopher Frayling, much of the screenplay is derived from William Archibald's play of the same name, which premiered on Broadway in 1950, rather than coming directly from James' novella, though he credits Truman Capote with about 90% of the film's script as it appears on the screen. Frayling attributes the Freudian subtext to screenwriter Capote, whose contribution gives the film a Southern Gothic feel – with the governess's repressed erotic sensibility counterpointed by shots of lush and decaying plants and rapacious insect life. Clayton though chose to downplay this aspect in the finished film to preserve the ambiguity between the ghost story and Freudian element.

Clayton wanted the film to be quite different to the Hammer horror films of the period, and employed a number of cinematic devices to achieve this, including using genuinely eerie sound effects and moody stylized lighting. For the first 45 seconds of the film the screen is black and singing is heard, and only after this do the credits appear (projectionists thought this was an error). To ensure that his child actors' performances were not too knowing, Clayton also withheld the full details of the story from Martin Stephens and Pamela Franklin, who only received those parts of the script that lacked the surprising and mysterious adult elements of the film. By such means Clayton was able to create a horror film that left the strange events depicted for the viewer to interpret.

The Innocents was the big career break for renowned film editor Jim Clark, who was hired on the recommendation of his colleague Jimmy Ware, editor of Clayton's first feature, *Room At The Top*. In his 2010 memoir *Dream Repairman*, Clark recalled the experience as "a true collaboration" and that he and Clayton became close friends and regular drinking partners during production, since both were single at the time, and lived near each other. He described *The Innocents* as:

"... a real pleasure to edit, since Jack had a very certain approach to his material, having worked out everything beforehand. He was a perfectionist who left nothing to chance, and was very precise in his approach to work".

Inspired by George Stevens' *A Place In The Sun*, Clark created "some rather cunning dissolves", which he also described as "mini montages" in which he edited the cross-fades between certain scenes to run four or five times longer than the standard 'mix', and often blended in a third, near-subliminal image. According to Clark, Clayton went through "a lot of anguish" over the final scene, in which Miles dies in Miss Giddens' arms, and that the director was "quite prone to agonising over scenes if he was uncertain of them, and we would run them over and over again, hardly changing a frame, until he felt reconciled to the sequence." Clark also revealed that, despite their previous harmonious working relationship, he unexpectedly fell out with Clayton just before the film was released, and felt that he had allowed himself to become too close to his director. Clark recalled that, on the evening of the pre-release critics' screening, Clayton went into a rage because (through no fault of her own) his personal assistant Jeanie Sims was late in phoning him with the critics' reaction. When Sims called Clark to Clayton's office the next day, he discovered that Clayton had completely smashed a large plaster scale model of Bly House, and was refusing to speak to either of them. In spite of this rift, Clark and Clayton gradually repaired their friendship, and Clayton subsequently invited Clark to edit his next film, *The Pumpkin Eater*.

Reportedly, when first screened, 20th Century Fox executives were disturbed by the scene (which does not occur in the novella) in which the governess kisses the boy Miles directly on the lips. The film has been given a 12 rating by the BBFC. Its original classification by the BBFC was "X", which meant that no person under the age of 16 years was allowed into the cinema to see it.

Lincoln Film Society would like to thank all its members and guests for their support in 2014 and wish you a very Happy Christmas and New Year.

Our next film: Friday January 9th 2015, 7.30pm

The Wind Rises (PG)

In "The Wind Rises," Jiro dreams of flying and designing beautiful aeroplanes, inspired by the famous Italian aeronautical designer Caproni. Nearsighted from a young age and unable to be a pilot, Jiro joins a major Japanese engineering company in 1927 and becomes one of the world's most innovative and accomplished aeroplane designers.

Hayao Miyazaki's final Studio Ghibli film, aimed this time at adults, brings all his talents as an animator to bear on a truly superb treatment of the life of Horikoshi Jiro. Consummate skill and craftsmanship are evident in every frame and there are sequences (such as the 1923 Tokyo earthquake) that leave one open-mouthed with admiration. This is a worthy finale to a glittering career.