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Cheap Thrills, Double Bills: The Great British 'B' Movie

To celebrate publication of the book *The British 'B' Film* by **Steve Chibnall** and **Brian McFarlane** (BFI/Palgrave, pb, £16.99), we revive the days of the double feature with eight rarely screened British supporting features, from the vaults of the BFI National Archive, to take you back to the halcyon days of the Great British 'B' movie.

As the 1930s dawned, and the awkward transition from silent to sound cinema took place, cost-conscious patrons considered carefully before they bought a ticket. Some smaller cinemas competed with wealthier rivals by showing an extra film with the main feature (the 'A' picture). The practice caught on: the 'B' picture, or supporting feature, was born. Protective legislation had already been imposed to stem the flood of American product into British cinemas: the 1927 Cinematograph Films Act required exhibitors to show a certain percentage of home-grown film. Intended to encourage the production of quality cinema, the actual result was a wave of short, cheap, quickly shot supporting features – 'Quota Quickies' – derided by contemporary critics as a disgrace to British cinema. New legislation was introduced in 1938, but an obligation remained to programme British films as well as Hollywood product – as well as meeting a public desire for supporting features. 'B' pictures were a staple part of the 'full supporting programme' until television finally edged out a night at the pictures as the cheap entertainment of choice in the 1960s.

Inevitably overshadowed by big-budget screen extravaganzas and taken for granted at the time, British 'B' pictures still had much to offer. Looked at now, the films provide a window to a vanished, grubby, monochromatic post-war world. They remind us of the concerns and aspirations of everyday people in an austere pre-permissive Britain, concerns arguably absent from the glamorous, glossy, full colour world of more 'worthy' 'A' pictures. And of course they supply some terrific unpretentious entertainment.

This season features films starring a youthful **Diana Dors** and a debonair **Christopher Lee**; also **Donald Pleasance**, **John Le Mesurier** and **Harry H Corbett**.

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PROGRAMME

Screenings

Double Bill:

Penny and the Pownall Case

UK 1948. Dir. Harry Hand. With Ralph Michael, Peggy Evans. 47min. **PG**

Early appearances by a youthful Diana Dors and debonair Christopher Lee add pep to this fizzy slam-bang quickie – loosely inspired by Norman Pett's *Jane* newspaper strip – which is entertainingly based around the exploits of beautiful Penny, a scantily-clad cartoonists' model and amateur criminologist who gets unwittingly mixed up with a ruthless gang of Nazi war criminals.

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The Third Alibi

UK 1961. Dir. Montgomery Tully. With Laurence Payne, Patricia Dainton. 68min. **PG**

A lustful, moody musician carries on an affair with his wife's sister in this gripping tale of gruesome intrigue. He plans the perfect murder to dispose of his inconvenient spouse: a complex plot, involving a trip to the cinema, and a state-of-the-art reel-to-reel tape recorder. But the best laid plans... Meanwhile, who is that strange old man who maintains a vigil over events from his caravan? Featuring a jazzy interlude from Cleo Laine, accompanied by Dudley Moore.

Mon 7 Dec 18:10 NFT2 *

Wed 16 Dec 20:30 NFT2

*** Introduction by Steve Chibnall**

Double Bill:

The Big Day

UK 1960. Dir. Peter Graham Scott. With Donald Pleasence, Andrée Melly, Colin Gordon, Harry H Corbett, William Franklyn. 62 min. **PG**

This snappy office-politics drama sees three employees – feeble, ineffectual Partridge (an oily Pleasence), brash, arrogant Selkirk (a swaggering Franklyn), and sycophant Jackson (a hen-pecked Corbett) – battle it out for promotion. Rightfully regarded upon release as B-picture film-making at its best, this splendidly cynical, downbeat tale of ambition and petty rivalry still packs a terrific punch today.

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Devil's Bait

UK 1959. Dir. Peter Graham Scott. With Geoffrey Keen, Jane Hylton, Dermot Kelly. 58min. **U**

A baker with a rodent problem puts down cyanide in a bread-tin, but his long-suffering wife accidentally bakes up a loaf in it. A desperate search for the poisoned loaf is led by Gordon Jackson's lantern-jawed, ultra-stern policeman: 'It's life and death, man!' Will he be in time to avert disaster?

Wed 23 Dec 18:15 NFT2

Mon 28 Dec 20:30 NFT2

Double Bill:

To the Public Danger

UK 1948. Dir. Terence Fisher. With Dermot Walsh, Susan Shaw, Barrie Letts. 44min. **PG**

Made ten years before his *Dracula*, this fast-paced featurette reveals Fisher's flair for the macabre. At a remote roadside tavern, a fickle floozy discards her dreary boyfriend in favour of a roguish bounder, before heading off for a drunken high-speed car-ride through the country lanes. Exploitation thriller

and road-safety film collide in a weird cautionary tale of the perils of drink driving, based upon a play from the uniquely bleak pen of Patrick Hamilton.

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Wide Boy

UK 1952. Dir. Ken Hughes. With Sydney Tafler, Susan Shaw, Ronald Howard. 67min. **PG**

Benny, a small-time spiv selling nylons from a suitcase, seizes his chance to move on to blackmail, then murder. Unburdened by conscience, he views crime more as a vocation than an occupation – and he can't resist making people squirm. But retribution awaits. Atmospherically shot around a shadowy, smoky, post-war London, *Wide Boy* effectively foreshadows Hughes' later *The Small World of Sammy Lee*.

Sat 19 Dec 16:00 NFT2

Tue 22 Dec 20:30 NFT2

Double Bill:

Flat Two

UK 1962. Dir. Alan Cooke. With John Le Mesurier, Jack Watling, Barry Keegan. 60 min. **U**

The first of two top-notch supporting features, from the long-running series inspired by the works of popular thriller writer Edgar Wallace. Le Mesurier gives a customarily smooth performance as a barrister who must attempt to defend a young architect framed for the murder of sleazy Emil Louba, a seedy casino owner who holds his flighty girlfriend's IOUs. Before this slick whodunit provides the ingenious solution, can *you* decide which visitor to Flat Two really settled Louba's account?

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Never Back Losers

UK 1961. Dir. Robert Tronson. With Jack Hedley, Jacqueline Ellis. 61min. **U**

In this terrific crooked-bookies thriller, a crusading insurance investigator tussles with a sinister master-criminal – splendidly played by Patrick Magee, chuckling, wreathed in smoke, complete with high-backed swivel chair. Throw in a Soho showgirl with a gun, burly racetrack toughs and a low-speed car chase around the streets of Mitcham, and the odds are on for top-quality, low-rent fun and thrills.

Mon 14 Dec 18:10 NFT2

Sat 19 Dec 18:00 NFT2

NOTES TO EDITORS

Booking information

The BFI Southbank is open to all. BFI members are entitled to a discount on all tickets. BFI Southbank Box Office tel: 020 7928 3232. Unless otherwise stated, tickets are £9.00, concs £7.60. Website www.bfi.org.uk/southbank

There's more to discover about film and television through the BFI. Our world-renowned archival collections, cinemas, festivals, films, publications and learning resources are here to inspire you.

***** PICTURE DESK *****

A selection of images for journalistic use in promoting these BFI Southbank screenings can be found at www.image.net under BFI / BFI Southbank / December 2009