

ROBERT DUNBAR

June 6 1914 – April 29 2000

After eight long weeks in hospital Bob died at the age of 85. He was such an estimable person, someone delightfully rewarding to know. In recent years his friends and family have several times joined in joyously celebrating various milestones in his life and it is not easy to say a last fond farewell.

Proudly of Scots descent, the son of a senior newspaper executive, his family background was not unprivileged but in 1932 he forsook an assured place at Oxford's Christchurch to join Gaumont-British. In those early days of the talkies multi-lingual co-productions were in fashion and Mickey Balcon promptly despatched Bob to UFA in Berlin as an unpaid assistant on the English enactment of *Ich und die Kaiserin (The Only Girl)*.

In that twilight of Isherwood's Berlin Bob had the risky duty to keep an eye on actor Ernest Thesiger in those louche Lokals. But Weimar was suffering its death throes and at this turning point in history Bob was witness to the Nazi Party's advent to power. With UFA quickly aryanized cooperation with the Jewish owned British company became unthinkable.

He returned to the Gainsborough Studios in Islington and had a first experience of pre-ACT trade unionism when, risking their jobs, the staff anonymously but solidly demanded not only a supper break in their fifteen hour (and more) day but also a half-crown (12 ½ p) supper money. How little things change. Transferred to Lime Grove he was a runner for Hitchcock before assignment to Berthold Viertel, an eminent émigré poet, actor, and director. Together they scripted a story of the young Byron, regrettably unproduced for reasons of cost.

Alexander Korda in his ascendancy was hiring and Bob joined him at Isleworth for pre-production on a version of *Cyrano* to star Charles Laughton and Vivien Leigh, also alas never made. At the resplendent new Denham Studios he was made second assistant on *Things to Come*. That included further duties as minder when, at Korda's behest, he was required to lure H G Wells, the opinionated author, away from the set and perambulate him along the banks of the Colne, gossiping, cracking jokes, and discussing the future of mankind. As reward he received one of Alex's expensive cigars! Later he worked as assistant location manager in a tiny back lot hut, close by that film's famous City Square set, surrounded by a multiplying herd of smelly goats. There's an echo here of *Nobody Ordered Wolves*, Jeffrey Dell's delicious *roman à clef* about those Korda years.

1938 saw yet another British production crisis so, off in the USA, he acquired a Studebaker and a wind-up gramophone to strike out for Hollywood. Reaching New Orleans he sidetracked to Mexico and met his future wife, Tatiana, from an émigré White Russian family. A handsome couple, they married in 1940. In Mexico City Bob was taken on by the Foreign Office and later moved to the Moscow Embassy where he served as Press Attaché for the rest of the war years, publishing the only uncensored Russian

language newspaper in the Soviet Union. S M Eisenstein was among his stimulating circle of acquaintance. With an apparent gift for finding himself at focal points of history Bob was privy to the great director's problems with Stalin, increasingly megalomaniacal and paranoid, over the final version of *Ivan the Terrible Part II*. Following Sergei Mikhailovich's heart attack Bob kept him supplied each week – to the disbelief of the FO in London - with two or three dozen whodunnits.

Back in England he returned to the film industry as an assistant on *The Third Man* whose director, Carol Reed, sent him from Vienna to the Excelsior in Rome to persuade a reluctant and cantankerous Orson Welles to accept the smallish part of Harry Lime. He succeeded - and more history was made. Welles and he met again when Bob was production manager on *The Red Rose*, a turgid costume epic on location near the Sahara, in which Orson was mockingly playing Ghenghiz Khan and simultaneously making off with sizeable quantities of Twentieth Century-Fox's raw stock with which to shoot his own *Othello*.

Next, on to *Odette* which led to him becoming Herbert Wilcox's General Manager for a while. For nascent "commercial" television he produced and directed a series of documentaries at Associated-Rediffusion, returning to features during the fifties and sixties as the producer of several fine pictures for ACT Films. *The Man Upstairs*, frantically rewritten in Jerry's Club, remained his favourite. Richard Attenborough was so eager to play in it he worked only for his agent's commission.

In 1963 Bob founded The London Film School whose courses he devised and many of whose alumni achieved considerable fame here and abroad. The hope had been to see it recognized as Britain's National Film School but sectarian political opposition prevented that and, despite investment of considerable personal finance, a bankruptcy ensued. Subsequently Bob's green thumb was useful when he spent part of his time developing the roof garden at Berkeley Court and some of his work there is still to be seen.

I think it's fair to say that Bob was no subscriber to "isms" but he was a staunch man of the left, always prepared to be engaged, unstintingly contributing his time, effort and pen to ACT and ACTT in their heyday, serving on General Council, as Chair of the Producers & Directors Section, and as Chair of the Journal Committee when our monthly had a different style. He was active during the period of amalgamation with BETA, joining in efforts to retain a vestige of ACTT's culture. In 1986 in recognition of his long-term input he was made an Honorary Member of ACTT which gave him great pleasure.

He was also there, right from the start and until very recently, with the History Project – indeed it was a two bottle lunch of the house rouge during the 1986 ACTT Annual Conference which saw him and me corpsing ourselves with tales of "the old days" and that gave me the idea for the oral history initiative which has grown to be of national importance. It's typical of his sensibilities that in his last days it was suggested rather than to spend money on flowers for him it should be donated to the Project.

His was an *interesting* life – varied, colourful, rewarding, and useful. It had its fair share of ups and downs, disappointments as well as achievements, and he was not on occasion without acerbity and impatience, never a sufferer of fools. In sum he was a civilized, talented, witty, urbane man with yet a trace remaining of the naughty schoolboy he must once have been. He'll be greatly missed, especially by those who shared conversation with him over a glass or two of Famous Grouse at BAFTA or in a nostalgic Soho watering hole (sometimes, I suspect, to the limit of Tanya's tolerance).

Our deep and heartfelt sympathy for this irreplaceable loss goes to Tanya, Bob's partner and companion for sixty years of wonderfully successful marriage, to their children Marina, John, Margaret and Jenny, their eight grandchildren and their three great-grandsons,

'Bye, Bob! Here's looking at you, Kid!

Roy Fowler

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