

British Cinema.

In the 1930s British cinema was generally considered inferior to that coming out of Hollywood. Part of the reason for the many 'quota quickie' films made with the lowest possible budgets simply to meet the quota obligations of the film distributors by the Cinematographic Act of 1927. These early films however gave an opportunity for the developing talents of home grown actors such as John Mills, James Mason and Jack Hawkins, who by the late 1930s had become household names. In 1938 a new Act removed the quota obligation and instead established minimum production costs so hoping to improve the quality of film production.

Nevertheless there were some critically acclaimed films made by British directors throughout the 1930s, largely in an effort to break into the American market dominated by the Hollywood studios. For example Alexander Korda directed *The Private Life of Henry VIII* starring Charles Laughton, (1933), and Alfred Hitchcock with *the Thirty Nine Steps*, (1935) starring Robert Donat. Both these directors plus Michael Balcon the Executive Director at British Gaumont and Gainsborough Studios would employ American actors in order to give their films more Transatlantic appeal, notably Marlene Dietrich who starred in *Knight Without Armour*. (Korda 1937).

Yet one of the major criticisms of British films throughout the 1930s was that they failed to reflect social reality depicting ordinary British life or rarely did they go beyond the confines of the studio in production. There were however a spate of documentary films that attempted to address this criticism, for example films from the Empire Marketing Board Film Unit, and the GPO Film Unit. The latter produced the now famous film *The Night Mail* with dialogue by John Betjeman and music by Benjamin Britten (1936).

Despite the variable quality of British films throughout the 1930s it did not stop large numbers of the British population going to the cinema, especially in the urban areas. The largest proportion of films made in the UK were comedies where such stars as Will Hay with Moore Marriot and Graham Moffat were creating one of the funniest comedy teams ever to work in British cinema. Three of the biggest box office attractions of the decade were George Formby, Gracie Fields and Jessie Matthews, with films such as Sing As We Go, 1934, (Fields), Keep It Fit, 1937. (Formby), and Evergreen 1934. (Matthews). There were many musical variety films with musical support provided by dance bands such as Henry Hall and Jack Payne and operatic tenors notably Richard Tauber and Jan Kiepura.

Crime films were also a major constituent of British film production up to 1939, including 'whodunnit' style films such as the Blood and Thunder series by Edgar Wallace and The Adventures of Bulldog Drummond. They Drive By Night. (1939). became one of the first films of the era to depicting tales of low life criminality and received critical acclaim.

Even with many Britons going to the cinema at least once a week the profitability of most British made films was small hence overseas markets, particularly America was sought in order to boost profits. However much of the output was quintessentially British in nature, the humour for example did not easily travel abroad. In addition the cinema going public often wanted more in the way of glitz, glamour, and grit that the British films did not always offer. Not surprisingly in the 1930s Hollywood films constituted a major component of the cinema goers diet. Hollywood films generally had bigger budgets together with a technical and often artistic superiority lacking in British films.

It is often thought that Hollywood in the 1930s endeavoured to reflect the American Dream and way of life.. Yet it must be remembered that many of the Hollywood pioneers who

established the industry were not American by birth. They were immigrants escaping from persecution in their home countries to the relative freedom of America. For example Louis B. Mayer and Samuel Goldwyn who contributed to setting Metro Goldwyn Mayer, or three of the