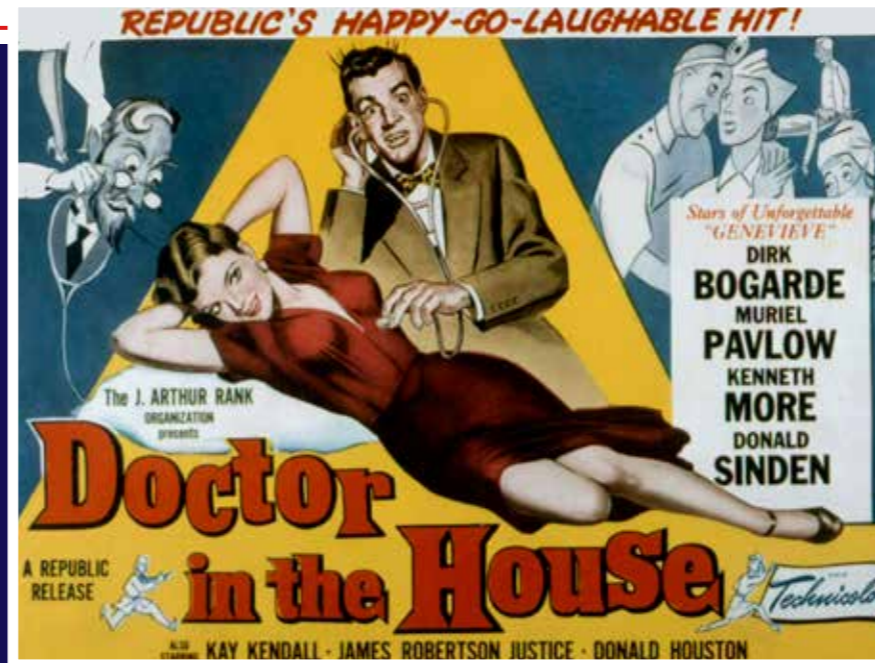


What's up, DOC?

The series of Doctor movies were some of the biggest hits of their day. Steve O'Brien looks back on this often overlooked film franchise...



1955's Doctor at Sea was the first of several sequels, cementing the series as a mainstay.

In the Fifties and Sixties, there was just one comedy franchise that gave the mighty Carry On films a run for their money. But while the Carry Ons now inspire lavish TV documentaries, bells-and-whistles box set releases and loving retrospectives at the BFI, the Doctor series seems to have dropped out of the cultural conversation.

Which is especially odd when you consider that the first film in the seven-movie series was the highest-grossing UK feature of 1954 and that they headlined not only some of British cinema's hottest names (Dirk Bogarde, pictured below, Leslie Phillips and Kenneth More), but also boasted an early English-speaking role for one of the world's most celebrated sex symbols, Brigitte Bardot.

Though the Doctor and Carry On films were rival franchises, behind the scenes things couldn't have been cosier. All seven Doctor films were produced by Betty E. Box, wife of Carry On boss Peter Rogers, with Ralph Thomas (brother of Carry On's Gerald Thomas) directing.



Then there's the fact that both series were lensed at Pinewood Studios and, of course, the shared casts, from Joan Sims and Leslie Phillips to Shirley Eaton, Brian Oulton and Jacki Piper. When Peter Rogers made his second medical Carry On, Carry On Doctor in 1967, he even added in a visual nod to his wife's franchise, in the form of a framed portrait of James Robertson Justice, aka the Doctor films' Sir Lancelot Spratt.

It was 70 years ago, in 1953, that film producer Betty E. Box came across a copy of Richard Gordon's 1952 book, Doctor in the House. Gordon had been an anaesthetist and assistant editor of the British Medical Journal before moving into fiction writing, and Doctor in the House was his first novel. Box saw its big-screen potential, even if Rank took some convincing, due to the book's lack of a central story.

"I think I know how to do it," Box recalled. "I take my four students through three or four years of medical training and make that the story."

She had earmarked the lead role of the timid medical student Simon Sparrow for Dirk Bogarde. But Rank's head

DID YOU KNOW? Carry On regular Joan Sims appeared in five of the Doctor movies, playing a different part each time.

Earl St. John was unsure whether the actor, whose biggest role up to then had been the cop-killing spiv Tom Riley in 1950's *The Blue Lamp*, had the required lightness of touch. Box remained steadfast – Bogarde, she felt, would be the still centre amid the chaos.

Kenneth More, Donald Sinden and Donald Houston rounded out the main cast as Sparrow's fellow students, with Muriel Pavlow as his love interest, Joy Gibson. Sinden would later recall that, at the time, *Doctor in the House* was "just another Rank film. There was no buzz around it".

BOX OFFICE

That was until a preview screening on London's Edgware Road and one scene in particular. When James Robertson Justice's blustery senior surgeon Sir Lancelot Spratt, while discussing the medical term for how long a clot takes to form, barks at an inattentive Simon Sparrow, "What's the bleeding time?" and receives the reply, "Ten past ten, sir!", it brought the house down.

Doctor in the House would go on to become a box office smash, recouping its budget within six weeks of release, and establishing Dirk Bogarde as not only a major star, but a premier-league heartthrob. It also won Kenneth More a BAFTA for Best Actor.

In the mid-Fifties, movie sequels were a rare thing, but Richard Gordon had already penned a follow-up novel, *Doctor at Sea*, and so another Doctor feature was a no-brainer for Rank. *Doctor at Sea*, again produced by Box and directed by Ralph Thomas, hit cinemas in July 1955, just 16 months after *Doctor in the House's* debut. The film would see Dirk Bogarde's freshly qualified Dr Simon Sparrow becoming the medical officer on the cargo ship the SS Lotus, the captain



Above: Brigitte Bardot, Betty Box, Dirk Bogarde and Ralph Thomas. James Robertson Justice (left).



of which is the bluff, whisky-downing Captain Wentworth Hogg (a returning James Robertson Justice).

The film, which also starred a then-21-year-old Brigitte Bardot, would go on to become the third most popular film at the British box office in 1955, after *The Dam Busters* (1955) and *White Christmas* (1954).

As a sign of his ballooning stardom, Bogarde was allowed to rewrite some of his dialogue for *Doctor at Sea*, a practice he continued on the next film, 1957's *Doctor at Large*. Sparrow's line about why doctors become doctors, "I think it's because they feel that the most precious thing we have in the world is life – and that there's nothing more important than helping to give everyone their fair share of it," is his, as is, "The NHS is all very well, but some people still prefer manners with their medicine." Unlike the Carry Ons, those early Doctor films weren't afraid of making moral, and sometimes political, points.

Doctor at Large would see the return of Donald Sinden as the raffish Dr Tony Benskin, Muriel Pavlow as Joy Gibson and James Robertson Justice back as Sir Lancelot Spratt. But with Bogarde's star in the ascendancy, he decided to sit out the next film, 1960's *Doctor in Love*. Instead, Michael Craig was brought in as Dr Richard Hare, with Leslie Phillips added to the cast as the skirt-chasing Dr Tony Burke. Only James Robertson Justice's Sir Lancelot provided a link with the previous films.

Despite Dirk Bogarde embracing more refined film roles such as the barrister who finds himself blackmailed over a homosexual love affair in *Victim* (1961) and the slyly manipulative Hugo Barrett in Joseph Losey's *The Servant* (1963), he accepted a \$20,000 pay cheque to return as Dr Simon Sparrow one last time for 1963's *Doctor in Distress*. It would also be the final Doctor film to be scripted by Nicholas Phipps. Though it failed to scale the box office heights of the first movie, *Doctor in Distress* was still one of the ten most popular films of 1963. Rank, it seems, weren't going to pull the plug on the franchise just yet.

But when *Doctor in Clover* arrived in 1966, it felt like a

Left: Kenneth More and Muriel Pavlow in *Doctor in the House*. *Doctor at Sea* (below).



reinvention. With former Norman Wisdom scribe Jack Davies now on screenwriting duties, *Doctor in Clover* was louder, faster and racier than previous instalments. Leslie Phillips returned, though this time as Gaston Grimsdyke, a doctor who, in an effort to woo a younger nurse, travels to Carnaby Street for a sexy, mod makeover. It almost seemed a metaphor for the series itself, a franchise desperate to extricate itself from its chaste, middle-class Fifties trappings.

The Doctor series would come to a sorry end with 1970's *Doctor in Trouble* (based loosely on Richard Gordon's 1961 novel *Doctor on Toast*). In it, Leslie Phillips returns as Dr Tony Burke and finds himself a stowaway on a boat captained by Sir Lancelot Spratt's brother, George. Again, penned by Davies, it's a lewd and frequently slapstick affair and, despite casting Sixties 'It boy' Simon Dee and rising Monty Python star Graham Chapman, it feels like a franchise that had run out of steam.

A DOCUMENT OF BRITAIN

It had been hoped that James Robertson Justice (the only actor to have appeared in all seven films) would play not only his regular role of Sir Lancelot, but also his sea-faring sibling. Only shortly before filming, the actor suffered a stroke and had emergency brain surgery. He recovered, but still wasn't well enough to film both parts. In the end, the role of Captain Spratt went to Robert Morley, who coincidentally had been offered the part of Sir Lancelot Spratt in *Doctor in the House* 16 years earlier. Justice did appear, but only for one scene as Sir Lancelot. "It must have taken every ounce of energy he possessed

to do it," said Box. "We paid him for both parts – he certainly deserved it for his long and loyal service."

The series' director Ralph Thomas was no fan of the movie, saying in the book *Collected Interviews: Voices From Twentieth-Century Cinema*: "I couldn't bear to make any more films in the series. And so Rank said, 'Well, right, would you allow us to dispose of your interest in a television series?' And so they did." Richard Gordon's Doctor stories would continue on the small screen through the Seventies, with Barry Evans, Robin Nedwell and Geoffrey Davies heading up the cast of medical hopefuls and John Cleese, Barry Cryer, Graeme Garden and Bill Oddie among its writers.

The Doctor films may be largely forgotten these days, but as a seven-movie document of a changing Britain, as well as giving us the first sightings of one of British cinema's most enigmatic actors, they're hard to beat.



As well as playing as Dr Duncan Waring in the TV series, Robin Nedwell appeared in five films.