

# Freedom in EXILE

Exiled from Hollywood, director Joseph Losey became a stranger in a foreign land, which gave him a unique vantage point to explore the peculiarities of British society, says Steve O'Brien

**I**n Hollywood history, few events are as shaming as the movie industry's treatment of its own during the McCarthy witch hunts of the Fifties.

Scores of brilliant, vital writers, directors, producers and actors became unemployable as the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) attempted to purge the country of communists. Finding themselves blacklisted in their homeland, many of Hollywood's finest upped sticks and continued their careers overseas, far from the prying eyes of Senator Joseph McCarthy and his anti-communist zealots.

Of all those who Tinseltown deserted in that turbulent, scarring period, Joseph Losey is the one whose loss was felt most keenly. But if American cinema lost out in the Sixties and Seventies for deserting this Wisconsin-born radical, British filmmaking was electrified by his



The *Servant*, directed by Joseph Losey, starred Wendy Craig as Susan and James Fox as her boyfriend Tony (above). Tony hires Hugo Barrett, played by Dirk Bogarde (right) as his manservant and he in turn brings his lover, Vera (Sarah Miles), into the household. The plot examines the four characters' relationships and issues of social class.



work here. *The Servant* (1963), *Accident* (1967) and *The Go-Between* (1971) are now seen as classics, as commercially popular as they were critically lauded. But by that point, there was no going back for Joseph Losey.

Hollywood may have kicked itself for blacklisting this unique and idiosyncratic talent, but Britain was where Losey became the filmmaker he was always destined to be. Talking shortly before his death about his being forced out of America in the early-Fifties he reflected, "Without it I would have three Cadillacs, two swimming pools and millions of dollars, and I'd be dead. It was terrifying, it was disgusting, but you can get trapped by money and complacency. A good shaking up never did anyone any harm."

## Reds under the bed

Many of those filmmakers driven out of Hollywood in the Fifties never recaptured the success they'd had before the HUAC began their anti-red crusade. But Joseph Losey's best work came after he left America. Before his exile he'd been a jobbing director, mostly pumping out pulpy, inexpensive B-pictures. His true love in those early days was the theatre, where he was more free to express his radical, left-leaning politics. After the Second World War he'd even befriended agitprop playwright Bertolt Brecht and collaborated with him on a staging of Brecht's fiery *Galileo* with the actor Charles Laughton. Soon after the play premiered on July 30, 1947, at the Coronet Theatre in Beverly Hills, Losey accompanied Brecht to Washington for the playwright's appearance before the HUAC. Brecht left the US the next day.

Losey directed his first feature, *The Boy with Green Hair*, in

1948. The movie, a heavy-handed allegory about a war orphan who wakes up one morning to find his hair has mysteriously turned green, was unremarkable and barely hinted at what this 38-year-old neophyte was capable of. Similarly, his remake of Fritz Lang's 1931 film *M* in 1951 only served to remind audiences of how powerful the original was.

Losey had joined the Communist Party USA in 1946 and in the spring of 1951, his name was brought up by two witnesses before the HUAC. Though he was in the midst of editing a thriller titled *The Big Night* (1951), he absconded to Europe. Losey remained in Italy for more than a year and when he returned home, no-one would give him a job.

### Losey in London

"There was no work in theatre, no work in radio, no work in education or advertising, and none in films, in anything," he recalled. "I didn't stay away for reasons of fear... I didn't have any money. I didn't have any work." After a month in the US, he returned briefly to Rome before settling in London in January 1953.

There's little of note artistically in Losey's first British picture. *The Sleeping Tiger* (1954) is a pot-boiler noir, as B as B-movies get, but it did introduce him to an actor who would become a treasured presence later in Losey's career – Dirk Bogarde.

Though he was uncredited on *The Sleeping Tiger* (the company behind the movie, Anglo-Amalgamated, were nervous of making Losey's involvement public, and attributed the film to 'Victor Hanbury'), it did well enough that Losey was rarely out of work in the years after. His past, however, continued to haunt him. Brought in to direct Hammer Films' *X the Unknown* in 1956, he was fired after



Pat O'Brien and Dean Stockwell in *The Boy with Green Hair* (above). Joseph Losey directed Terence Stamp in *Modesty Blaise* (1966, below).



just a few days when actor Dean Jagger refused to work for him, due to his communist sympathies. On the whole, though, the following decade would see Losey grow as a director, evolving beyond the shallow genre movies he'd started out on and slowly embracing a richer dramas that explored his fascination with class, power and sexuality. Movies such as the bullish *The Criminal* (1960) and *Eva* (1962) share an emotional intensity as well as a distinct baroque visual style.

But it's Losey's trilogy of literary adaptations for which he remains most acclaimed. 1963's *The Servant* is a masterpiece, a subversive psycho-horror with Dirk Bogarde as a sociopathic manservant who gains psychological control over his timid employer. The film was based on a novella by Robin Maugham that Bogarde had introduced to Losey on the set of *The Sleeping Tiger*. The book's probing of the British class system and its

homosexual undertones were rich pickings for a director like Losey and for writer Harold Pinter who shared Losey's leftist leanings, theatrical roots and outsider viewpoint.

A few years later, Losey and Pinter collaborated again for an adaptation of Nicholas Mosley's 1965 novel, *Accident*. The story of two middle-aged Oxford dons (played by Dirk Bogarde and Stanley Baker) who fall under the spell of a female student, it won Losey the Grand Prix Spécial du Jury award at the 1967 Cannes Film Festival. "No elaborations, no odd angles, no darting about," Pinter said to *Sight & Sound* magazine of Losey's direction. "Just a level intense look at people, at things. As though if you look at them long enough, they will give up their secrets."

Their final film together was *The Go-Between*, based on L.P. Hartley's 1953 novel of the same name. Like *The Servant* and *Accident*, it's an acute study of the British class system, only set this time at the dawn of the century. "It has a surface and a coating of romantic melodrama," Losey said at the time, "but it has a bitter core."

Losey's career in the Seventies would prove erratic. Though films such as the French-Italian co-production *Monsieur Klein* and his 1975 feature adaptation of Brecht's *Galileo* (the same play he'd directed on stage in 1947) were exemplary by any director's standards, other movies such as 1975's *The Romantic Englishwoman* (with Michael Caine and Glenda Jackson) and 1972's *The Assassination of Trotsky* (starring Richard Burton) were regrettable misfires.

Asked in 1982 if he dreamed of ever working in the States again,

Joseph Losey and Dirk Bogarde first worked together on *The Sleeping Tiger*.



Losey replied: "Oh, sure, naturally. I come from that background. I'm probably more deeply rooted, more strongly and more educatedly, than a lot of those people who make it impossible to work there. Of course, I want to, but whether I will ever be able to is another matter."

Losey never did get to make that next American movie. He died in 1984, just four weeks after completing work on his final film, *Steaming* (1985).

Many of Hollywood's finest found their voice in exile. Filmmakers such as Billy Wilder, Douglas Sirk and Edgar Ulmer made America their home after fleeing from Nazism. But there's

a smaller grouping of US-born directors whose banishment from their country sharpened their creative visions. Though Joseph Losey lived in the UK for the last 31 years of his life, he never renounced his American citizenship. And, even though Hollywood never apologised to Losey and the other talents it callously snubbed in the Fifties, the director's story has been told, in a roundabout sort of way.

In 1991, a film appeared that looked back on that troubled time. Irwin Winkler's *Guilty by Suspicion* told the tale of a Hollywood director (played by Robert De Niro) who returns from abroad to find

that, unless he outs other left-wing sympathisers to the HUAC, he will be blacklisted. Yet there's one other character in the film who is clearly based on Joseph Losey. Instead of naming names, 'Joe Lesser' instead flees Hollywood for the UK. And who did Winkler choose to play this thinly veiled portrait of Tinseltown's most famous émigré, but the biggest film director of 1991, Martin Scorsese. As tributes go, that's not a bad one.

Thirty-nine years on from his death, Joseph Losey is regarded as one of the UK's most incisive and artistically daring film directors. America's loss was most certainly Britain's gain.