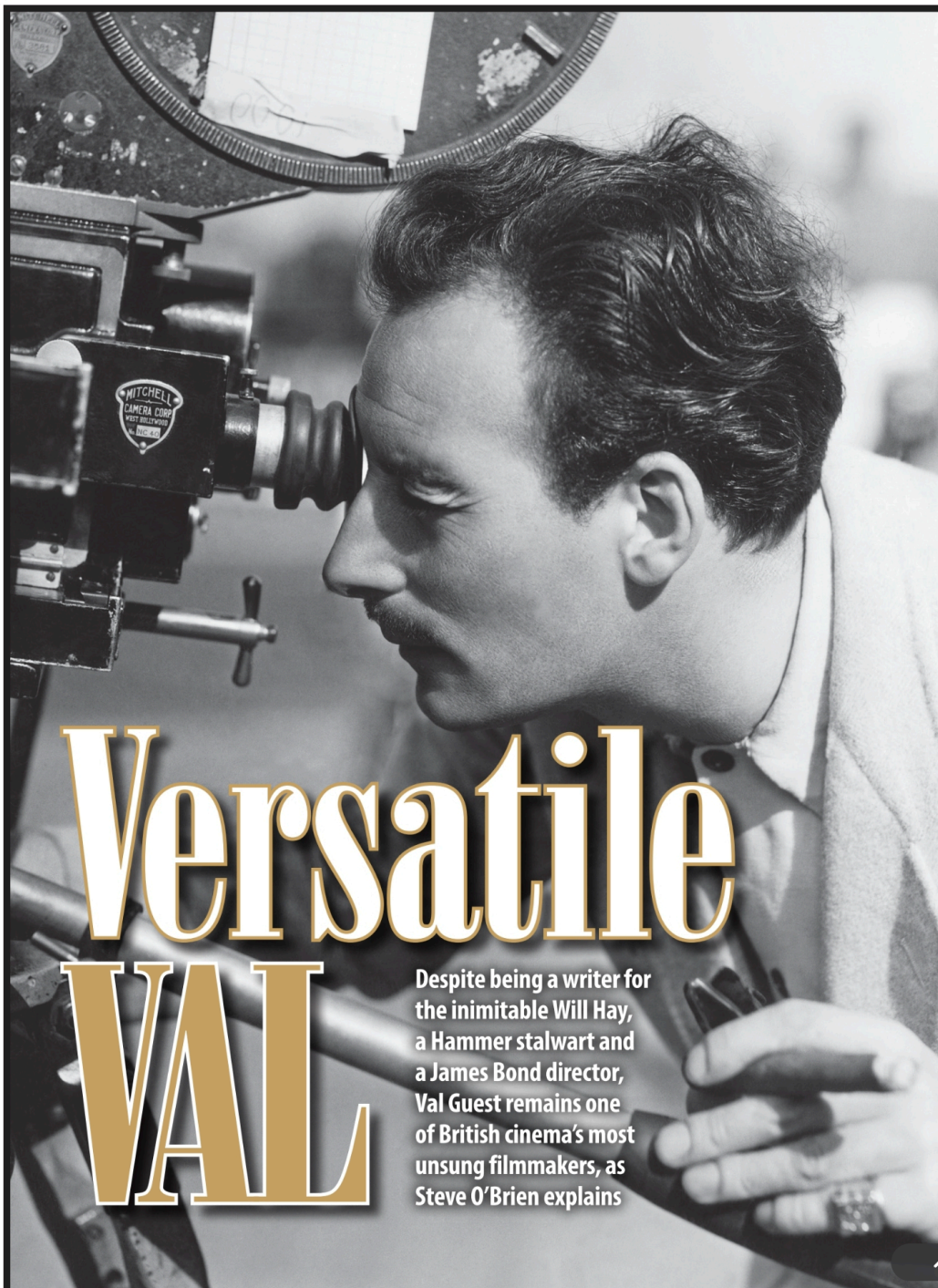


Guest made several movies with his wife Yolande Donlan including *Miss Pilgrim's Progress* (1949). Married in 1954, they both lived to the ripe old age of 94, with Val dying in 2006 and Donlan in 2015.



# Versatile VAL

Despite being a writer for the inimitable Will Hay, a Hammer stalwart and a James Bond director, Val Guest remains one of British cinema's most unsung filmmakers, as Steve O'Brien explains

Take a glance at director Val Guest's CV and you might think it had somehow become jumbled up with the work of another filmmaker, so wildly different were his movies, in content, style and indeed quality. Can it be that the same person who helmed the gritty, apocalyptic drama *The Day the Earth Caught Fire* (1961) also directed the Robin Askwith sex comedy *Confessions of a Window Cleaner* (1974)? And how can it be that the person who wrote the much-loved Will Hay comedy *Ask a Policeman* (1939), could – as a director – mess up its Cannon & Ball-starring remake, retitled *The Boys in Blue* (1983), some 43 years later? Then there's the biting music industry satire *Expresso Bongo* (1959), followed up a few years later by what *The Daily Telegraph* called 'one of the worst films ever made', Hammer's camp-tastic *When Dinosaurs Ruled The Earth* (1970). 'It is impossible,' noted *The Independent* upon the director's death in 2006, 'to think of another British film creator who can approach his record.'

It's also hard to think of other filmmakers with such era-spanning careers. Born in London in 1911, Val Guest's first-ever screen credit was as co-writer on the 1935 comedy *No Monkey Business*, with his first director caption coming on the Arthur Askey short, *The Nose Has it!* (1942). He finally hung up

his director's hat in 1984, after helming three episodes of the television series *Hammer House of Mystery and Suspense*, closing a career that had started nearly half a century before.

It's fair to say that, without those blemishes, Val Guest may very well be feted as one of British cinema's most skilled directors. After all, there are many uncontested classics in his vast filmography, including the sci-fi horror *The Quatermass Xperiment* (1955), the propulsive thriller *Jigsaw* (1962) and the smallpox drama *80,000 Suspects* (1963), not to mention *The Day the Earth Caught Fire*, a movie that so impressed President John F Kennedy he screened it for 200 foreign correspondents at the White House.

## GRITTY REALITY

All those films have a distinct realist style, with Guest employing a gritty, cinema verité approach that gave his dramas a thrilling urgency and verisimilitude. His plan for *Quatermass*, Guest told the author Tom Weaver in 1994, was 'to shoot it as though a television company had said, "Go on out and cover this story". I wanted it to look as though it was [filmed by] hand-held cameras; we didn't have to frame somebody absolutely in the middle – make it real'.

It was a technique that's hard to spot in the bonkers sci-fi musical *Toomorrow* (1970), the soft-core

farce *Au Pair Girls* (1972) or thriller *Killer Force* (1976) (rated just 14% on Rotten Tomatoes), none of which are on anyone's favourite films list. 'He was a jack-of-all-trades,' the director Joe Dante said of Guest upon his death, 'but there are a lot of little gems in his output that, hopefully, will come to light now.'

Yet it's those very films that make Guest such a fascinating figure in British cinema. His CV is certainly eccentric and erratic... imagine Alfred Hitchcock following *Frenzy* with *Holiday on the Buses!* The eclecticism is likely the reason that, in his lifetime, he was never truly lauded. He was the archetypal director-for-hire, often signing on for movies he had little love for, yet even with those outlier projects, there's no hint that he was ever half-hearted about the job in question.

*Confessions of a Window Cleaner* was, despite the critical scorn, the top-grossing British film in the UK in 1974, while even *When Dinosaurs Ruled the Earth* performed well, grossing \$1.25 million in the US. They may not have been the movies Val Guest would have wanted brought up in any obituary, but they're reminders of how adaptable and flexible he was as a director. It's hard to imagine David Lean feeling comfortable on a Doctor film or Michael Powell making a *Carry On* movie work. But Val Guest always ➤



The multi-faceted Guest penned the script for the much-loved Will Hay comedy *Ask a Policeman*...



...TV's Cannon and Ball took to the big screen in a re-worked version of Guest's original Hay comedy... it should have been arrested

made transitioning from The Camp on Blood Island to Up the Creek (both 1958) look easy.

**WRITING CREDITS**

What's often forgotten about Val Guest is that, unlike many other directors, he frequently had a hand in the writing of his films. He co-wrote the screenplays to The Quatermass Xperiment (with Richard Landau) and Quatermass 2 (1957, with Nigel Kneale, author of the original BBC serial), as well as The Day the Earth Caught Fire (with Wolf Mankowitz) and Assignment K (1968, with Bill Strutton and Maurice Foster), while 80,000 Suspects, Hell is a City (1960) and Jigsaw are all solo efforts. 'I would rather do the writing myself,' he said in a 1997 interview for the book An Autobiography of British Cinema, 'so that if it went wrong, there was only me to blame.'

But then Guest had form as a screenwriter. Most of his early credits were in comedy, and from 1937's Good Morning, Boys!, he became Will Hay's go-to scribe, penning another three movies for the much-loved star, including Oh, Mr Porter! (1937) and Convict 99 (1938). Guest was always a frustrated director, however, and finally secured his break after the Ministry of Information approached him to write a short

When Dinosaurs Ruled the Earth was described as one of the worst films ever made



film about the dangers to public health and the war effort of do sneezing. 'I refused to do it unless, if what I wrote was accepted, they allowed me to direct it,' he recalled.

The Nose Has it! proved so popular (attached to the Rita Hayworth musical My Gal Sal, one critic opined that it was better than

the A-picture) that he was snapped up by Gainsborough Studios. From 1943 on, there's barely a pause on his filmography, often pumping out several pictures a year (The Quatermass Xperiment was one of six films Guest released in 1955).

Though many of the movies Guest made over the course of his

career were American-funded, he never – unlike Alfred Hitchcock or Alexander Mackendrick – broke through as a director in the States.

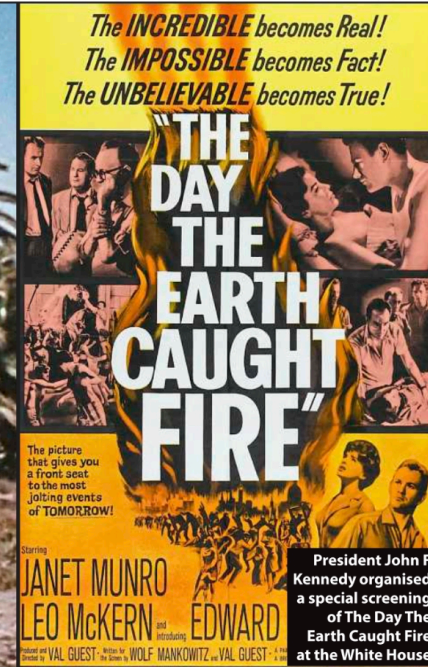
**VULGAR VAUDEVILLE**

The nearest he got was when the offer came to direct Casino Royale (1967), or rather 'co-direct' the planned James Bond spoof alongside John Huston. Only the production would prove a disaster and, in the end, Guest and Huston were two of five credited directors (Ken Hughes, Robert Parrish and Joe McGrath being the others) on a movie that Time magazine called 'an incoherent and vulgar vaudeville'. When it came to the film's London premiere, Guest found himself sitting next to Huston who leaned over and whispered, 'D'you think we're wise to be here?'

Outside the 007 debacle, Guest made many of his best films during the late Fifties and Sixties, and

he would cite Yesterday's Enemy (1959), Expresso Bongo, Hell is a City, The Day the Earth Caught Fire (for which he won a BAFTA Award for Best Screenplay) and Jigsaw as his favourites. 'I like doing comedy,' he once told author Brian McFarlane, 'but I would rather do something more serious, particularly a thriller of some kind.'

Except that's not what happened as Guest stepped into the Seventies. His final full decade as a director was a dispiriting mix of low-brow comedies and television work, including episodes of The Persuaders! (1971-72), The Adventurer (1972-73) and Space: 1999 (1976-77). His final cinema project, however, would bring him almost full circle. The Boys in Blue was to be the big-screen debut of the popular TV comedy duo Cannon and Ball and Guest was tasked with rewriting and updating his own screenplay from the



Will Hay classic Ask a Policeman. Guest recalled in his autobiography how, after he finished writing, he hoped 'nobody would turn in their graves,' adding 'except perhaps me'.

Guest's last directing job again took him back to his youth. He'd made some of his best movies for Hammer – the Quatermass films and The Abominable Snowman (1957) among them – and in 1984 he accepted an offer to direct three episodes of the TV series Hammer House of Mystery and Suspense. In his autobiography he says he 'thoroughly enjoyed the whole assignment', but at the age of 73, it was time to call it a day.

**LONG LIFE**

Guest would live on to the ripe old age of 94, spending much of his last decade on the film festival circuit, talking enthusiastically about his favourite movies and less passionately about others (The Boys in Blue, we're looking at you). Upon his death in 2006, obituaries – what there were of them – called him 'one of the most prolific, versatile, popular and least pretentious filmmakers in post-war British cinema' (The Daily Telegraph) and a director with 'a wide range of themes and styles' (The Independent).

Over the course of a career that stretched from the premiership of Stanley Baldwin to that of Margaret Thatcher, Guest wrote more than 70 films and directed more than 50, making him one of the UK's most prolific, if forever underrated, filmmakers.

'I have never in my life set out to make a picture for the lowest common denominator audience,' he once said. 'Any picture I've made I've made because it was the sort of picture I would like to see. I just hope that other people share my taste.'

Casino Royale with David Niven and Ursula Andress was a James Bond spoof that mis-fired spectacularly



Director John Carpenter said The Quatermass Xperiment had an enormous impact on him and remains a sci-fi favourite

**DID YOU KNOW?** Before he became a screenwriter, Guest was London Correspondent for The Hollywood Reporter in the early Thirties, replacing another future director, John Paddy Carstairs.