

Justice for all

The Duke of Edinburgh once described his friend James Robertson Justice as “a large man with a personality to match”. Steve O’Brien reflects on the life and work of the bear-like star of the Doctor films



Alongside Dirk Bogarde and Dandy Nichols in *Doctor at Large*

“You! What’s the bleeding time?” “Ten past ten, sir!”

everyone was talking about when they left that theatre. He would go on to appear in all six sequels, the only actor to do so.

Most of James Robertson Justice’s movie roles, from *The Fast Lady* (1962) to *Raising the Wind* (1961) to *Father Came Too!* (1964) to *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* (1968) – as Truly Scrumptious’ father – depicted him as an imposing, if occasionally mischievous, authority figure, but those who knew the actor attest to the fact that the real James Robertson Justice was much more eccentric and whimsical. “James was a large man with a personality to match,” Prince Philip once said of his friend, “He lived every bit of his life to the full and richly deserves the title ‘eccentric’.”

LARGER THAN LIFE

Justice was a man of many and varied passions. He was a keen naturalist, enjoying trout fishing and falconry (including teaching a young Prince Charles) and was even a founding member of the Wildfowl Trust. He was also, despite his marriage to Dilys, a voracious womaniser. One of his more significant flings was

with the fashion journalist Molly Parkin. “He was 30 years older than me, but that seemed irrelevant,” she wrote in her book *Welcome to Mollywood*. “On the night we met, I gave James my virginity on a gilded plate, and in return he taught me the joys of physical love. Nothing has ever compared with what we had together: the warmth, the shared wit, the mutual affection, the sexual attraction so potent that we could barely sleep.”

Though Parkin would later describe Justice as “the true love of my life”, the affair withered when the actor refused to leave Dilys. The couple did eventually divorce in 1968, by which time he was deep

into a relationship with the actress Irene von Meyendorff, whom he had appeared opposite in the 1960 film, *The Ambassador*.

It wasn’t long after his divorce, and indeed after the filming of *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*, that Justice suffered a stroke. The after-effects were so severe that his scenes in *Doctor in Trouble* (1970) were scaled back and 1972’s *The Massacre of Glencoe* would prove to be his final big-screen outing.

The last years of Justice’s life were, by all accounts, a struggle. The divorce, and the chronic lack of work, had decimated him financially and he was forced into selling his beloved home in Scotland. By now he was living with Irene and, on June 29, 1975 they finally married. He died, penniless, just three days later.

James Robertson Justice was a larger-than-life figure, with passions to match. He may not have been cinema’s most versatile actor (Doctor in the House writer Richard Gordon once reflected, “every performance was himself”), but there are few movies that aren’t lifted by his bombastic presence. He was one of the pillars of the silver screen in the Fifties and Sixties and his death, at the cruelly young age of 68, would prove to be a bitter blow for British cinema.

The image cinemagoers had of James Robertson Justice in the Fifties was of the ultimate establishment figure, a bushy-bearded, booming-voiced behemoth who seemed as if he’d be most at home in a Westminster gentlemen’s den downing Dom Pérignon with stupidly rich bankers and fusty cabinet ministers. But, while the man who played Sir Lancelot Spratt in *Doctor in the House* and its various sequels did indeed count Prince Philip and various members of the aristocracy among his cronies, he was no stuffed shirt. Few Carlton Club regulars would, we imagine, have enjoyed as colourful and packed a life as James Robertson Justice. He was, at various points, a journalist, a lumberjack, a teacher, a racing car driver, a policeman, a parliamentary

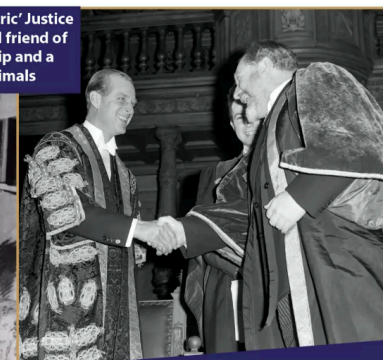
candidate (for Labour, as it happens) and a soldier (for the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve). Hell, he even fought in the Spanish Civil War, on the side of the Republicans. And this is all before he even set foot in front of a movie camera. In an age when too few actors have experience beyond the film set, James Robertson Justice is an example of a movie star who lived life to the full and who wasn’t motivated by fame or fortune. He acted, he once said, simply to pay the bills for his real passions.

He was 37 when he made his first film appearance, an uncredited part as operation room officer in the 1944 Ealing war picture *For Those in Peril*, though it wasn’t until his turn as the boozy Dr Maclaren in 1949’s *Whisky Galore!* that his big-screen career gathered pace. His signature role, however, was still five years away. Sir Lancelot Spratt, the rambunctious Chief Surgeon at London’s St Swithin’s Hospital isn’t the biggest part in *Doctor in the House* (incidentally, the biggest film in the UK in 1954), but it’s the one

James Robertson Justice co-starred with James Anderson (*Whisky Galore!*), Dirk Bogarde (*Doctor in Distress*, 1963) and Brigitte Bardot (*Doctor at Sea*, 1955)



The ‘eccentric’ Justice was a good friend of Prince Philip and a lover of animals



For a time, Justice was a professional ice hockey player while also managing the national team at the 1932 European Championships.

DID YOU KNOW?

