

Masters of reinvention

Over three decades Frank Launder and Sidney Gilliat made a huge impact on British cinema, so why aren't their names better known? asks Steve O'Brien



When critics talk of the great British filmmakers of the Thirties, Forties and Fifties, there are names that are almost always brought up – Alfred Hitchcock, Powell & Pressburger, David Lean, Carol Reed... But often forgotten, and unjustly so, is the writing/directing partnership of Frank Launder and Sidney Gilliat. It's very possible you've never even heard of them – when Gilliat passed away in 1994, followed by Launder three years later, their deaths barely registered on the media Richter scale. Yet take a look at their filmography and you'll see some of the most successful and beloved movies of cinema's Golden Age – *The Lady Vanishes* (1938), *Night Train to Munich* (1940), *Green for Danger* (1946), *The Belles of St Trinian's* (1954)... Individually, their names are attached to more than 100 films, together, almost 40, and yet they're rarely talked about these days. Where their filmmaking contemporaries continue to enjoy lavish retrospectives at the BFI and feature-length documentaries honouring their importance, Launder and Gilliat remain uncelebrated and under-appreciated.

It's possible that their greatest strength as filmmakers is also the reason they're not as venerated as Hitchcock, Lean or Powell. Unlike those more auteur-like directors they didn't have a signature style or a preferred genre. Over the course of their decades-long careers, they dabbled in virtually every category of film, from escapist thriller to saucy comedy, gritty drama to comic horror. 'Versatility,' Gilliat once said, 'was always our curse.' They even created two characters, Charters and Caldicott, who appeared across multiple movies, pre-dating the 'cinematic universe' that Marvel Studios claims to have invented, by 70 years.

FIZZING DIALOGUE

Both had started out in the early Thirties as screenwriters, Gilliat penning such fare as *The Ghost Train* (1931), *Rome Express* (1932) and *The Man Who Changed His Mind* (1936) while Launder was behind films including *The Black Mask* (1935) and *Oh, Mr Porter!* (1937). Their first joint credit was on the 1933 comedy *Facing the Music*, but it was their script for Alfred Hitchcock's 1938 adaptation of Ethel Lina White's novel *The Wheel Spins*, soon to be retitled *The Lady*

DID YOU KNOW?

Sidney Gilliat was the son of George Gilliat, the one-time editor of the London Evening Standard.

Vanishes, that would be their breakout movie.

If you want an example of the fizzing dialogue and vivid characterisation for which Launder and Gilliat would become known, you need look no further than this classic of pre-war cinema. It helped that the writers' macabre sense of humour aligned so much with their director's and, in fact, several of the pair's movies after this would echo Hitchcock's trademark mix of suspense and whimsy.

Launder and Gilliat's most significant add-on to White's story were two cricket-mad eccentrics, Charters and Caldicott, played in the film by Basil Radford and Naunton Wayne. The characters, who, in *The Lady Vanishes* are more interested in the results of the Test Match than the missing Miss Froy, proved such a standout that the writers revived them for the 1940 wartime drama *Night Train to Munich*, directed by that other giant of British cinema, Carol Reed. Like *The Lady Vanishes*, this too was an adaptation of a book, in this case Gordon Wellesley's *Report on a Fugitive*, but with the inclusion of Charters and Caldicott, Launder and Gilliat's stamp is on it completely. The characters' ➤



Basil Radford and Naunton Wayne played Charters and Caldicott in four films including *The Lady Vanishes* (left) and *Night Train to Munich* (above)

dialogue is sharp and playful, 'I bought a copy of Mein Kampf,' Charters tells Caldicott. 'Occurred to me it might shed a spot of light on all this. I understand they give a copy to all the bridal couples over here.'

It's something that elevates what might have otherwise been a fairly routine thriller into something much more memorable.

Introduced almost as background colour in *The Lady Vanishes*, and upgraded to supporting characters in *Night Train to Munich*, Charters and Caldicott were made leads for the 1940 spy comedy *Crook's Tour*.

They guested again in the Home Office-commissioned propaganda film *Millions Like Us* (1943), but a planned fifth appearance, in the *Lauder and Gilliat*-penned and *Lauder*-directed *I See a Dark Stranger* (1946), failed to materialise. The script had Charters and Caldicott once more as support, but with *Radford* and *Wayne*'s fame now considerably greater, the pair demanded more screen time. *Lauder* and *Gilliat* refused, and the two actors left the movie, their roles rewritten for two new characters, *Captain Goodhusband* (*Garry Marsh*) and *Lieutenant Spanswick* (*Tom Macaulay*).

In some ways, parting ways with *Radford* and *Wayne* would prove a blessing for *Lauder* and *Gilliat*, freeing them up to explore different kinds of films, without the need to parachute in their famous comic creations. They'd made their directing debut with *Millions Like Us*, and from then on would

From the comedy of *St Trinian's* to the 'kitchen sink' style of *Only Two Can Play*, the pair refused to be pigeonholed

be (largely, anyway) in control of their own screenplays, sometimes directing together, but mostly on their own, showing an insatiable need to challenge themselves in a variety of genres.

THE ST TRINIAN'S YEARS

In 1945, they set up their own production company, *Individual Pictures*, giving them even more autonomy. From here on, they decided to continue to write together, but direct – as the name of their company indicated – individually. 'Co-directing didn't work,' *Gilliat* told the author *Brian McFarlane* in 1992. 'Frank was very easy with actors, whereas I was very diffident.' Not that they were tied to each other creatively – one of the reasons their partnership survived so long is that they allowed themselves space to write and direct projects outside of the *Lauder-Gilliat* marriage. *Gilliat* alone wrote and directed the fine thriller *Green for Danger* (1946), while the 1950 comedy *The Happiest Days of Your Life* saw *Lauder* writing and directing. But whatever they did on their own, they would always come back to each other.

Fittingly, it was a *Lauder-Gilliat* co-write that would become their

biggest hit since *The Lady Vanishes*.

The *Belles of St Trinian's* was a comedy inspired by *Ronald Searle's* school-based comic strips and starred *Alastair Sim* in dual roles as headmistress *Miss Millicent Fritton* and her twin brother, *Clarence*. The film was a commercial and critical smash, with *Kine Weekly* calling it a 'wacky, side-splitting collegiate extravaganza.'

In fact, the movie was such a success that it spawned a sequel in 1957, *Blue Murder at St Trinian's*, with *Lauder* once more directing. *The Pure Hell of St Trinian's* (1960) and *The Great St Trinian's Train Robbery* (1966) duly followed.

Even in between *St Trinian's* features, they continued to spread their wings. The pair's 1959 comedy



Trains appear in several of *Lauder and Gilliat's* films including *The Ghost Train* (above) and *Oh, Mr Porter!* (right)



reviews, with *Christie* herself saying of the film, 'It got flatter and less interesting every minute.' A final *St Trinian's* movie (without *Gilliat's* involvement), *The Wildcats of St Trinian's*, was released in 1980 and would be *Lauder's* last directing credit.

Gilliat died in 1994, at the age of 86, with *Lauder* passing away three years later, aged 91. There was a smattering of obituaries in the press, but otherwise their deaths went unnoticed.

Yet even beyond the official *Lauder-Gilliat* features, their influence spread wide. 1979's star-drenched remake of *The Lady Vanishes* kept *Charters* and *Caldicott* in the character mix, while the BBC produced a six-episode series based around the two cricket-loving well-borns in 1985.

Even the *St Trinian's* series was rebooted in 2007 and 2009, both films owing a sizable debt to the movies made by *Frank* and *Sidney* five decades earlier.

While they never enjoyed the respect and acclaim of their golden-age peers, there's much to cherish in the pair's vast and varied filmography. If you want to understand the character and social and political temperature of the UK in the mid-20th Century, you need look no further than the films of *Lauder* and *Gilliat*, the great unsung heroes of British cinema.

Left Right & Centre has little in common with the broad farce of the *St Trinian's* series. A crisp satire of the British political system, it's more *Boulting Brothers* than *Carry On*, while 1962's *Only Two Can Play* (directed by *Gilliat*, but from a script by *Bryan Forbes*) was a character-driven comedy-drama rooted in the kitchen-sink tradition. There was no genre, it seems, off limits to them.

Their output became less frequent in the second half of the Sixties, and their last project as a duo was 1972's thriller *Endless Night*, based on the *Agatha Christie* novel. It was released to mixed

DID YOU KNOW?

Aside from their appearances in movies, *Naughton Wayne* and *Basil Radford* also played *Charters* and *Caldicott* in a series of BBC radio productions.

