

**SIMONE SIGNORET
LAURENCE HARVEY
HEATHER SEARS**

THE FILM OF
JOHN BRAINE'S
ROOM AT THE TOP

ROOM AT THE TOP

DONALD WOLFIT

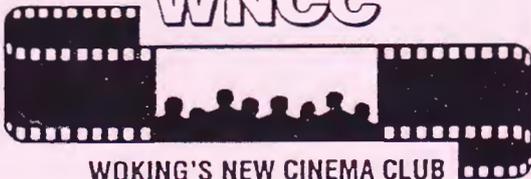
DONALD HOUSTON HERMIONE BADDELEY

Screenplay by Neil Paterson A Remus Film

directed by JACK CLAYTON produced by JOHN & JAMES WOOLF

Distributed by British Lion in association with Independent Film Distributors

WNCC



WOKING'S NEW CINEMA CLUB

UK; 1959
115 minutes; Black & White.

- * Directed by.....Jack Clayton
- * Written by.....Neil Paterson
- * Original Story by...John Braine
- * Cinematography by...Freddie Francis
- * Music by.....Mario Nascimbene

CAST:

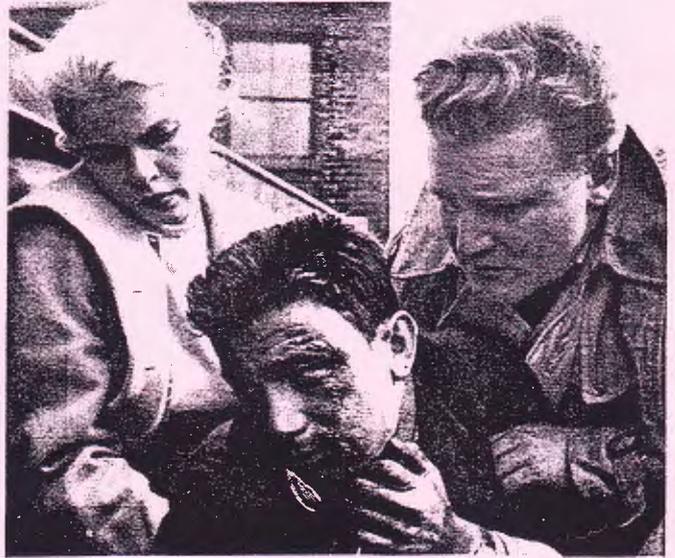
- * Laurence Harvey.....Joe Lampton
- * Simone Signoret.....Alice Aisgill
- * Heather Sears.....Susan Brown
- * Donald Houston.....Charles Soames
- * Donald Wolfit.....Mr. Brown
- * Hermione Baddeley.....Elspeth
- * Allan Cuthbertson.....George Aisgill
- * Raymond Huntley.....Mr. Hoylake
- * Richard Pascoe.....Teddy
- * Ambrosine Phillpotts..Mrs. Brown



Jack Clayton's first feature film, an adaptation of John Braine's controversial best-selling novel, was the prelude to a new genre of British realist films, based on the writings of the "Angry Young Men". Acclaimed as the first British film to treat sex seriously, (i.e. as something enjoyable rather than sinful), it was also unusual in showing the industrial north as it really was - hard, grimy and depressing. In these respects, it has been called the 1950's 'Brief Encounter'

It was also the first British-made film to be X-rated for its sexual content, a fact that increased its popularity with American audiences and paved the way for subsequent kitchen-sink dramas, such as 'Saturday Night and Sunday Morning' and 'Look Back In Anger'. Simone Signoret was imported from France specifically to make the sex look convincing and won an Oscar for her efforts.

Laurence Harvey plays the newly discharged war hero, Joe Lampton, who takes up a post as a junior accountant in Warnley Borough Council Treasurer's Department. He loses no time in pursuing his ambition : to marry class, looks and money - all in the person of the rather dim Susan Brown, (Heather Sears), the pride and joy of the local amateur dramatic society. However, Joe is warned off by Susan's self-made businessman father, (Donald Wolfitt) and starts a passionate affair with an older married woman, Alice Aisgill (Simone Signoret). I don't have to tell you that it can only end in tears.



There are many excellent scenes that illustrate Jack Clayton's skill as a director: Joe's unromantic and almost grudging seduction of Susan at a local beauty spot; Joe and Alice's wet, dismal, but ultimately touching weekend at a seaside cottage; and Joe's reluctant visit to his impoverished parents in their run-down Council house. Freddie Francis, who would become an accomplished director himself, contributed enormously to the gritty feel of the film with his excellent use of black and white photography to bring the grey industrial locations (actually Bradford) to life.

Although Clayton and screenwriter Paterson stuck reasonably close to the spirit and atmosphere of Braine's novel, some contemporary critics considered that the restrictions of 1950's censorship and the resultant rather stilted and coy approach to the sex scenes (lots of cutting away to faces and distant views at the crucial points) destroyed the tension of the source material.

'Room At The Top' was also seen by some critics as derivative of the French low-life and Italian realism schools, but lacking their power and intensity. Others thought that it lapsed into cliché, was melodramatic and had shallow characterisation. However, no-one criticised its sense of place, with its accurate evocation of grimy streets, smokey clubs and scruffy love nests. In retrospect, it is a valuable social document, reminiscent of the mould-breaking period in British life leading up to the "never had it so good" era of the early 1960's, with its blurring of social groupings and class divisions.

The critics' reservations did not affect audience reactions, or the Oscar awards panel who gave the film two statuettes (Signoret - Best Actress and Paterson - Best Adapted Screenplay) and four nominations (Harvey - Best Actor; Hermione Baddeley - Best Supporting Actress; Clayton - Best Director; and Best Picture). The British critics remained unimpressed by what they perceived as an "ambiguous and inflexible" performance by Harvey, who was felt to convey "insufficient physical desire". Producer James Woolf had in fact made attempts to make the smooth actor more rugged by giving him a crew-cut and employing dialect coaches for that authentic Yorkshire look and sound, but John Braine still considered him to be "an exotic butterfly" - hardly a ringing endorsement of Harvey's portrayal of Joe Lampton ! (Incidentally, did you know that young Lithuanian Larushka Skikne, brought up in South Africa, renamed himself Laurence Harvey after Harvey Nichols store in Knightsbridge ?)

In contrast, Simone Signoret's portrayal of the older woman was universally praised, attracting glowing critical accolades such as: "honest, acute and altogether outstanding" and "overwhelmingly tragic...she dominates the film". As the exact opposite of poor little rich girl Susan Brown, Signoret held all the trump cards, but Heather Sears' understated performance as Susan was nevertheless regarded as "shrewdly observed". Hermione Baddeley, as Alice's friend, fully deserved her Oscar nomination, whilst Donald Houston and Richard Pascoe (as Joe's workmates) and Donald Wolfitt also made good use of their supporting roles.

'Room At The Top' gave rise to two less successful sequels, both based on Braine's follow-up novels - "Life At The Top" (1965), starring Harvey, Jean Simmons and Honor Blackman, and 'Man At The Top' (1975), featuring Kenneth Haigh as the replacement for Laurence Harvey, who had died tragically young in 1973. Haigh also starred in the popular TV series of the same name.

I'll leave the final word to John Trevelyan, the Chairman of The British Board of Film Classification who awarded 'Room At The Top' its X- Certificate. In his memoirs, entitled "What The Censor Saw", Trevelyan said: "Up to this time, the cinema, with rare exceptions, had presented a fantasy world; this film dealt with real people with real problems. At the time, its sex scenes were regarded as sensational and some of the critics who praised the film congratulated the Board on having had the courage to pass it....there was no nudity or simulated copulation, but there was rather more frankness about sexual relations in the dialogue than people were used to." Nearly 40 years later, its sexual frankness seems tame by the standards adopted by the screenwriters for 'EastEnders', 'Brookside' or 'Coronation Street' - how attitudes have changed !

IAN SOWERBY.

The next Woking Borough Council Big Steam Screen day (presented in association with WNCC) will be on Saturday 5 April, with performances at 3 pm and 7.30 pm.

The snappy (?) title reflects the event having made the same move as ourselves, from Goldwater Lodge to the Kemp Room.

Further details are available from David Vince, Woking Borough Council's Arts Development Officer on 01483 743807. Ticket prices and details of films to be shown will be announced at future WNCC screenings.



the late Marcello Mastroianni in *Pret à Porter*

A man of many talents, Willie Rushton - who died on December 11th aged 59 - appeared in a few films as well as making his mark in the diverse fields of satire, light entertainment, cartooning and freelance punditry. Always fun to watch, his film appearances were a curiosity for being at the service of a film rather than maintaining his easygoing desire to entertain for the sake of it, but he enjoyed roles in *Those Magnificent Men in Their Flying Machines* (1965), *The Bliss of Mrs Blossom* (1968), *Monte Carlo or Bust* (1969) and *The Flight of the Doves* (1971) amongst others.

Another British comedy hero for whom the simple label of actor or comedian seems dreadfully insufficient, Michael Bentine - who died on November 26th aged 74 - was a founder member of *The Goons*. His film appearances were few, but included a rare lead with *The Sandwich Man* (1966).

An actor of rare power and presence, Howard E Rollins Jr - who died on December 8th aged 46 - shot to prominence with *Ragtime* (1981), and consolidated that success with a strong performance in *A Soldier's Story* (1984). On the small screen he appeared in *In The Heat of the Night* during the late '80s.

Actress Maria Casares - who died on November 21st aged 74 - appeared in many classics of French cinema, including *Les Enfants du Paradis* (1943), *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne* (1945), *Orphée* (1950) and *Testament d'Orphée* (1960).



A top fashion photographer, Terence Donovan - who died on November 22nd aged 60 - directed the film *Yellow Dog* (1973).

Playwright and actress Diana Morgan - who died on December 15th aged 88 - worked mostly in the theatre and latterly on television, but was also a contract screenwriter at the Ealing Studios, writing *A Run For Your Money* and *Poet's Pub* (both 1949).

53 reaction sheets completed giving an average score of **8.1**.

Some of your comments about:-

The Film:

What can one say? Perfect!

Poignant and touching film.

Better than Cinema Paradiso!

On a par with Cinema Paradiso - almost!

The barmaid was in a "glass" of her own but found a 1st class mail when she married the postman!!

The film was enjoyable but seems to be a little lost after about an hour.

Now and always, forever searching for the poetical postman.

A really superb film when we first saw it and still that now we have revisited it. Such drama and so many messages.

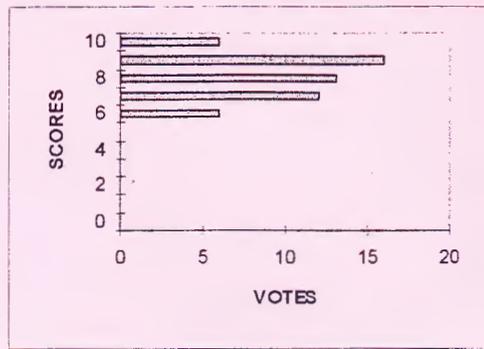
The type of film that the Club should be showing - splendid, delightful.

Benne, Benne!!

The New Venue:

Many positive comments were made about this including the improved comfort of the seating. Several requests were made for the screen (or ceiling!) to be higher and the seats to be staggered with more space between the rows, especially if there are sub-titles. Other suggestions were to screen off the light from outside and to have interval pre-orders at the bar (where some felt the prices were high). And last but not least....Sheila and team, your cakes are being missed!!

Helen Sayers



REACTIONS

20 February 1997

COMING NEXT

15] USA/UK 1994 128 mins. Dir. Peter Chelsom
Oliver Platt, Jerry Lewis, Lee Evans, Leslie Caron

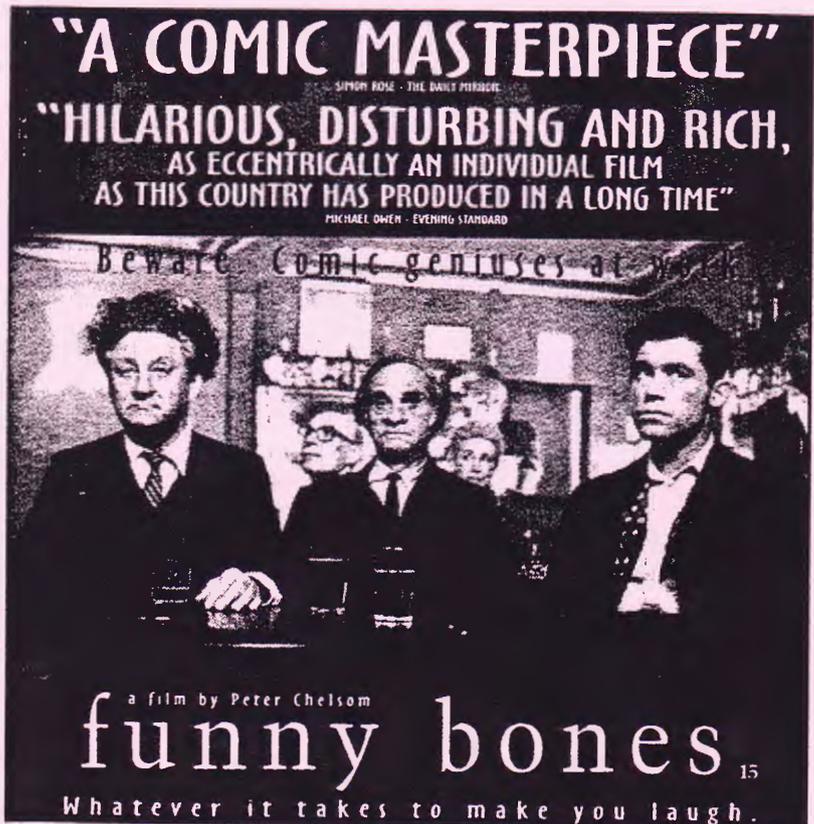
When stand-up comedian Tommy (Platt) dies a humiliating 'death' on his opening night in Vegas, he flees to Blackpool to relearn his art and encounters the natural genius of Jack (Evans). Originality, sensitivity and an exceptional eccentricity of performance make this comi-tragic drama a fitting follow up to Chelsom's last picture, Hear My Song. "...quietly moving and genuinely funny" Empire

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Performance Ends 10.40pm (approx.)