

Thursday 28 January 2010

Woking's New Cinema Club presents:

TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD



**An Oscar-winning classic
starring Gregory Peck**

Notes by Iain McGlashan

A year on from the inauguration ceremony for President Obama, I think tonight's film is a fitting opportunity to mark that significant event in American history.

It is perhaps hard for anyone aged under 50 used to the America of today with a black President to appreciate the huge social change that America went through in the period between the 1 December 1954 Rosa Parks (the "mother of the Civil Rights Movement") refused to give up her seat on a public bus to make room for a white passenger and 2 July 1964 when the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was signed into law by President Johnson.

This was a landmark piece of legislation that extended voting rights and outlawed racial segregation in schools, at the workplace and by facilities that served the general public.

As my father said when watching the ceremony last year "I never thought a black man would become President of America in my lifetime."

It was with this background of significant social unrest that *To Kill a Mockingbird* was published on 11 July 1960. Harper Lee's fictionalized remembrance of her Depression era childhood in Monroeville, Alabama, won the Pulitzer Prize in 1961. The novel spent a year and a half on the best seller lists, and sold over 3 million hardcover copies.

Director Richard Mulligan and producer Alan Pakula saw something rare and valuable in the story, and so did Gregory Peck, who read the book overnight and called at 8 am the following morning to agree to play Atticus Finch.



Author Harper Lee (shown in the publicity photo for the film with the producer Alan J. Pakula) stated, "In that film, the man and the part met." Lee became good friends with Peck and even gave him her father's watch, which he used in the famous courtroom scene.

When one thinks of the scene where Atticus explained to Scout, when she wondered why she had to give the damaged Boo Radley his possessions, that "it is customary for the son to have his father's watch", the significance of the author's gift to Peck is clear.

Peck himself said that *To Kill A Mockingbird* was the film that mattered to him most. "I put everything I had into it — all my feelings

and everything I'd learned in 46 years of living, about family life and fathers and children," Peck said in 1989, recalling the role. "And my feelings about racial justice and inequality and opportunity."

He was drawn to the novel in part because he identified with Scout and Jem's childhood, free of adult supervision, running barefoot and rolling in tires. He also remembered a cross-burning that the Klan directed towards a neighbouring African-American family. "I felt I could climb into Atticus' shoes without any play-acting. That I could be him."



Winner of three Oscars, *To Kill A Mockingbird* is one of those films where all the elements came together perfectly. Besides hiring one of the biggest stars in Hollywood, producer Alan J Pakula secured an esteemed director, Robert Mulligan, gifted Director of Photography, Russell Harlan and acclaimed composer, Elmer Bernstein. Pakula also struck gold when it came to the supporting roles, and the cast here do much to carry the film - particularly a young unknown by the name of Robert Duvall.



Mary Badham recalled "I had never done any theatre, or anything. My father was so against it." After flying to New York for the screen test and getting the part, she found that Peck was so accessible and infinitely helpful to her. "There was such a comfortable, warm atmosphere on the set."

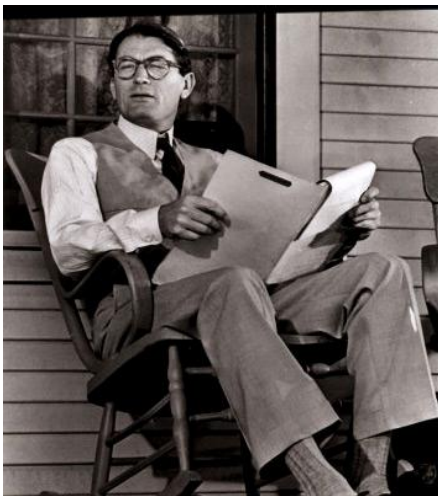
They remained friends all his life, which seems to be a trait with him, caring for people and keeping in touch. "He was my grounding," Mary says. "He made me feel so secure."

After only a few days on the set, she would climb into his lap in between shots.

He was "every little girl's dream of a father, kind, considerate, patient a total delight to work with" and said in another interview, "It was all just so easy."

She enjoyed the experience so much that during the last scene that was filmed, outside the jail the night before the trial, she kept blowing her lines, knowing the experience was about to end. Finally, her mother scolded, "Look, enough is enough. Let's get this done and get it over with. You're a professional now." Mary was nominated for an Oscar, but lost to Patty Duke (in *The Miracle Worker*).

The performance of Peck and Badham were complemented by Robert Duvall's film debut as the mysterious neighbour, Boo Radley, and the tragic dignity of Brock Peters' performance as the accused man.



At an Academy tribute memorial Peck's daughter Cecelia told the gathered audience "He really was a lot like Atticus Finch,"

The role of Atticus Finch earned Peck his final Hollywood honour, as in the week before his death on Thursday 12 June 2003 (aged 87), the character was placed No. 1 on the American Film Institute's list of top 50 heroes in U.S. movies.

Peck often said, "The lead in my obituary is sure to be 'Academy Award Winner for *To Kill a Mockingbird*.' I'll settle for that."

USA released 25.12.62 Running Time 129 minutes Certificate U

Director : Robert Mulligan

Writing Credits : Harper Lee (novel); Horton Foote (screenplay)

Music: Elmer Bernstein

Cast:

Attius Finch – Gregory Peck

Tom Robinson – Brock Peters

Artur "Boo" Radlwey – Robert Duvall

Scout - Mary Badham

Jem- Philip Alford