

# OH! WHAT A LOVELY WAR

Followed by a Q&A with **Michael Attenborough CBE** and **Angela Thorne**, hosted by **Jo Botting**



To mark the First World War Centenary, BAFTA screens *Oh! What A Lovely War* (1969) directed by Lord Richard Attenborough CBE. Attenborough's unforgettable directorial debut won five Academy Awards and was nominated for Best Film and Best Director. It remains an outstanding creative achievement and we're delighted to be one of the first to screen this new digital print.

In 1967 John Mills and Len Deighton approached Richard Attenborough with a screenplay adaptation of *Oh! What A Lovely War*, having secured the film rights. Here, Attenborough describes his response and talks about the complexity of bringing this remarkable work to the screen.

"I rang Johnny in the morning and said, 'It is a fabulous screenplay. What

do you want me to play?', Attenborough recalled. "He said, 'Dick we're not asking you to play, we want you to direct.' I told him he was out of his mind, as it was an incredibly difficult subject to direct and I had no experience what so ever. He said, 'We could find somebody who knows absolutely everything about directing, or we could find somebody who knows absolutely nothing about it and who

RELEASE YEAR: 1969

RUNTIME: 144 mins

DIRECTOR: Richard Attenborough

SCREENWRITER: Len Deighton.

Adapted from a play by Charles Chilton, with musical stage play by Joan Littlewood.

might venture into new ground. We've decided to get someone who knows absolutely nothing."

Attenborough had already produced four films through his own company – *The Angry Silence*, *The L-Shaped Room*, *Séance On A Wet Afternoon* and *Whistle Down The Wind* (the latter with Mill's daughter Hayley) – and had developed a taste for directing. He had already been





offered a number of pictures to direct but turned them all down, keeping in mind a piece of advice he had been given by David Lean: “Don’t do it just because you want to direct. The time to direct is when you feel that if you can’t direct that particular film, you’ll die.” For Attenborough, that film was a biography of Mahatma Gandhi, a project that even David Lean had failed to get to grips with. *Oh! What A Lovely War* was a different matter altogether.

“I just couldn’t see it until I read Len Deighton’s script”, he told Margaret Hinxman, “and then I realised its possibilities. It seemed to me at first an essentially theatrical conception, marvellous on the stage, but if it couldn’t be improved as a film it wasn’t worth doing.”

Part of that involved widening the scope of the picture. “I thought the play was petty in ignoring the sacrifice of the upper classes – young subalterns whose

life span at the front was three weeks”, Attenborough explained. “I inserted some scenes to put over this point. But even so I think we may be criticised for not stressing sufficiently that the losses and suffering weren’t simply confined to the working classes. I regret that.”

There was one other overriding problem. They had no money.

The late ’60s were a particularly bad time for British cinema. In the wake of successes such as the Bond films, *A Hard Day’s Night*, *Tom Jones* and *The Knack*, there had been a boom in US investment in British films – as much as 90% of investment in UK films had come from the US – but the returns had been poor and production was drying up. A number of major box-office disasters such as Tony Richardson’s *The Charge Of The Light Brigade* (1968) had left the Hollywood studios licking their wounds and withdrawing their support. A big-budget, highly stylised anti-war musical based on

a show that had flopped on Broadway was nobody’s idea of a safe bet.

Admitting that “to ask for \$2.5m to make a semi-documentary, semi-fantasy picture with no storyline and no character development isn’t the easiest thing in the world,” Attenborough went from studio to studio to raise the \$3.25m budget without success. It was a chance meeting with Charles Bluhdorn, whose company Gulf + Western had just bought Paramount, when Attenborough pitched the project, acting out many of the parts and “ham that I am, played some of the scenes, sang some of the songs, did some of the dancing.” Bluhdorn was impressed by his enthusiasm and asked him who he could get for the cast. “Lying through my teeth I said I could get Olivier, Ralph Richardson, John Gielgud, Jack Hawkins, Kenneth More, Maggie Smith, Michael and Vanessa Redgrave, etc. He said that if I got five of the names on that list, he would give me the money to make it.”

Attenborough visited Olivier and found him incredibly supportive. “It doesn’t matter what the part is, I’ll read the telephone directory if you wanted me to do so.” Not only did he agree to play the part for the minimum union fee, but he also spread the word that others should do the same. The high profile of the project attracted an incredible cast of British talent – in addition to the names he promised Bluhdorn, he also secured Dirk Bogarde, Susannah York, Jean-Pierre Cassel, John Clements and many other familiar faces, with John Mills taking the plum role of Haig.

The star casting was more than just a commercial consideration. “One had a series of parts which, by virtue of their brevity, had to make an immediate impact or were nothing,” Attenborough explained. “I decided therefore to cast all the world figures and military leaders from well known names; everyone on the front line, however, is comparatively unknown.”

Although set on Brighton’s West Pier, now all but destroyed by storms and arson attacks, parts of the film were also shot on the English seaside town’s other, larger Palace Pier, where filming finally began in March 1968. For Attenborough the location was a particularly appropriate





one for this new stage in his career; in 1947 his vicious thug Pinkie Brown had met his end on the pier in *Brighton Rock*, the film which had kick started his acting career with his first starring role.

Where that film had run into trouble with Brighton council (who actually forced them off Brighton racecourse), here he was given an incredible level of cooperation, and most of the film was shot in or around the town. The impressive trenches and the scarred landscape of No Man's Land were re-created at the Brighton municipal rubbish tip at Sheepcote Valley, while the production found a replica of a chateau in the Loire a mere 17 miles away.

Amazingly, with the notable exception of Cassel's rendition of *Belgium Put The Kibosh On The Kaiser*, which had to be reshot due to rain, they were even blessed with good weather – almost too good, with the cast recreating the famous Christmas Day Truce in sweltering 70-degree temperatures.

In addition to dealing with 50 musical numbers, 2,000 extras and countless logistical problems, the first time director had to find a way to meld the semi-documentary aspects of the film with the semi-fantasy ones, all the while holding the audience's attention.

"The principal problem was the fragmentation. There is no storyline, no development of character," Attenborough told Michael Billington." Instead one has a series of vignettes, an accumulation of incidents plus a number of transitions from fantasy to reality. Early on, one had to settle for some style that would pull

all this together. Normally in going from one sequence to another, one would use various forms of dissolves but here that would make for enormous difficulties. I got this idea instead of using aural dissolves. Each scene is related to the next by virtue of the continuation of sound. It's not a style that's been imposed on the material; it's one that arose as a solution to specific problems."

The visual design was equally important. A keen art collector, many of Attenborough's compositions were inspired by Monet, Sisley and Cézanne. And in keeping with Littlewood's vision, there was to be no blood or deaths in the film. The only red in the film would come from the poppies given to those about to die (ironically, it was to be Haig's own annual Poppy Appeal that would rescue many veterans from abject poverty after the war). But the film's greatest *coup de cinema* was its stunning final sequence that gave some small sense of the enormity of a conflict in which more than ten million died. More than 15,000 white wooden crosses would be used in the haunting final image of the film.

*From an abridged version by Trevor Willsmer*

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## MICHAEL ATTENBOROUGH CBE

Theatre director Michael Attenborough has held some of the most coveted positions in British theatre including Resident Director and Executive Producer of The Royal Shakespeare Company, Principal Associate Director at The Swan Theatre Stratford and Artistic Director of the Almeida Theatre. Of his many career highlight's at the Almeida, Michael's *Measure For Measure* was nominated for three Olivier Awards and won the Evening Standard Theatre Award and *The Knot Of The Heart* was also nominated for two Olivier Awards and two Evening Standard Awards. He has just directed *Macbeth* in Australia and is about to direct JB Priestley's *Dangerous Corner* in London, followed by *As You Like It* in the US. Michael will be talking about his father Richard and his memories of the making of *Oh! What A Lovely War*.

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## ANGELA THORNE

Angela Thorne is a stage and screen actress best known for her character Marjory Frobisher in *To The Manor Born* (1979–2007).

She trained at Guildhall School of Music and Drama and completed repertory seasons in York and Sheffield before being cast in productions at Theatre Royal, Windsor and the Haymarket Theatre. *Oh! What A Lovely War* was Angela's first film where she played the role of Betty Smith.

She portrayed Margaret Thatcher in the satiric *Anyone For Denis?* to critical acclaim and following the productions positive reviews Angela reprised her role in the television film of the play in 1982. She also starred in Alan Ayckbourn's *Communicating Doors* (1996) at the Savoy Theatre, played fairy queen Titania in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1997) at the Almeida Theatre and featured in the tour of *Old Ladies* (2003).

Angela has appeared in a number of television shows including the role of Lady Leicester in the mini-series *Elizabeth R* (1971), Daphne in the BBC comedy *Three Up, Two Down* (1985–1989), and has had guest roles in *Midsomer Murders* (2002) and *Foyle's War* (2004).

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## JO BOTTING

As a fiction curator at the BFI National Archive, Jo Botting is responsible for acquiring and preserving British film heritage, programming film seasons and hosting events. Her BFI seasons include Deborah Kerr, Vivien Leigh, The Boulting Brothers and Margaret Lockwood and she has contributed to books on Gothic Cinema, Alfred Hitchcock and Ealing Studios, as well as other BFI publications and online resources.

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