

THE ENTERTAINER

“Look at my eyes. I’m dead behind these eyes. I’m dead, just like the whole, inert, shoddy lot out there. It doesn’t matter because I don’t feel a thing, and neither do they. We’re just as dead as each other.”

Archie Rice (Laurence Olivier)

Having adapted John Osborne’s first play *Look Back In Anger* as their debut film, Woodfall took the logical step of the writer’s follow-up *The Entertainer*—the story of a washed-up music-hall veteran—as their second. The results provided Sir Laurence Olivier with one of his most memorable roles—and a sixth Best Actor nomination—as well as giving future Woodfall legend Albert Finney his first big-screen appearance at the age of 23.

The film itself pivots on the painful passing of old generations as new ones energetically arise, set against the tumultuous backdrop of the epoch-defining Suez crisis in the autumn of 1956. Because while *The Entertainer* takes place in an unspecified English coastal town—and was mainly shot on real locations and with natural light wherever possible—in the fading Lancashire resort of Morecambe, the real action is unfolding some 2,370 miles away in Egypt.

The nationalisation of the Suez Canal by Egypt under Colonel Nasser sparked a brief, bloody war as the country was invaded by Israel, France and the United Kingdom. In Osborne’s play and screenplay (the latter co-written with Nigel Kneale), the British armed forces on the ground include Mick Rice (Finney), son of the film’s title character Archie (Olivier).

Events in Suez dominate newspaper headlines back home and are followed avidly, even by those who don’t have relatives involved. The consequences of the United Kingdom’s climbdown, starting with the resignation of Prime Minister Anthony Eden, would reverberate for decades to come. Indeed, many observers reckon that the national psyche has still not come to terms with the abrupt curtain-fall of its days as a confident global superpower.

The sunset of Empire is thus the backdrop for Osborne’s keenly observed study of a single showbusiness family—its pawky patriarch the much-loved Edwardian star Billy Rice (Roger Livesey), whose ill-advised comeback provides the final act with genuine moments of pathos and tragedy.

By this stage Billy can see no other way of helping out his financially beleaguered son, a delusional bankrupt clinging to his pastimes of skirt-chasing and draught Bass beer (the ale received so much exposure in the script that its brewers were reportedly asked if they would like to come on board as a sponsor.)

Archie a complex, demanding part, which involves navigating quickly between very different emotional registers as he shifts instinctively between various forms of artifice, not to mention several extended song-and-dance routines. Rice was specifically created for Olivier, who was so impressed by *Look Back In Anger* that he asked Osborne to come up with an angry middle-aged man as protagonist. Osborne nervously sent the first act to Olivier, who knew a winner when he saw one—even if it wore all the lineaments of a loser. “I could be run over and killed at the beginning of Act II for all I cared,” he remarked.

The film uncompromisingly captures a truly iconic performance (“the way he allows his sleazy façade to slip by a twist of the mouth, a throwaway line, or a look in the eyes is quite brilliant,” raved *Variety*). But, unlike Archie’s magnificently tawdry act, this is no one-man show by any means. It is instead a genuine ensemble, the first of several such achievements in the career of director Richardson.

Lancashire-born Brenda De Banzie (who six years earlier had more than held her own opposite Charles Laughton in *Hobson’s Choice*) matches Olivier every step of the way as his pathetically long-suffering wife Phoebe, a part at one point slated for Olivier’s then-wife Vivien Leigh. Leigh’s loss was cinema’s gain. “Her drunk scene,” wrote acerbic American critic Stanley Kauffmann in *The New Republic*, “is one to which all Studio [Method] actors should be taken and held fast by the nape of the neck until they have seen it a dozen times.”