

LAUGHTER IN THE DARK

“You’re so clever, the way you’ve arranged everything.”

Sir Edward More (Nicol Williamson)

How appropriate that a film in which the main character loses his sight should have for decades have been so very difficult to see: barely distributed, shown only twice on British television, never made available in home-video formats. One of the more ill-starred of Woodfall productions, Edward Bond’s adaptation of the 1932 novel by Vladimir Nabokov had a chequered reputation from the earliest days of its shoot: leading man Richard Burton—who hadn’t worked with director Tony Richardson since the latter’s debut, *Look Back In Anger* (1959)—was sacked after filming a handful of scenes, allegedly for drink-derived tardiness.

Nicol Williamson quickly stepped into what now stands as the second in an accidental triptych of consecutive Woodfall pictures in which the magnificently versatile Scottish thespian takes centre stage—sandwiched between *Inadmissible Evidence* (1968) and *Hamlet* (1969). In a performance which won him the Best Actor award at the San Sebastian Film Festival, he sweatily incarnates art-expert Sir Edward More, a very British gentleman who abandons his conventional lifestyle after contracting a virulent form of amour fou. Like the painting of King Henry VIII he’s seen appraising on television, Sir Edward cuts an impressive figure at first glance but proves paper-thin on closer inspection.

Footloose target of his affections is Margot, played by Nouvelle Vague icon Anna Karina—he meets her, aptly enough, in the cinema where’s employed as an usherette. At first glance a liberated lass seemingly sprung from the very paving-stones of Carnaby Street—by way of the Rive Gauche—Margot gradually turns out to be a calculating gold-digger of Machiavellian tendencies. And when she pairs up with old flame Hervé (Jean-Claude Drouot), the pair emerge as truly, sociopathically diabolical—taking full, cruel advantage of Sir Edward’s incapacity when he is blinded in a car-accident.

This sets up the sun-dappled final act of the film, set mainly in a Majorca villa which Sir Edward shares with Margot and—not that he’s aware of this—the cat-footed Hervé as well. Anagnorisis, when it finally comes, hits Sir Edward like a hammer, eliciting from Williamson a yawp of truly animal despair. Although taking considerable liberties with Nabokov’s original text—a personal favourite of the author’s, the proto-Lolita set in Weimar Berlin—Bond nevertheless captures the author’s tone of bemused, cynical erudition (as Monteverdi tinkles brightly on the soundtrack). By making the audience constantly aware of Sir Edward’s predicament, the film simultaneously evokes sympathy for this hapless boob as well as placing us in the shoes of his breezily amoral tormentors. With shades of Patricia Highsmith’s Tom Ripley (another art-world denizen), meanwhile, Drouot’s Hervé outmatches even Purple Noon-era Alain Delon in terms of immaculately suave, Francophone handsomeness. His inscrutably feline grace lies at the sinister heart of a brightly-lit, zingingly colourful production, whose comedy is as black as the darkest night.