

THE SAILOR FROM GIBRALTAR

“You didn’t love him! You love the myth you made out of him! Crime, mystery, adventure, freedom, innocence. Looking at the world through the eyes of a child. It’s romantic crap!”

Alan (Ian Bannen)

Of all the Woodfall Films, French-flavoured *The Sailor from Gibraltar* most deserves the epithet film maudit, perhaps even film perdu. Writing in 2009, Scottish critic David Cairns joked that Tony Richardson’s ill-fated adaptation of Marguerite Duras’ 1952 novel *Le Marin de Gibraltar* “lies dusty in a nuclear bunker guarded by wolves,” so hard to see had it become. Nevertheless, he managed to see it. And liked it. “A slow, compelling and beautiful

movie,” enthused Cairns, “which must have seemed unfashionably romantic when released in the age of free love—a tale of obsessions, in which a love affair takes on the qualities of myth.” This paean was a long way from the near-universal pans which greeted the picture on its initial release in 1967.

Fifty years later, the film—while no masterpiece—seems ripe for rediscovery. Among Richardson’s many features, it boasts the most distinctive opening titles, the most memorable score, and (arguably) the most alluring of his leading ladies. The intriguing titles, featuring (007-style) images from the film projected onto statuary and other irregular surfaces, were designed by The Beatles’ graphic designer of choice Alan Aldridge (“no one,” according to Sir John Betjeman, “comes close to matching his influence on illustration in the 20th Century!”)

The score: lush, eclectic orchestrations featuring instruments from various Mediterranean countries—the complex and entrancing main theme is built around what sounds very much like the Greek box-zither known as the kanonaki—by regular Jean-Luc Godard collaborator Antoine Duhamel. The leading lady: enigmatic, sensual, haughty, coquettish Jeanne Moreau, essaying the polar opposite from her calculating, landbound, Machiavellian schoolmarm from Richardson’s previous Duras collaboration, *Mademoiselle* (1966).

Moreau’s character Anna may speak almost exclusively English throughout—and flawlessly, Moreau’s *maman* was after all from Oldham—and is nicknamed The American or La Americana, but her quintessential Frenchness is never in doubt for *une seconde*. Fabulously wealthy, uninhibitedly sensual, worldly but with the flightiness and humour of an ingenue, Anna sails the world’s oceans in search of her lost lover—the eponymous *matelot*—like some distaff Flying Dutchman, drifting from port to port in her majestic three-masted ship, renamed the Gibraltar in his honour.

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Along the way she picks up various temporary boyfriends, including the film's neurotic, self-questioning main protagonist Alan (Ian Bannen). Indeed, Anna doesn't actually appear until after the end of the first reel, around twenty minutes in. These early stretches sketch in the doomed relationship between Alan and his chatterbox girlfriend Sheila (Vanessa Redgrave), as they holiday in Florence and various other tourist-trodden haunts around the Med. As soon as he sets eyes on Anna, however, Alan—raised along strict British lines in colonial Ceylon (now Sri Lanka)—impulsively boards the Gibraltar chasing a “thousand to one” shot of libertine happiness.

The second half of the film is an increasingly wild and pioneeringly post-modern affair, as Alan accompanies Anna as she follows various leads which she believes will bring her to the ever-elusive sailor. One of these leads comes from a certain “Louis of Mozambique,” played an amused by Orson Welles in a brief cameo where he gets to show off a truly pan-global accent. The screenplay—written by Richardson, Christopher Isherwood and others—drifts from this point into the unpredictable currents of shaggy-dog stories, exquisite corpse games, and the deadpan absurdity of Josef von Sternberg's *The Shanghai Gesture* as the action zigzags from Italy to Greece to Alexandria and even, somewhat incongruously, Addis Ababa and inland Ethiopia.

For all its flaws, *The Sailor From Gibraltar* never takes itself too seriously, and certainly doesn't outstay its welcome: it clocks in at a lean 91 minutes, signing off on an exhilaratingly open, Yokohama-bound note. Shot in crisp, windblown widescreen black-and-white by another Godard regular, Raoul Coutard, this is a strange, dreamy film, difficult to pin down or categorise. Partly timeless and at other moments emphatically of its era, it's the oddly flavoured fruit of a director caught in a period of extreme personal turmoil and professional restlessness. *Le fait juge l'homme...*