

THE KNACK ...AND HOW TO GET IT

“We’re all of us more or less sexual failures”

Tom (Donal Donnelly)

Having landed Hollywood’s most important prize—the Academy Award for Best Picture—with Tom Jones in March 1964, Woodfall scooped the arthouse equivalent just 14 months later when *The Knack ...and How To Get It* won top honours (the Grand Prix du Jury, as the Palme d’Or was then known) at the 1965 Cannes Film Festival. It

was the first British production to do so since *The Third Man* in 1949—ironic, then, that such a cinematic quintessence of Swinging London should have been made by born-and-bred Philadelphian Richard Lester, the only American ever to direct a Woodfall film.

Showbiz prodigy Lester, who started directing TV in his teens, arrived in London aged 21 in 1953. He flung out no fewer than half a dozen features between 1962 and 1965, including two hugely influential vehicles for The Beatles: *A Hard Day’s Night* (1964) and *Help!* (1965). And while *The Knack ...and How To Get It* was sandwiched between the mop-top brace, Lester profitably eschews the temptations of a pop soundtrack in favour of a relatively grandiose but snazzily hip orchestral soundtrack by John Barry.

Then as now Barry was synonymous with the music of 007, the inveterate womaniser whose path from page to to screen had been smoothed by former Woodfall supremo Harry Saltzman. Bondian echoes here half-mockingly burnish the superhuman, supernatural boudoir-prowess of black-suited ladykiller Tolen (Ray Brooks), whose eponymous “knack” with the opposite sex is viewed with envious bemusement by his earnestly bookish, sexually-frustrated young landlord Colin (Michael Crawford). The unflappably suave Tolen offers to take Colin under his wing and provide a schooling in the ways of the sexual scoundrel—only for two wild-card elements to show up near-simultaneously.

First comes the madcap Irish house-painter Tom (Donal Donnelly) and, then, fresh off a bus from somewhere in the north, Nancy (Rita Tushingham, in her third and final Woodfall engagement after *A Taste of Honey* and *Girl With Green Eyes*). The wordy shenanigans between this unlikely quartet are adapted by Charles Wood from the play by Ann Jellicoe; these theatrical origins are most evident in several scenes set in Colin’s entirely white-painted (by Tom) front room. But Lester ebulliently “opens out” the picture not only by the way David Watkin’s cameras explore the nooks and crannies of Colin’s gloriously old-school gaff—1 Melrose Crescent, Hammersmith—but by frequent jaunts into the surrounding streets and even further afield.

London thrillingly becomes an elaborate playground (and/or stage-set) for the frolics of these footloose twentysomethings whose antics are disapprovingly commented upon throughout by a choric slew of tut-tutting oldsters (“raves! you’re having raves! one long rave!”). Set-pieces abound—including one truly inspired and inventive sequence involving a row of temporary doors around a vacant lot—in a film which derives significant energy from the cutting of Woodfall regular Antony Gibbs.

Half a decade later Gibbs would also edit another tale of chalk-and-cheese young(ish) males in a cavernous London abode: Nicolas Roeg and Donald Cammell's *Performance*. *The Knack ...and How To Get It* is of course a much breezier, sillier affair—although the darkness of some cavalier final-reel humour involving potential sexual assault (“rape! rape! rape!”) means the picture has always been controversial, even polarisingly so. Ardent fans have always abounded, however, most vocally Steven Soderbergh—a truly passionate Lesterophile who ranks *The Knack* alongside *A Hard Day's Night* and *Petunia* in the Pennsylvanian's pantheon of masterpieces.

By the 1970 of *Performance*, London had lost nearly all of its swing. In 1965, however, that throbbing confluence of fashion, music and cinema, smashing down class boundaries left right and centre, was very much all the rage. The film is a black-and-white time-capsule of an era when fresh British faces very quickly became global sensations: in *The Knack*, the truly eagle-eyed will recognise then-unknowns Charlotte Rampling, Jane Birkin, Jacqueline Bisset and Pattie Boyd among the bevy of Tolen-hungry beauties, testament to the precocious skills of 27-year-old casting-director Paul Lee Lander. It was his debut, too.