

matt jones

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Oscar Jack and the Marilyn coincidence

*Sunday's Academy Awards ceremony saw an honorary Oscar go to legendary British cinematographer Jack Cardiff, who won his first Oscar in 1947 for *Black Narcissus*. Watching from Dubai, **Matt Jones** recalls the day he met Cardiff and stumbled upon a remarkable coincidence.*

Synchronicity. Serendipity. Coincidence. Call it what you will. What did it mean? Perhaps nothing. Perhaps everything. Five years on, I'm still waiting to find out.

Once I was a reporter on the *South Wales Echo* in Cardiff, the capital city of Wales. I tramped a beat that wove between the magistrates' and coroner's courts, through polling stations and council estates, to street corners where I might conduct vox pops on the state of public transport, the latest Budget or Cardiff City's chances in the league. But the job wasn't entirely lacking in glamour. There was an occasional royal visit to cover and I got to meet other people's heroes, as well as a few of my own.

Of that period in my life, the memory I revisit most is having tea with film cameraman, director and movie legend Jack Cardiff in the Angel Hotel, during the course of which we stumbled upon one of those strange coincidences that re-awaken you to the possibility that there's more to life than meets the eye.

With Jack Cardiff back in the news following the presentation of an Honorary Academy Award to him in Los Angeles on Sunday, it's as good a time as any to tell the tale. The players are Marilyn Monroe, Dylan Thomas, Jack Cardiff and, er, me.

It was on Monday, May 13th 1996, that Cardiff the man came to Cardiff the city to promote his new autobiography, *Magic Hour*, with a book signing and special showing of *A Matter of Life and Death* (called *Stairway to Heaven* in the US), the 1946 classic that starred David Niven as British pilot Peter Carter, who escapes death in a wartime crash to the chagrin of a heavenly escort (Marius Goring) sent to collect his soul.

It was late afternoon when I found Jack Cardiff in the Angel's sunny lounge, comfortably handling a series of one-on-one interviews on his own – thankfully, there was no sign of his publisher's PR person.

Unusually, I had not one but two photographers with me for the assignment. This both perplexed and amused the dapper octogenarian (Cardiff was 82 at the time, he's 86 now) as he rose from a chair to shake hands with us. "We're both fans," one of the photographers sheepishly explained.

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I had already spoken with Cardiff – a telephone interview for a feature that an *Echo* sub had wittily headlined “The Man who Shot Marilyn Monroe”. The story had appeared ahead of that night’s event, so I was meeting Cardiff ostensibly for a follow-up picture story, but in reality to meet in person the man who took Arthur Miller’s favourite photograph of Marilyn and who became her confidante during the filming of *The Prince and the Showgirl*. With me, I carried a bromide of the feature, which I was hoping Cardiff would sign.

Although Cardiff has worked with the likes of Marlene Dietrich, Humphrey Bogart, Katharine Hepburn, Audrey Hepburn, Ingrid Bergman, Bette Davis, Laurence Olivier, Vivien Leigh and Orson Welles, not forgetting Alfred Hitchcock, King Vidor and John Huston, it was Marilyn I was most interested in talking to him about. She was a university pin-up, of course, and her life and death fascinated me for as long as I could recall. With Jack Cardiff, I could bask in one degree of separation from Marilyn Monroe. I could ask someone who actually knew her: “What was she really like?”

Marilyn featured in a screenplay I had begun writing four months before meeting Cardiff. The story of the reconciliation of two estranged lovers, one of whom is desperately ill with AIDS, it is set against the backdrop of HIV-positive basketball star Magic Johnson’s comeback to the NBA. The script’s theme was about finding courage in the face of adversity, maintaining hope however bad the circumstances may be and living life to the full no matter how much time you think you have left. To paraphrase the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas, my story was about not going gently into that good night, but about raging against the dying of the light.

In one scene, after an odyssey through the streets of Los Angeles my hero, Spencer Beacon, finally arrives at the door of the Brentwood home in which he believes his lover is living. When the door is opened, however, he finds himself face to face with a late middle-aged maid who asks if he has come for the body. At this point, two men with a gurney push past Spencer into the house and he dumbly follows. The furniture in the house is from the 1960s, as is the clothing of the maid and the men with the gurney – Spencer has been transported back in time.

A camera flashes in a room along the corridor and presently Spencer enters to see men in suits and hats milling around a bed. On the bed is the body of a woman. She is lying face down, with her left arm outstretched towards a telephone. Beside the phone is an empty bottle of sleeping tablets.

The phone rings and one of the men picks it up. A moment later he shouts: “The press are going crazy downtown, what do we tell ’em?” to which another man replies: “Don’t tell ’em that Marilyn is dead.”

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At this, Spencer slumps onto a seat in disbelief and one of the men – obviously a cop – pulls a book from Marilyn’s bookshelf and reads a passage from Thomas’s poem “Do not go gentle into that good night”: “Do not go gentle unto that good night... Rage, rage against the dying of the light.” The cop then shows the book to a doctor who, in reply, waves the empty bottle of Nembutal and says: “She went gently. She didn’t rage.”

The scene was a fiction that I concocted at my desk at home in Cardiff. I had no idea if Marilyn Monroe knew who Dylan Thomas was, let alone if she was familiar with his poetry. I was also unsure as to whether or not she committed suicide, and remain so. But suicide and the use of the poem suited the theme of my script. I included them because it felt right to do so, although my agent and a couple of producers have subsequently suggested I delete the scene. The script remains un-produced.

Over tea in the Angel, Jack Cardiff’s first words about Marilyn related to his taking of Miller’s favourite photograph of her during the filming of *The Prince and the Showgirl* in Britain in 1957. The picture is reproduced in the book. I seized this opportunity to ask the burning question: “So, what was she really like?”

Cardiff clasped his hands in front of him and looked to the ceiling as if to compose with care the answer he would give. “I think she was unique,” he said, after a time. “She had a split personality. She was like a child sometimes, very naïve, and you’d think: ‘Is this a screen sex symbol?’ She said to me once: ‘Jack, I’ve got a disguise’, and produced this bright orange and red wig that was visible 300 yards away.

“But she had an intuitive wit,” Cardiff added. “She had this new make-up she wanted to wear in the film. I said that if it was white it would make her teeth look dark. So we went to see *Bus Stop* in a private screening room in Soho so I could see how this make-up had looked in that film.

“The women went off to the ladies and someone said: ‘Aren’t dark Italian men wonderful? Which do you prefer, dark men or blond men?’ Marilyn replied: ‘I don’t think it matters, so long as they think darkly.’”

Would you say Marilyn was an intelligent person? I asked Cardiff. With a wry smile, he dodged the question by pointing out that in all her movies you won’t see her on camera for any length of time. The suggestion seemed to be that she would forget her lines or would need to refer to the script while the camera was elsewhere.

Having said that, the softly-spoken and unassuming Cardiff – characteristically it would seem – immediately sought to balance a negative with a positive. “But she was an avid reader,” he added.

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I asked what sort of books Marilyn read. “Well, I gave her a book once,” said Cardiff. “A book of poems by...” He clicked his fingers trying to recall the name of the author. “Oh, what’s his name? He’s one of my favourites. The Welshman.”

I felt the hairs rising on the back of my neck. I was sure he was going to say Dylan Thomas, but knew better than to give him a name, in case he said “Yes” to avoid any embarrassment and I’d be none the wiser.

“Dylan Thomas!” he exclaimed, finally. I must have had a strange look on my face, for the next thing he did was to ask me if I was OK. I told him about my unfinished screenplay and the scene in the Brentwood home.

“Three months ago I imagined a book of Dylan Thomas poems on a bookshelf in Marilyn Monroe’s bedroom,” I said. “Now, not only do I know that Marilyn Monroe really had such a book, but I’ve met the man who gave it to her.”

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