

matt jones

Interview – The Cinematographer, Jack Cardiff

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The man who shot Marilyn Monroe

He's a living legend to movie-goers the world over. Matt Jones meets Oscar-winning cinematographer and director Jack Cardiff.

His father worked with Charlie Chaplin in his music hall days, he took playwright Arthur Miller's favourite photograph of Marilyn Monroe and director Martin Scorsese calls him an "inspiration". And what's more, he's named after Wales' capital city.

Jack Cardiff, film cameraman, director and movie legend, only has trouble with his surname in Wales. The sprightly 82-year-old, who will speak about his life in films at Chapter Arts Centre, Cardiff, on Monday, recalls a previous visit to the city. "I was checking in to a hotel and the man at the desk asked for my name," he says. "After I'd given it, he looked at me as if I was a fool and said: 'Yes, we know where you are, but what's your name?'"

The name Cardiff has been billed on the big screen alongside the greatest names in the business: Dietrich, Bogart, King Vidor, Hitchcock, John Wayne, Olivier, Hepburn, Huston, Orson Welles... Like film credits rolling long after an audience has left the cinema, the list goes on, and on.

The Welsh city's links with the great and the good began when Jack Cardiff's travelling entertainer father decided that 'Gran' was too weak a surname for the stage. "He was playing in Cardiff at the time, so Cardiff it was," he says.

Jack Cardiff legally assumed the name when he was 15 and the rest, as they say, is history – film history.

He started as a child actor in black and white films and grew up to become one of the first cameramen to use the new Technicolour film camera. His autobiography, *Magic Hour*, has just been published by Faber and Faber. Scorsese, legendary director of *Raging Bull* and *Taxi Driver*, said on reading it: "An entire history of cinema seems to be contained within. I hope he knows what an inspiration he's been to me."

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And yet the man who photographed the world's most beautiful women, partied with its greatest hell-raisers and won an Oscar for *Black Narcissus* is an unassuming Essex pensioner, living in Saffron Walden.

If there is one film or moment he could relive what would it be? "*Red Shoes*," he answers, citing the 1949 Powell and Pressburger film about ballerinas. "The excitement was wonderful. We knew we were beginning something special. During the day we worked hard, but in the evenings we partied and had great fun."

Would he, then, consider making one more film? "I like modern cinematography, people like Oliver Stone taking liberties with different kinds of film. I would have loved to have done it myself. Charles Crichton was around my age when he came back to do *A Fish Called Wanda* and all these people in Hollywood were asking who the new guy was! But a friend said to me: 'Come on Jack, do you really fancy getting up at 5.30am every day, in the heat and all that?' and I said: 'Well, perhaps you're right.'

"It is a wonderful business, though. I love it. I dream a fair amount and every time it is a picture. I dream of film."

It is a thrill to speak with the modest, softly-spoken English gent who has played a key part in creating 20th century icons – in immortalising film legends.

What's the story behind his photo of Marilyn Monroe? "She and Arthur Miller lived near Ascot in the '50s when she and I were working on *The Prince and the Showgirl*," he says. "I called at the house one day and Arthur said Marilyn was sleeping. We had lunch and she was still sleeping, so we played tennis. Finally, she came down at 6.30pm looking wonderful.

"I think she was unique. 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. 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.'"

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Cardiff recalls, too, Katharine Hepburn getting angry when director John Huston fished during a take on *The African Queen*.

“Huston was in essence a very fine director with terrific sensitivity, but very relaxed,” he says. “We were working from a raft on one occasion and he had his legs in the water, fishing. Kate Hepburn was furious. ‘John Huston, I will not work when you are fishing with your back to me,’ she said. ‘I’m listening,’ he said, and carried on fishing. ‘I’m listening.’”

Before Cardiff is whisked away to appear at the National Film Theatre, London, I ask one last question: What does he want to be remembered for?

“Photography,” he answers, adding: “There was a cinematographer in Italy who changed his name to Alfredo Cardiff because he thought it would get him more work!”

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