

Backstory: Ealing Studios: 1902 to the present

Club Indigo: The Ladykillers – May 12, 2017

By Joe Kirkish

In Hollywood, there was a time when the studio system was lord over the making of movies. Each studio had its own reputation for a certain kind of film it might be expected to produce, with MGM being the royal member of the family (producer of “classy” films from “Dr. Zhivago” and “Butterfield 8,” to “Gone With the Wind” and “The Good Earth”), discovering stars like Judy Garland, Clark Gable, Paul Muni, Spencer Tracy, Elizabeth Taylor, etc.

At the same time, England had its Ealing Studios, the oldest continuously working film studio in the world, becoming at first famous for classic comedies before it branched into equally classic dramas and wildly varied features, all within a definitely British milieu. It was located between Heathrow airport and central London, growing in size with its stages (mainly for shooting on massive indoor sets) and offices steeped in history – having survived the onset of the talkies, two world wars, and technological advances in both film and television.

Like MGM, the Ealing Studios also produced many stars of British fame, beginning with comics like Gracie Fields, Stanley Holloway and Will Hay.

In the drama field, the studios went to war with patriotic themes before settling down afterwards with dramas like an influential thriller “Dead of Night” (often appreciated here on TCM).

Best remembered, however, are the post-war series of comedies which became the studio's hallmark – all lightly satirical about various aspects of British characters and society. And best remembered of these (produced between the late 40s to the mid 50s) were “Whisky Galore,” “Passport to Pimlico,” “Kind Hearts & Coronets,” “The Titfield Thunderbolt,” “The Man in the White Suit,” and the most successful of all, “The Ladykillers.” All have become readily available from American film rental companies like Netflix.

More recent successes include the hilarious series about mishaps in a girls' school, “St. Trinian's,” and the more sophisticated Oscar Wilde's “The Importance of Being Earnest” - running all the way to international fame with the TV Masterpiece series “Downtown Abbey” (shot in parts at the studios proper).

