

Leslie Howard: The Lost Actor. By Estel Eforagan. London and Portland, OR: Vallentine Mitchell and Co., Ltd., 2010. vii + 269 pp. \$74.95 cloth. x + 288 pp. \$29.95 paper.

In this carefully researched biography, Estel Eforagan reveals the many ironies in Leslie Howard's starring role as Ashley Wilkes in *Gone With the Wind*. An Englishman through and through, Howard could claim no southern lineage. Yet even his Englishness possessed a certain qualification. His father, a Hungarian Jew, had come to London by way of Vienna. His mother's family, three generations earlier, had originated among the Jews of East Prussia. At the time that Howard played a starring role in *Gone With the Wind*, one of MGM's landmark productions in its *annis mirabilis*, 1939, his eyes were firmly set on England. Leslie Howard hoped to resurrect Britain's film industry despite the looming threat of war. He intended to contribute to British cinema not only in front of the camera but also in production as scriptwriter and director. The war itself would give Howard his subject matter. Eforagan captures the many facets of Howard's career. She contextualizes that career within the broader history of Anglo-American theater and cinema in the first half of the twentieth century.

Up until 1939, Howard had fit comfortably among the British expatriates in Hollywood who had trained on the stage of late Edwardian London. Sound had brought them to the movie colony. Their accents gave the pictures a measure of sophistication, just as the censoring Hayes Office began to exert authority over the studios.

Howard's role in *Intermezzo* in 1939, the film that made Ingrid Bergman a star, changed his life and, had Howard lived longer, might have changed the course of British cinema. In contributing to the production of *Intermezzo*, Howard recognized that making movies, not just acting in

them, was his calling. He returned to Britain to resurrect British cinema; he intended to re-make it if he could, employing a broad range of talents well honed on both sides of the Atlantic in theater and film.

Howard's wartime success, combining previously unrecognized talents as a producer, director, and scriptwriter as well as utilizing his much vaunted skill as an actor, make him worthy of a biography. Like so many in Britain, Howard reached the height of his powers in the crucible of war. If he had been Ashley Wilkes before the war, he became the incognito anti-Nazi liberator Pimpernel Smith with the Blitz. In December 1940 Howard proclaimed, "I say to hell with whether what I say is propaganda or not." (171)

Resurrecting British cinema, under wartime conditions or not, was no mean task. World War I had devastated the British industry. After 1927, sound production had enabled Hollywood to overwhelm what remained. Howard himself summed up British cinema's dilemma: "We have never succeeded in invading the U.S. ... market on a scale even remotely comparable to their invasion of ours" (207). Eforan explains that Howard intended to look to Europe and Britain itself for his market. He hoped to jointly produce films with French and Italian companies after the war. But first and foremost, he hoped to realize a "lifelong ambition to develop the British film industry." (205) He nearly succeeded.

While there exists extensive literature on wartime British cinema, none has provided the depth of analysis and information on Howard's contribution until Eforan's work. In the painfully short interval of three and a half years between his return to England and his death, Howard made two first rate films that in themselves energized British cinema and its audience. *The First of the Few* (1942), the story of R. J. Mitchell, "the genius inventor" of the Spitfire, Eforan characterizes as Howard's "masterpiece." It proved to be the top-grossing British film of 1942. Britons could cheer one of their own. For the first time in nearly a decade, they flocked to a film that had not been imported from America.

Howard's first major wartime production, *Pimpernel Smith*, contained his own *crie de coeur*. In the character of Smith, he drew a dramatic portrait of the rescuer. Howard both crafted and played Horatio "Pimpernel" Smith. Eforan has opened the door to comparative treatment of Howard's film and such American productions as *The Mortal Storm* and *The Great Dictator*. Both, made a year earlier in 1940, addressed the plight of Europe's Jews under Nazi rule. Howard tried to do the same, but just whom his character meant to rescue from the Third Reich remained ambiguous, because the Ministry of Information forbade use of the word "Jew" in wartime British productions. Louis B. Mayer imposed the same restriction at MGM where *The Mortal Storm* was produced. Only Chaplin, a wealthy independent, had the luxury to say what he meant and proclaim the word "Jew" on screen.

Eforgan treats extensively two issues that have surrounded Leslie Howard since his violent and untimely death on June 1, 1943. Was Howard engaged in espionage, and did such work motivate the German attack on the Lisbon-to-Bristol flight that Howard had taken back to England following a supposed good-will tour of Spain and Portugal?

While Eforgan convincingly argues that Howard had no formal connection to the British and American intelligence agencies that proliferated during the war, she reveals his support and financial backing for “an international resistance group located in Lisbon” (155). Prominent members of the group belonged to Britain’s Special Operations Executive. Eforgan also observes that Howard “was to have other connections to SOE” (157). Did the Nazis know of Howard’s support for the Lisbon operation? And did his fateful trip, with visits to Madrid and Lisbon, bear a connection to such support? Howard traveled back to Britain on a regularly scheduled commercial flight the Luftwaffe had previously ignored; yet with Howard on board, it was attacked. To this reviewer a measure of ambiguity remains regarding Howard’s possible connection to British espionage.

Eforgan’s work constitutes the definitive biography of Leslie Howard. This is an important book, encompassing, among other topics, late Edwardian theater, the transition to sound in cinema, and the Golden Age of Hollywood. She has contributed to the history of British cinema while raising provocative questions for the comparative study of Anglo-American wartime productions.