

Alec Guinness (1914-2000)—an appreciation

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Alec Guinness, the last of a breed of stage and screen British actors who were classically trained, broad in the scope of their repertoire, and literate, died on August 5, at the age of 86. This distinguished group included Laurence Olivier, John Gielgud, Ralph Richardson and Michael Redgrave. Gielgud himself died on April 14 of this year, at 96, and was acting into his last days.

All of them were thoroughly professional, caring more about their art than about gossip or publicity. Needless to say, all were steeped in the dramatic classics and could perform any role from Shakespeare at a moment's notice.

Guinness was physically unimpressive to the point of being nondescript. His features were soft and malleable, and he looked like the dull civil servants and tradesmen he often played. His voice was flat, bland and unassuming. But into this marvelous, transparent vessel Guinness poured an amazing variety of characterizations.

Perhaps the character that most resembled him was the plain, bookish master spy George Smiley, portrayed brilliantly by Guinness in the series of films adapted from the novels of John Le Carré. Le Carré had this to say about Guinness's genius and the precision with which he practiced his art:

“Watching him putting on an identity is like watching a man set out on a mission into enemy territory. Is the disguise right for *him*? (*Him* being himself in his new persona.) Are his spectacles right?—no, let's try those. His shoes, are they too good, too new, will they give him away? And this walk, this thing he does with his knee, this glance, this posture—not too much, you think? And if he looks like a native, will he speak like one—does he master the vernacular?

“And when the show is over, or the day's shoot, and he is once more Alec—the fluid hand shiny from the make-up, the small cigar trembling slightly in the thick hand—you can't help feeling what a dull old world he

has come back to, after all the adventures he has had out there.”

His acting, along with being precise, was spare and understated. Living within his roles, Guinness could reveal a good deal about the character economically through slight physical gestures and subtle inflections of speech. One of the rare times he embellished a character and went over the top was in his portrayal of the Indian professor Goodbole in David Lean's *A Passage to India* (1984).

Guinness worked in an advertising agency until 1934, when he made his stage debut as an extra. Three years later, he joined Gielgud's stage company. His first speaking role in a film was as Pip in David Lean's adaptation of Dickens' *Great Expectations* (1946). In his long career, Guinness divided his time between film and the theater. He appeared in more than 60 films, and his stage roles ranged from Shakespeare to T.S. Eliot's *The Cocktail Party* to the title role in *Dylan*, a play about the poet Dylan Thomas.

His films included *Oliver Twist* (1948), *Kind Hearts and Coronets* (1949, playing *eight* roles), *The Lavender Hill Mob* (1951), *The Ladykillers* (1955), *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957), *The Horse's Mouth* (1958, for which he also wrote the screenplay), *Our Man in Havana* (1960), *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964), *Dr. Zhivago* (1965) and *Little Dorritt* (1988).

Unfortunately, most of the world will remember Alec Guinness for the role he detested: as Obi-Wan Kenobi in George Lucas's juvenile epic *Star Wars* (1977) and its sequels. He regarded it as “a fantasy world of secondhand, childish banalities.” In an interview, he told how he encouraged Lucas to kill off his character. “And he agreed with me. What I didn't tell him was that I just couldn't go on speaking those bloody awful, banal lines. I'd had enough of the mumbo jumbo.” Guinness received a large amount of fan mail for this

role, but he threw it all in the wastebasket, unopened.

Guinness was not a fossilized relic of a bygone era of the theater. He was open to fresh, new ways of making films and plays, and was able to appreciate unorthodox interpretations of works closest to him. In his 1994-96 diaries, published as *A Positively Final Appearance*, he recounts how he saw and enjoyed Baz Luhrmann's *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* (a film with as much visual pyrotechnics as *Star Wars*). He particularly liked the camped-up treatment of Mercutio and expressed “what a relief it is to listen to American accents dealing with Shakespeare.”

For a complete filmography of Alec Guinness, go to the Internet Movie Database:
<http://us.imdb.com/Name?Guinness,+Alec>



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