

# The 19<sup>th</sup> British Silent Film Festival



## *Balaclava* (1928)

**Friday 15 September, 9am:** Introduced by Lucie Dutton

Silent version, UK 1928 / 1930, production company: Gainsborough Pictures



**Directors:** Maurice Elvey (silent version)

**Producer:** Michael Balcon

**Story:** 'Boyd Cable' [Colonel E. A. Ewart], based on the poem *The Charge of the Light Brigade* by Lord Tennyson

**Photography:** Percy Strong

**Art Director:** Andrew L. Mazzei

**Studio:** Gainsborough Studios, London,

**Shooting:** September - December 1928 (silent version, Aldershot locations)

BFI print (silent version, entitled *The Valley of Death*): 72 minutes

**Cast:** Cyril McLaglen (Lieutenant John Kennedy/Trooper Kent), Benita Hume (Jean McDonald), Colin Kenny (Captain Gardner), Alf Goddard (Trooper Nobbs), Harold Huth (Captain Nolan), Robert Holmes (Father Nicolai), Wally Patch (Trooper Strong), J. Fisher White (Lord Raglan)

### A *Balaclava* timeline:

#### 1928

*July 12:* Pat Mannock in *Kinematograph Weekly* writes that "Michael Balcon informs me that production of their big spectacular *Balaclava* will be embarked upon in September or October".

*September 19:* Maurice Elvey begins shooting at the Gainsborough studios

*September 27:* *Kine Weekly* reports that Elvey has found all the acting types needed to cast Queen Victoria, Napoleon III, the Tsar, the Sultan of Turkey, etc., "all nearly as perfect as possible according to actual photographs of these personages". Crucial help in filming has come from Captain Oakes-Jones, "the War Office authority on military pageantry".

*October 25:* with studio work done, Elvey has moved to Aldershot and the Salisbury Plains to shoot the Crimean War scenes. *Kine Weekly* reports that "a British Acoustic sound van

is following Maurice Elvey and his unit around, and will be extensively used in connection with all the scenes".

*November 8:* *Kine Weekly* reports on the reconstruction of the Charge of the Light Brigade at Long Valley, "the nearest thing available to the 1854 battlefield". Army airplanes "had to be warned off, on account of their noise, which, being unmistakable, was in danger of being recorded by the British Acoustic apparatus, even when they flew a mile or so away . . . Elvey seemed in high spirits, and told me that the result was twice as good as he expected. If the cameras have got what I saw, it is going to be terrific."

*December 6:* Elvey is assembling the material.

## 1929

*March:* divisions are revealed within the Gainsborough and Gaumont-British hierarchy over the silent *Balacava*, now ready to be trade shown. Technical concerns surface over how the British Acoustic sound effects could be accommodated in a possible synchronised version. Michael Balcon presses for its synchronisation; Colonel Bromhead of Gaumont urges its immediate release as a silent.

*June:* the film, still unreleased, has been renamed *The Valley of Death*, but chances for a silent release are finally dashed when Gaumont announce that sound apparatus will be installed throughout its theatre circuit. During the month, a synchronised track of music and effects is prepared at the RCA Gramercy studio in New York.

*October:* trade papers report that the film will now be remade with talkie sequences as soon as Elvey returns from a business trip to America.

## 1930

*Early January:* shooting begins at Gainsborough on the new talkie scenes. Milton Rosmer, not Elvey, is the director; he is also writing the dialogue. The original cast has been re-assembled with the exception of Colin Kenny, playing Captain Gardner, who is replaced by Miles Mander. The film reverts to its original title, *Balacava*. On a studio visit, Nerina Shute of *Film Weekly* comments that Benita Hume "looked more lovely than ever", dressed in a Russian costume, "with dark hair wound in plaits round her head".

*January 18:* fire strikes Gainsborough studios at 1.30pm in the afternoon, while a *Balacava* scene is being rehearsed. Studio manager George Gunn loses a finger (jammed in a door) and is severely burned, as are several others, one fatally. It takes until June before definite steps towards rebuilding the studio are taken.

*January 27:* work resumes on *Balacava* at British International's studios, Elstree.

*February 20:* *Kine Weekly* reports that shooting has finished.

*April 14:* the talking *Balacava* is finally trade shown, on the same day as the film of *Journey's End*. It opens in May in London at the Marble Arch Pavilion. Critics are mostly complimentary, but suggest that the best of the material lies in the original silent footage.

***Variety*, 30 April 1930, p. 38, Frat.:**

"... suffers from the comparative slowness of the sound sequences against those made silent – a factor which seems to arise whenever this making over happens... Theme is strung, very lightly, on Tennyson's 'Charge of the Light Brigade'. This part, kept in from the first-made silent, is easily the meat of the film, and is a fine piece of work. Sound effects and music have been dubbed onto this with no very great success, but the excellence of the staging of the cavalry charges minimizes this entirely. Some of the shots are as fine as a Caton Woodville drawing, and the drama of the charge is well brought out with a few mid shots and some good cross-cutting. Good popular stuff here in places where they don't take their drama too seriously."

***The Times*, 19 May 1930 p 12:**

"Does the audience, then, when the time comes, gallop in imagination with the Six Hundred, marking the tragic futility of the wild charge they made yet carried forward by its superb heroism? Nearly, but not quite, the film passes this simple but severe test... The squadrons driving inflexibly through the barrage are a genuinely moving spectacle, but the effect is suddenly spoiled by the sound of a voice raised above the noise of battle in frantic declamation of Tennyson's too familiar lines. It is one more case of the film overdoing a good thing..."

***Manchester Guardian*, 14 Oct 1930 p 14, H. J. H.:**

"All that was picturesque in war, glamorously romantic, and gloriously insane has been packed into *Balaclava*... The personal heroism and unhesitating devotion to duty of the troops are exalted to the glory of the military machine and the splendour of England's fighting tradition. This was the end no doubt sought for by the director – for it is a British film and the War Office have taken a hand in its production. The military pomp and pageant, the period costumes, cavalry with lances aloft and pennants flying, Scottish troops on the march, the rattle of accoutrements, and the bustle and laughter of soldiers in camp make a spectacle to gladden any boyish heart. And the charge of the Light Brigade rouses admiration and compassion, for disaster is here on a heroic scale. Interwoven with the military display there is a romantic story in which Cyril McLaglen and Benita Hume competently play the leading roles. There is also a court martial as a variation of the trial scenes which have been common in films of late. *Balaclava* is a clever production in which doubts as to the morality and efficacy of war for the settlement of international disputes are not merely left aside, but appear never to have been heard of."

*Programme note compiled by Geoff Brown*



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