

Chapter Seven: The Film Director, *Wodehouse Golf Stories* (1924)

In 1924 APW was 38 years old. For the preceding twelve years, he had been an actor for the Abbey Theatre, then their general business manager, and finally a producer/director and playwright for them, acting in seven plays and directing nineteen plays. He had also during this time written a newspaper column for a socialist weekly and actively participated in the 1913 Dublin Lock-out; he helped found a left-wing labor drama group within the Irish Transit and General Workers' Union and acted, directed and wrote for them. Immediately after leaving the Abbey he became the manager of a new Irish theatre company of disgruntled former Abbey players; he was hired as a house manager for Sir Oswald Stoll in London, managing the Coliseum, the largest variety hall in England; he had been invited into the new Scottish National Players as their director, acting teacher, dramaturge/producer, salesman, and occasional actor, staging twenty-nine plays in just over two years and had arranged their grueling tour of 16 towns in three weeks throughout Scotland, as well as a royal command performance for the King and Queen at Balmoral Castle and a six-night premiere of the company in London at the Coliseum in which he both directed the plays but acted in them as well. At this point, suffering from laryngitis, he resigned from the SNP, exhausted and unemployed. What was next for APW? He became a film director.

Before examining APW's brief career as a film director, a short look at the British film industry is in order, and, specifically, Stoll Pictures, the "biggest and most ambitious British studio between the end of the 1910s and the middle of the 1920s".¹ As Jon Burrows states, "Stoll's bore the name of its chairman, the music-hall impresario Sir Oswald Stoll, who was a founding partner of Britain's biggest music-hall chain, Moss Empires, and the independent power behind London's biggest variety theatre, the Coliseum. He branched out to launch the Stoll Film Company in April 1918 as a semi-vertically integrated production and distribution concern."² Since the end of the First World War, European film production was slow in recovering, especially against the onslaught of American films which continued to be made and exhibited during the war

¹ Burrows, Jon. "Big Studio Production in the Pre-Quota Years." Murphy, Robert, ed. *The British Cinema Book*. London. BFI Publishing. 2001. pg 20.

² Ibid. pg 20-21.

years. What Stoll intended to do was to become a distributor of American films and profit from them while attempting to make “significant inroads into the American stranglehold, and keeping its own exchanges and its regular customers in business with a supply mostly made up of home-grown films.”³ Stoll felt that British films well made would eventually be welcomed into the market place. Burrows quotes from an editorial in the company’s own trade paper, *Stoll’s Editorial News*:

We are going to produce upon a large scale. We are going to prove to the British exhibitor that he can procure at home the films his patrons will flock to see. British films by British producers, breathing the British spirit are what the public really want.⁴

While Stoll Pictures tried various genres, the one area it held to longest with the greatest tenacity was the literary adaptation, the kinds of stories the British public wanted to be told and would immediately and comfortingly recognize as British in cultural identity. British cinema has repeatedly, from its beginnings, relied quite heavily on adaptations from ‘literature.’ But, as Christine Gledhill points out, “‘Story’ calls up the vexed relations of British films to literary sources, and calls down the standards of ‘classic Hollywood narrative.’”⁵ Part of these vexed relations can be seen as the necessity of retaining and maintaining audience recognition of the narrative as British. This recognition is a part of what she calls the “democratizing negotiations of a post-war class-based culture confronting the 20th century.” Part of this confrontation is the juggling of sometimes oppositional diversified entertainments that come together to create cinema, e.g., pictures, songs, melodramas, police reports, music-hall skits which all create and deliver a mass-produced narrative. The nineteenth century separation of high literary art from other art forms conferred a degree of identity within the culture that Stoll sought to graph on its institutional identity. As Gledhill records, Maurice Elvey, “in a fanfare for Stoll’s ‘Eminent British Authors,’ declared, ‘The holding of the best stories in the world from the film point of view is the stronghold of the British trade.’”⁶ Yet

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Gledhill, Christine. *Reframing the British Cinema, 1918-1928: Between Restraint and Passion*. London. BFI Publishing. 2003. pg. 151.

⁶ Ibid., pg. 151-152.

Gledhill notes that “it is rarely the literary giants who provide the stories so eagerly sought [and] a raft of middlebrow writers were named as ‘eminent British authors.’”⁷

As a result, Stoll set about “a sustained purchasing spree to secure the film rights to a huge library of contemporary British novels [including works by] A.E.W. Mason, Edgar Wallace, E. Phillips Oppenheim, Geoffrey Farnol, Rafael Sabatini . . . H.G. Wells, Sax Rohmer, Ethel M. Dell, amongst many others [which] were acquired in bulk to provide the scenarios for films that would be marketed under the banner of Stoll’s ‘Eminent British Author’s Series.’”⁸ At first Stoll’s enterprise worked, but this can be seen to a fairly ambitious gambit: they block-booked their films so that if exhibitors wanted to show any of Stoll’s films, they were forced to take the complete package being offered sight-unseen. Soon, however Stoll’s revamped its policy and by 1923 block-booking had been scrapped in favor of territory-by-territory where individual agents with exclusive territorial rights could secure titles for their area.⁹

1924, the year APW went to work for Stoll as a film director, was a watershed year for the British film industry, called simply and without varnish the British Film Slump. Film production declined in 1924 and many of the “old production companies went bankrupt or withdrew into renting activities.”¹⁰ Armes argues that British films were “underfinanced and unadventurous” and unable to compete successfully with Hollywood, which offered audiences and exhibitors a better, more profitable product. Perhaps as if whistling by the graveyard, Stoll actually put more films into production that year. Surprisingly it was short films that flourished at this time. Low points out that “Fred Paul’s series of Fu Manchu stories, *Thrilling Stories from the Strand Magazine* by Bentley, Hill, and A.P. Wilson . . . and some two-reelers based on P.G. Wodehouse’s

⁷ Ibid., pg. 154.

⁸ Burrows, pg. 22. Burrows also notes that Ethel M. Dell’s works were the most regularly adapted for film and that she was the “pre-eminent British romance writer of the day.” pg. 23. In the U.S. producer Jesse L. Lasky felt that audiences would be lured into seeing high-brow stars of the legitimate theatre and began signing up various stars under his Famous Players Series. But with the boom in filmmaking and necessity for product most producers went scouring for stories. Stoll’s difference was in his attempt to publicize the source for his films, to market them according to a perception of his intended audience that they would excited about seeing well-known books on the screen.

⁹ Ibid., pg. 24.

¹⁰ Armes, Roy. *A Critical History of British Cinema*. New York. Oxford University Press. 1978. pg 61-62.

stories by Wilson and starring Harry Beasley, all kept production alive in some form.”¹¹ But overall production was down in the other companies. And Stoll experienced it eventually as well. In 1927 the government had introduced a Quota Act which would keep exhibitors showing a specific percentage of British-made films but, as Armes assesses, the Act’s lack of a clause to foster quality had “disastrous consequences. It stimulated production [of] cheap and shoddy films (quota quickies) which were guaranteed an outlet, if not a profit, by the regulations.”¹² Stoll had already pulled back on production by this time and was soon out of the film business.

There are no letters, memoirs, interviews, or announcements available to give any indication of how APW became a film director the year he resigned from the SNP, except the obvious: his years of working for Stoll in managing Stoll’s theatres had presumably earned him a slot. Obviously APW kept his contacts with the Stoll organization and had successfully introduced the Scottish National Players to London audiences and critics at the Coliseum. One can reasonably assume that APW was seen as someone who had a knack of getting shows on their feet without wasting money, could speedily adapt stories into some dramatic shape, keep the shows moving at a brisk pace and with visual satisfaction, and direct actors.

As the notice quoted by Low attests, APW directed a series of films based on six comical short stories by P.G. Wodehouse, and possibly a story or so from the *Strand Magazine’s Thrilling Stories* series. All my research has come up with just seven titles, all two-reelers¹³: six from Wodehouse and one from Edgar Wallace, *Fighting Snub Reilly*. It is entirely possible that the Wallace story is the story from the *Strand* that Low mentions and that there are no others. Unfortunately the film has not survived, nor have

¹¹ Low, Rachel. *The History of the British Film, 1918-1929*. London. George Allen & Unwin Ltd. 1971. pg. 161.

¹² Armes, pg. 73.

¹³ This is a term that refers to the length of a film. A one-reel film typically would run around 12 minutes in length before the reel finished. Two reelers, then, ran around 18-24 minutes each and were very common and popular for short subjects. Chaplin and Keaton, for instance, made many two-reelers before they branched out into feature-length films. And two-reelers were an excellent and relatively inexpensive means for a studio to cultivate unknown talent.

any reviews it may have garnered. What have survived are five of the six films of the series under the heading of *The Clicking of Cuthbert*.¹⁴

All five films (and presumably the sixth, as well) are preceded with this announcement:

Dedication to the Immortal Memory of John Henrie and Pat Robie who at
Edinburgh in the year 1593 a.d. were imprisoned for
“Playing of the Gowlf on the
Links of Leith every Sabbath
The time of the Sermons,”
Also of Robert Robertson
Who got it in the neck in 1604 a.d. For the Same reason.

The stories are all contemporary comedies connected to the playing of golf, adherence to rules that seem arcane and outmoded, and the endless fascination that golfers have with the game itself and those who play it. Except for its subject matter the short stories are not linked by any character or plotline, though APW created a linking character in the Eternal Caddy (played by Harry Beasley¹⁵ in all six shorts), a prepubescent, freckled, red-haired working class boy/con man/caddy who smokes cigarettes, drinks beer, aggressively pursues caddying jobs, and who knows that he totes clubs for fools but who also knows where the money comes from.

Ordeal by Golf appears to be the first in the series, especially as it spends some time introducing the Eternal Caddy (an invention of APW, not of Wodehouse). All the actions involving the Caddy are new material added on the stories. In *Ordeal by Golf*, the Caddy is introduced with a visual joke. A Golfer sees golf balls apparently jumping in the air only to find the Caddy below a bank juggling the ‘lost balls.’ Then a Reverend asks the Caddy to teach him to play. The Caddy asks, “With or without language?” “With,” the Reverend replies and the Caddy reports that it will then cost him extra. A series of comic skits ensue where the Caddy attempts to teach the minister how to hold

¹⁴ The five surviving films, all at the British Film Institute and available for screening, are *Chester Forgets Himself*, *Ordeal by Golf*, *Rodney Fails to Qualify*, *The Clicking of Cuthbert*, and *The Long Hole*. Missing is *The Magic Plus Fours*.

¹⁵ In all the advertisements for the Wodehouse series, Beasley is prominently displayed, as a burgeoning star, along the order of Jackie Coogan. Was he signed by Stoll and trumpeted as their next star (for whom APW was required to give him exposure) or was he discovered by APW and then marketed by Stoll?

and swing a club. No matter how high the mound on which the Caddy places the ball before the Reverend, the minister is unable to hit the ball. The Caddy ultimately gives the Reverend his money back as he fails to hit the ball, no matter how many wild swings he makes with the club.

Now, the Wodehouse story proper begins. Which of two men – Rupert and Mitchell – should be promoted to the position of Treasurer at the business they work? The man who pleases his boss best at golf will get the job promotion. Rupert is calm, pleasant, sunny and fair of disposition and he likes the attractive Millicent, who spurns Rupert for Mitchell. Mitchell is sullen, angry, dark and unable to control his anger when playing. His fiancée gives him a book on how to control his behavior and he studies it. Mitchell proceeds to win both the job and Millicent by giving in honestly to his bad temper.

Rodney Fails to Qualify also opens with the Eternal Caddy, this time at home, helping his father find insects. The home life also consists of his mother reading tea leaves for her son and daughter. The Caddy is later given a dog to walk at the Country Club, a bulldog who walks the Caddy instead. None of this comes near to the completed arc of Ordeal's bouncing golf ball visual joke, and the home life section goes nowhere.¹⁶

The Wodehouse plot introduces Bates, a rather stiff geek who is in love with Jane. But she is swept off her feet by the poet Rodney, who shares her interest in literature. But Rodney's poetical outbursts on the links spoils Jane's golfing fun. Bates' love for golf eventually wins over Jane.

This film is a pleasure to look at. APW creates a strong depth of field staging, especially a sequence at a dance at the club, and several scenes are nicely backlit. There is also a sequence where several dogs are running through various shots in the background of the action, creating a feel for normal, natural settings into which the Wodehouse characters are placed.

The Clicking of Cuthbert uses the Caddy much less, though he is ever-present. Two rival camps are presented: the Golfers and the Cultured. Cuthbert is rejected by Adeline for spending all his time on golf. Cuthbert asks to join her Debating Society so

¹⁶ This section also features a brief shot of APW smoking a pipe, possibly a visual reference for those who have read the story to the character of the club's Oldest Member who narrates the Wodehouse stories.

he can be more cultured. The Cultured meet at the club for a dinner with the famous Russian novelist Brusiloff, who is signing copies of his new book *The Sewers of Fate*, which Cuthbert knocks into the field with his golf club. All of the Cultured are aghast. But Brusiloff is a golfing fanatic, who recognizes Cuthbert from an earlier game and praises him. In an embroidered sequence by APW (not in the story) Brusiloff remembers a game played in the Siberian snows with midgets in beards (including Harry Beasley, also in a beard). The game ends in Brusiloff shooting his opponent and his caddies (and Beasley, pretending to fall dead). Now Adeline wants to learn how to play from Cuthbert.

This is all very silly fluff, but the Siberian sequence is also funny, macabre and a little surrealistic, especially as it is done completely in a studio with very fake snow and very fake beards and cardboard settings, unlike the rest of the story which is shot on a real course and with characters who appear connected to at least a pictorial reality.

Chester Forgets Himself is an even slighter story, with a dialogue-less cameo from APW at the beginning as Felicia's father, a "student of everything except life," who cannot be budged from his reading. A major motif from the Wodehouse story is the Wrecking Crew, a group of hardened golf fanatics who are nearly psychotically focused on their game only and go trampling through all other's property and lives in the pursuit of their game. They are wonderfully parodied by Wodehouse with dexterous wordplay. APW, lacking the prose, creates an accident where the Wrecking Crew hit the Caddy with a golf ball and knock him unconscious briefly. Chester looks after the boy (his caddy) and the Wrecking Crew – though clueless – do show up at the boy's home to pay their respects.

The Long Hole is both the strongest story and the strongest film in the series. A golf match is arranged between Arthur and Ralph to determine who will win Amanda and who will leave town for good. The premise of the match is that it is played with only a single hole but that begins miles away. An epic, Homeric match through the countryside and town, ending at the Majestic Hotel, through lakes and mud and dairy stalls and an open automobile, each must overcome the obstacles of nature and man and be the first to finish the match. At the end, they both discover that Amanda already has a fiancé and the Caddy checks all – including himself – into the local Balmpots Asylum. This is the best

of the films, with excellent use of location shots, good performances and an enjoyable narrative

Wodehouse originally set this story in America (as he did with *The Clicking of Cuthbert*), specifically in Long Island and New York City. It included golfing across the 59th Street Bridge and ended at the Astor Hotel in Times Square. APW keeps all the stories set in England and substitutes several visual jokes in place of the New York City references in the prose. Yet the story – as is true of the others – remains very largely intact in APW’s transfer to the screen.¹⁷

These are not immortal comic gems of Wodehouse. They are trivial, light-weight entertainments skillfully crafted, which is what APW provides in his adaptations. He adds the Caddy, ostensibly as a linking device, and constructs several skits involving him, yet the Caddy remains at best a peripheral figure to the main story.

Generally the series was accepted as well done and appealing. APW’s scripts did not impress, though his direction was deemed solid. Typical of the reviews that have survived is this one from *Kinematograph Weekly* of the full series:

‘The P.G. Wodehouse Series’ are certainly the most amusing two-reel comedies that Stoll’s has Trade shown, each one being based on golf but not limited to the golfer in their humorous appeal . . . Andrew P. Wilson has directed them fairly well. If at times they become mild and a little thin as regards humour, this is partly due to the rather uncreative adaptations, but they should entertain, especially in high class halls.¹⁸

As for individual reviews of the five films, some are not available. But two are, and they are today the strongest films from APW’s year. From *Bioscope* and *Kinematograph Weekly*:

The Clicking of Cuthbert : Suburban ‘highbrows’ are good-naturedly burlesqued in this amusing little story, which shows how a golfer cuts out the local aesthete at a literary tea party in honour of a famous Russian novelist. If the scenario and direction had been as good as the story, the film might have been a gem of a comedy. The action, however, is not played as nearly as smartly and pithily as it should have been, and there is a good deal of rather clumsy and obvious by-play . . . Despite the poor continuity and uncertain direction [it] is an agreeable and rather novel trifle which should please the average audience.¹⁹

¹⁷ Given the surrealist tone of the story, one can only imagine what a Keaton might have made with Wodehouse’s material.

¹⁸ *Kinematograph Weekly*, 16 October 1924, pg. 51.

¹⁹ Rev. “The Clicking of Cuthbert.” *Bioscope*. 16 October 1924. pg. 46.

The Clicking of Cuthbert . . . is very trifling, but has a really comic Russian golfing vision, and the performances of Peter Haddon [Cuthbert] and Harry Beasley are excellent.²⁰

The Long Hole: Primarily of interest to golfers, this entertaining and ingenious little comedy of a novel match between two rivals for the hand of a girl, who subsequently discloses the fact that she is already engaged to another. The action mainly consists in the original methods adopted by the players to gain an advantage in a one-hole match across ten miles of open country. Stress is laid upon the fact that in their wildest freaks of play, they conform strictly to the rules of the game. Although the film is brightly acted by the two leading players, the principal appeal lies in the unusual game which is followed . . . The settings, country exteriors, are well chosen and the photography is excellent.²¹

The Long Hole a farcical tale . . . much humour arises from the golf ball lodging in extraordinary places and the strict interpretation of various rules of the game by which each alternatively scores off the other. Their persistency is the point which saves the sequence of shots from monotony. Harry Beasley gets something out of nothing as the caddie.²²

Of the two remaining films APW directed, *The Magic Plus Fours* (Wodehouse), *Fighting Snub Reilly* (Wallace), neither reviews nor films are extant or available; they appear to have fallen by the wayside and are part of the statistics of 85% of all films made before 1950 being now considered 'lost.'

At a centenary celebration of Wodehouse in September 1981 the National Film Theatre Programme showed four of the films: *The Clicking of Cuthbert*, *Chester Forgets Himself*, *Ordeal by Golf*, and *Rodney Fails to Qualify*. In the programme they were introduced as a "series of adaptations from two Wodehouse collections of short stories. Each of these short silents (around 22 minutes each) concerns golf, visual entertainment and general imbecility making up for the lack of PGW dialogue, and successfully conveying the familiar flavour."²³

By the beginning of 1925 APW's film career was over. The cause[s] are unknown. Whether due to disagreement over the material, a breach in the relationship between APW and Stoll, the realities of a dwindling market and Stoll's having to cut back on producing films, or perhaps the process itself being quite unsatisfactorily different from writing and directing for the stage, there is no reliable information. There are no further records of APW appearing in films, although the 1930s did bring about a

²⁰ Rev. "The Clicking of Cuthbert." *Kinematograph Weekly*. 16 October 1924, pg. 51.

²¹ Rev. "The Long Hole." *Bioscope*. 16 October 1924. pg. 45.

²² Rev. "The Long Hole." *Kinematograph Weekly*, 16 October 1924, pg. 51.

²³ *National Film Theatre Programme*. P.G. Wodehouse: a Centenary Tribute, September 1981.

lengthy and ongoing career in radio, which allowed APW to maintain his control of the material and the production. But for reasons unknown, invisibility continued to stalk him. Now, perhaps, was the time to break through. Now was the time for APW to form his own theatre company and produce his own plays, in Edinburgh, with the Andrew P. Wilson and His Scottish Players.