
John le Carré at the NFT (1)

On stage at the NFT, John le Carré looks back over his career and pays tribute to Alec Guinness

Adrian Wootton: It's been 18 years since we last welcomed you onto this stage. Tonight we're primarily talking about Alec Guinness, so could you start by telling us how Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy made it to the screen?

John le Carré: Good evening. We're here to do honour to Alec, which I really want to do. Like every novelist, I fantasise about film. Novelists are not equipped to make a movie, in my opinion. They make their own movie when they write: they're casting, they're dressing the scene, they're working out where the energy of the scene is coming from and they're also relying tremendously on the creative imagination of the reader. Therefore, any piece of any piece of casting is, by definition, a limitation of the possibilities of the character.

When Flaubert was asked whether he wanted Madame Bovary illustrated, he said, "No. On no account. Because everybody will lose their individual picture of her." By the same token, my love affair with movies was a love-hate relationship. But, coming from a bookless household, I've always had great sympathy for people who don't read, and I wanted to reach a larger audience. So the first movie that came along, inevitably, was the first literary success I had which was with *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*. I was thrown in at the deep end with Richard Burton, who was then still married to Liz Taylor, and so on.

It was actually a very decent film, directed by Martin Ritt and scripted by

Paul Dehn. I had problems with Burton as that character. I found him too noisy, too theatrical. I wished at the time, I still, in a way, wish, that we could have had Trevor Howard or Peter Finch, or someone like that. So that was movie number one, and that was O.K.

Movie number two followed very fast upon it. Sidney Lumet, for Columbia, made a small, not very distinguished movie of my very first novel [Call for the Dead, retitled The Deadly Affair as the film]. This was also a Smiley novel, but we couldn't have Smiley in it because Paramount owned the rights to Smiley - the usual movie nonsense. Then a truly bad film was made called The Looking Glass War. It wasn't really until Tinker, Tailor came along - and my own writing was slightly in the doldrums then, and I felt I'd peaked - that an actor appeared who so beautifully represented Smiley and left the character intact.

With Tinker, Tailor everything worked. We had Alec, his first television performance, and John Irvin directing it. Alec and John loved each other from the start. It was an extremely happy production - we could empty the National Theatre if we wanted to once Guinness was aboard because everyone wanted to be in the show.

In those days there was no such thing as a budget at the BBC and no such thing as a schedule, and the barons at the BBC did not see a clip of the movie, nothing, until we were ready to show it to them. I have also to efface myself a little bit in this situation, because I didn't write the screenplay. I had absolutely nothing to do with the filmmaking, except that I became, through Tinker, Tailor, very, very fond of Alec. 'Close', you could never say, but he began to fascinate me. With Smiley's People, it was a sequel. It didn't begin easily. We had one director who we lost for various reasons. We had one script, which wasn't popular so I had to write the script. We had the awful situation of a cast, a budget, a green light from the BBC and virtually no script to work with. So the script for Smiley's People, I wrote in about three weeks. There was no time.

That doesn't necessarily mean that I would have written a better script if I'd had thirty weeks. On the rare occasions when I've done screenplay, I've always worked very fast. I hate committee work, as any novelist does. Well, that's the background of how we came to this.

AW: After some of those unfortunate experiences, had you become disillusioned with screenwriting? Did you want to write adaptations of your own work?

JLC: I wanted to write the adaptations, and I was innocent enough to believe I could influence the film when it was going to be made by being aboard. I really don't think that that's ever been the case, except when I worked with John Boorman on The Tailor of Panama. I don't think it should be the case. I do believe very much in movie as a one-man-show. I think that where I've watched movie go wrong, it's usually because the dread committee has been interfering with it.

But I did work, before we came to Tinker, Tailor and Smiley's People, I had worked, uselessly, for the better part of a year with Sidney Pollack, Karel Reisz, Jack Clayton and (I can't remember whether it became before or after) I played footsie with Stanley Kubrick. Some foot! So I was in and out of trying to make movie. Thank heaven that the roar of the greasepaint has now left me. I think that there are books that I hope I will still write where I really would not wish a movie to be made. I think the book I'm writing now is such a book - thirty years ago I never would have thought that.

AW: Tinker, Tailor, with its huge success, contributed to making Alec the personification of your character.

JLC: Yes, that's true. I did, incidentally, receive film offers for Tinker, Tailor but I didn't feel comfortable with the idea. I was very leery, then, of the short form and I thought that Tinker, Tailor would work far better in

long form. When Jonathan Powell, who was then at the BBC, approached me and asked if I would do it, I said, "Yes". He asked me who I thought should play Smiley and I think we both said, "Guinness" at the same time.

A whole lot of things accounted for the success of Tinker, Tailor. First of all, ITV did us a great favour by having a strike, so we opened on BBC Two, but the viewing figures, of necessity, were fourteen-to-seventeen million. Then it was incomprehensible to many people, and Terry Wogan ran a daily quiz on how much anybody had understood it. It became, for those seven weeks, a sort of national conundrum.

They're both such period pieces now - even Smiley's People is twenty-two years ago now, but one must remember the Cold War atmosphere. People were looking to interpret society in terms of conspiracy. There was such self-censorship about intelligence gathering, it was so shrouded in mystique and absurdity and the reigning figure was this obscene caricature of an intelligence operator in the form of James Bond - amusing but not reality - that there was a counter-Bond market established in people's minds. There was a great appetite to establish something that was the 'real thing'.

This wasn't the real thing, but it had a very serious genealogy. It had the Philby Affair, George Blake, Burgess, Maclean - everybody knew about that stuff and it was really waiting to be dramatised.

AW: Guinness always considered himself to be a theatre rather than a film actor. How difficult was it to get him to do it?

JLC: I can only answer very subjectively. Alec had reached a point in his career when he wasn't going to get any sexy parts. There were only limited parts available to him. There was something else that attracted him, that made him step over the doorstep into television, there was something in the part, that became apparent to me as we went along, that was almost spiritual to him. We never discussed such things, we always played the gentleman to one another. But even in this flawed thing, Tinker, Tailor, with its good and bad scenes, what you see in Alec is some kind of dramatic extension of a religious belief. I think that his view of his role as that person was almost as a Jesuitical moderator in a sinful society. There was no talk of pleasure, not for Alec. His own life was forfeit. I think there was something at that age in Alec that was very, very moving and identifiable for him in the character. It was a very personal thing.

There's something called the actor's guilt, the feeling that you're playing with life - you're acting life but you're never living it. It can amount to a kind of puritanical self-hatred. I think part of the amazing range Alec produces in his face, and everywhere else, derives from that genuine, internal concern about his own identity.

AW: What did he take from you in terms not only of your personal relationship, but in terms of research?

JLC: Alec and I, as far as I can remember, never had a personal discussion in our lives. We told stories about ourselves to one another. Alec came from a wretched background. His mother was a lady of the town, he never knew who his father was, and so on. I came from an equally dysfunctional background, a semi-criminal background, and both of us knew, even as children, that we were show-offs. Rather like Frankie Howerd who when he was asked why he wanted to make people laugh replied, "All my life I've been terrified of ridicule". If you're growing up in a chaotic world without reason, your instinct is to become a performer and control the circumstances around you. You lead from weakness into strength, you have an undefended back. I think Alec and I understood that of each other very well.

The other element is much more amusing. Alec was an absolute thief,

and I knew that he was watching this gesture, these sort of shy-boy things that I do, and he was just stealing from me. Particularly in Tinker, Tailor I think, "Crikey! That's really cheeky!" Really for him I was an orang-utan. He used to go to London Zoo and watch orang-utans because it told him about mime. He rang up just before we were going to start Tinker, Tailor:

[In Guinness voice] "May I speak to Mr. David Cornwell, please."

I'd say, "Hello, Alec!"

"How did you know it was me?"

Then he said, "I've never met a real spy." Which I found rather offensive. "Could you possibly introduce me to a real operator?"

So I rang, in all innocence, Sir Maurice Oldfield, who'd been head of SIS and who, unknown to me, had been living under a cloud. He said, "Oh, yes, David. I'd love to. I'm a great admirer of Sir Alec."

Alec then rang me and said, "What should I wear? Something, very, very grey?"

So then we arranged to meet at a restaurant in Chelsea. He said, "If you come along at one-o'clock I will have done everything that is necessary." So I thought, "What on earth is this?"

I arrived at the restaurant and say, "I believe Sir Alec Gu..."

"Sssh!" The head waiter then lead me through the room, into a private room where I find Maurice Oldfield and Alec Guinness sitting. We have lunch, and by then Alec, in his mind, has joined the secret service.

Maurice said, "I think young David here has gone a bit over the top about this spying stuff."

Alec said, "Oh, I do agree."

Maurice suddenly says, "I must go now" and gets up and leaves the restaurant. Alec says, "May we? Do you mind?" And we watch Maurice Oldfield, with his umbrella, going down the road. He's watching the orang-utan. Then he says, "May we pop back and have a little brandy?" So we go back. He then says, "Do they all wear those very vulgar cuff links?"

I said, "No."

"Can you tell me something else? I've seen people do that [drinking mime], and I've seen people do that [mimes another drink], but I've never seen anyone do this [another mime]. Do you think he's looking for the dregs of poison?"

The identification was absolutely extraordinary. Because he was also a highly intelligent man, and an extremely sensitive one, I really think it's the process of controlled schizophrenia. He did what every good artist does - he kept the child alive in himself.

There was another time when my wife and I went down to Camden Lock for the very last scene of Tinker, Tailor, and the mole was going to be revealed. Here Alec was in the safe house - making love, first of all, with all the properties, all the things he was going to touch. He's in his long-johns, half made-up and it's quite cold, he's all wrapped up.

"Who do you think it's going to be? Tinker, Tailor? It could be that nice Roy Bland." He was really working himself into the mode of believing that he didn't know and that he was about to make a discovery. You prick that bubble at your peril.

AW: You were finishing Smiley's People at the time of Tinker, Tailor. Having had Alec personify Smiley, how difficult was it for you to disassociate Guinness from Smiley in terms of your fictional work.

JLC: The truth is that I don't know how much was me and how much was him. I had originally intended to do an espionage comede humaine of the Smiley-Karla stand off, and take it all over the world. Make it a kind of fool's guide to the Cold War. I began to become intensely bored with this stand-off. The Cold War was over long before it was officially declared dead. But from the moment Alec's voice became that music in my ear, I felt that I was hampered.

I cannot help voicing my characters and listening to them - that's the failed actor in me - so I think that Alec must have accelerated my departure. I wanted to bury Smiley, I wanted to write about younger people, I wanted to be unencumbered. Alec made that happen faster.

AW: You had had a thought of trying to persuade Alec to do another one as well as Smiley's People?

JLC: Yes, that's right. There was an ITV television production of the second novel I wrote, called Murder of Quality. It was a little murder story set in a public school - I'd once taught at Eton and I used that stuff. It was a little book that I'd written while I was in the Foreign Service, just in a few weeks and they were going to make it. But Alec had a wonderful instinct for when to leave the stage, and I think he felt he'd done enough Smiley. I think he knew that we could never match the fun or the concept of Tinker, Tailor.

Tinker, Tailor centred on a wonderfully simple premise: that there is a spy inside our secret service, and we can use the secret service as a vision of the British establishment at play. I think he felt that we'd got by with Smiley's People. I think, with me, that he felt that the final scenes were very good as a goodbye to the Cold War. To make a final appearance as Smiley on a weaker story was something he wouldn't do.

I've always believed that his wife played a great part in guiding him in those matters. It was very interesting with Alec, what he thought he was proud of. He often dismissed the Ealing Comedies completely and in his memoirs I don't think he ever spoke of the Smiley part, but I still think that Smiley really was his secret sharer for those last years of his life.

AW: His memoirs are interesting because he writes very well but reveals nothing about himself. He was a great master of disguise and could embody characters without ever being one of them. You never knew where Alec Guinness was.

JLC: He loved the dissembler's part. I mentioned actor's guilt. I think that, because he had no centre himself, to play the part of a man like Smiley, who can enter one shell after another, was a very strong refuge for him. That identity. Socially, too, he was exactly the same. What you got, you could only communicate with in sub-text. There was never a moment when he let his hair down and became a more frank person. Not in my experience, anyway.

When he was 80, a bunch of us got together to make him a book which we presented to him. It made him furious, he hated that kind of celebration. I wrote a piece that began:

"The child in this eighty-year-old man is not yet appeased."

I didn't think it was very flattering of Alec. I turned quite a corrosive eye on him. And he loved it. When he came to publish the next volume of his memoirs, he asked if he could put the whole piece at the beginning of the book. I felt that I had hit a nerve there. He would agree, though he would never be so frank, that he could attribute a great deal of who he was to his childhood.

AW: Another common friendship you had was Graham Greene.

JLC: Yes. I didn't know Greene well, but I knew him over a period. We had one of those public quarrels that Greene was quite addicted to and I didn't mind. I think the relationship between Alec and Greene, I don't think it endured very much. With Greene, a relationship had to move. With Alec, it didn't. But they both had Catholicism in common, and at a certain level, they met on that. They got to know each other quite well during the making of *Our Man in Havana*, and Alec always remembered with enormous admiration, the speed with which Greene would re-write his lines for him. I don't know where the director was in that, but I should think he was having a fit.

I don't otherwise know how the relationship worked between them. With Alec you had to function on very military lines: you arrived on time, or a minute before, properly dressed and you left at eleven-fifteen. These were the rules he lived by. One of the things that Alec and I had in common was that feeling of living on enemy territory. Home is a very dangerous place.

[Comment on the clip]

AW: Alec stayed at your house one time...

JLC: It was just before the shooting of *Tinker, Tailor*, and he was coming up in order to get his act up to a critical mass of nervousness and concentration.

By the way, on the first day of shooting he fluffed everything and said, "As long as you take back the part I shall give you all the money back." John Irvin took him away and soothed him down. The following day he came in and gave the camera lens a kiss and went to work.

Anyway, he rang and said, "I really think I should spend a few days beside the Atlantic. Do you know anywhere?"

I said, "Well, it so happens that I have a house in Cornwall." As he very well knew. So we lent him the house. You either like it or you don't, it sits up on a Cornish cliff looking straight at the Atlantic. So he moved in with his wife, Merula. I only heard later what happened.

I was in contact with the British Ambassador in Bonn about some other matter, and the phone rang while Alec was there, with the wind rattling around this house. And a voice said, "Can I speak to John le Carré?"

"No, I'm afraid this is Alec Guinness."

"Will you tell him that the British Ambassador needs to speak to him as soon as possible?"

Alec had already been thinking that the house had an awful lot of electric equipment in it. He suddenly decided that I was in London, or somewhere nearby, listening. He left the house and walked up to the headland where, as fate would have it, my neighbour, a wicked, adorable man called Derek Tangye, who was a writer, happened also to be standing.

Derek says, "I know who you are. You're Guinness, you're staying at Cornwell's house."

"Yes. Yes I am. Do you know much about him?"

Tangye said, "A bit. Why?"

"I have a curious feeling that we're being overheard."

"Yes, you probably are. I know that equipment. You have to stay three-hundred yards away from the house and you'll be perfectly all right."

I knew nothing of this conversation. In London I get a call from Alec:

"We're having a marvellous time, but I must tell you a very tragic thing has happened. A very dear friend of ours is very ill in London and we shall have to visit him immediately."

I said, "that's awful. I'm very sorry." And he fled. But it was another extreme example of him thinking himself into the part. He was, really, stoking the paranoia in himself and beginning to interpret the whole of life in terms of intrigue.

AW: Could you share another of these great Alec moments with us?

JLC: The most famous story, and I don't know if Alec ever knew it, was when Alec was making a film in Hollywood with all the knights. It was written by Neil Simon, in the first instance, and I think it was called Theatre of Blood. Olivier was in it, Truman Capote was in it, Gielgud was in it, and they were all assembling. As they were coming up to the first day of shooting, Neil Simon's phone rang in the evening:

"Hello. Is that Mr. Simon? This is Alec here. How are you? Could we possibly take a quick look at the script? Page seventeen, for some extraordinary reason, seems to be the earliest point at which I come into the film. There is a first speech there that I find absolutely unsayable, could you possibly re-write it for me."

The next day Neil Simon sends some pages off to the studio, but these calls kept coming. It was driving Neil crazy. He'd be having dinner and...

"...can we have another look at page eighty-four?"

Then, eve of shoot, the phone goes again:

"I'm afraid I'm being rather a nuisance. My wife, Merula, has decided she is not going to come over to California, and I was wondering whether, for want of a better expression, you could find me a piece of fluff?"

Neil Simon drew himself up to his four-foot nothing and said, "I'm afraid I am not a pimp!"

And it was Peter Sellers doing the whole thing.

There were also Alec's own stories about himself. He often lunched or dined with the Queen Mother. He loved the Royals and they loved him. She said to him after he came back from America, "Where have you been, Sir Alec?"

"Oh, M'am, one was picking up a rather silly thing called a Special Oscar."

To which the Queen Mother said, according to Alec, "Oh! Hurrah for England!"

He also told a wonderful story about after making Star Wars - one of the parts he wanted to disown - and discovering that he was in the money. They had a reunion and Alec found himself talking to a Dalek without his helmet on. Alec said to him, "What are you going to do with all the lovely money we've got?"

"Well, Sir Alec, you may not know this, but I'm very fond of roses. The problem with me is that my kitchen door has glass at the top and wood at the bottom, so I'm constantly doing that [mimes jumping up and down], so what I'm going to do is put glass at the bottom and wood at the top!"

For Alec, it was the orang-utans.

AW: Let's open this to the audience.

Q: Where did the humour in Smiley's People come from?

JLC: I put it into the script and the director liked it and Alec liked it. Where it comes from is from my own awareness that secret work function on the edge of farce the whole time. The most inane things go wrong. The reality of a conspiracy is that some idiot leaves a briefcase on the tube. Or they've forgotten that it's summertime. So you may be in the middle of committing a fantastic burglary to steal all the secrets that Moscow centre ever had and you do meet someone on the stairs who says that it's nice to be fancied. When I was a young student, W. H. Auden, who was professor of poetry, made a very indecent proposal to me when I was a young student and I said, "No." He said, "Well, never mind. It's nice to be fancied."

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