Virtual March 23, 2021 (42:8)
Peter Medak: **THE RULING CLASS** (1972, 154 min)
Spelling and Style—use of italics, quotation marks or nothing at all for titles, e.g.—follows the form of the sources.
Cast and crew name hyperlinks connect to the individuals' Wikipedia entries

Vimeo link for **ALL** of Bruce Jackson's and Diane Christian's film introductions and post-film discussions in the virtual BFS

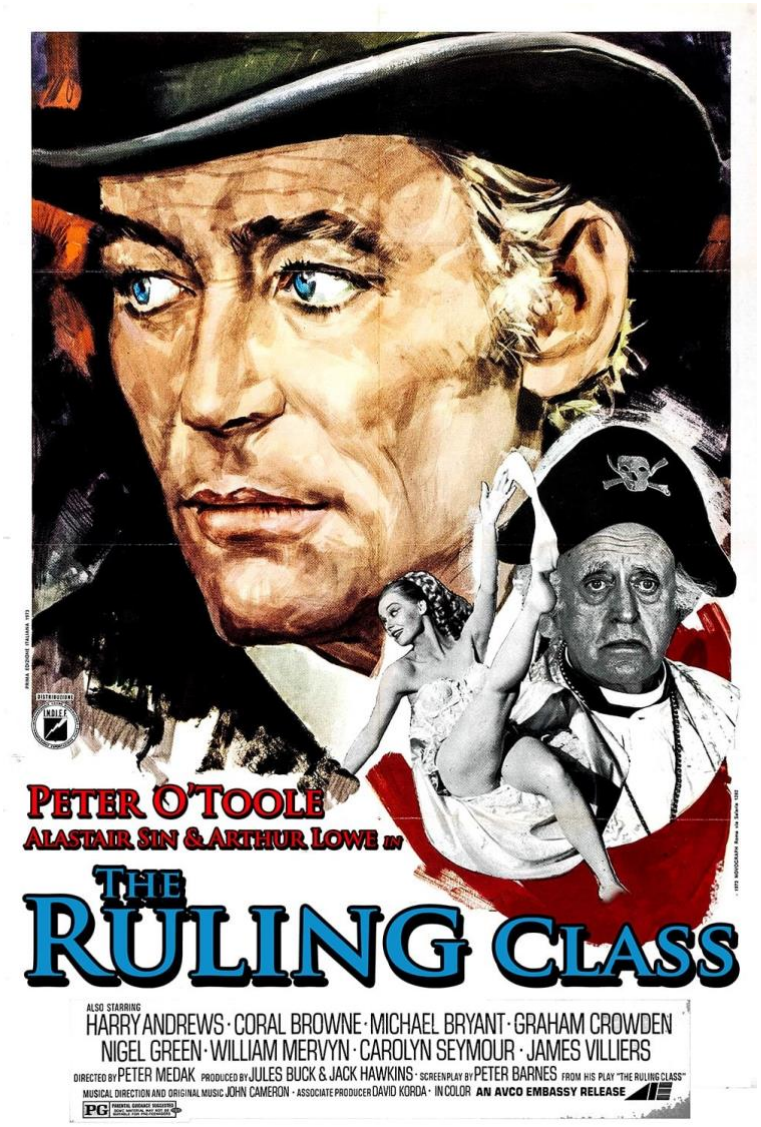
Vimeo link for our introduction to *The Ruling Class*

Zoom link for *all* Spring 2021 BFS Tuesday 7:00 PM post-screening discussions:
Meeting ID: 925 3527 4384 Passcode: 820766

Director Peter Medak
Writing Peter Barnes wrote the screenplay adaption from his original play.
Producers Jules Buck and Jack Hawkins
Music John Cameron
Cinematography Ken Hodges
Editing Ray Lovejoy

The film was nominated for Best Actor in a Leading Role for Peter O'Toole at the 1973 Academy Awards and for the Palme d'Or at the 1972 Cannes Film Festival.

Cast
Peter O'Toole.... Jack Arnold Alexander Tancred Gurney, 14th Earl of Gurney
Alastair Sim....Bishop Lampton
Arthur Lowe....Daniel Tucker
Harry Andrews....13th Earl of Gurney
Coral Browne....Lady Claire Gurney
Michael Bryant....Dr. Herder
Nigel Green....McKyle
William Mervyn....Sir Charles Gurney



Carolyn Seymour....Grace Shelley

Peter Medak (23 December 1937, Budapest). From *The Film Encyclopedia*, 4th Edition. Ephraim Katz (revised by Fred Klein & Ronald Dean Nolen). Harper 2001 NY: "Born Dec. 23, 1937, in Budapest. Escaping Hungary following the crushing of the 1956 uprising, he entered the British film industry that same year as a trainee at AB-Pathe. Following a long apprenticeship in the sound, editing, and camera departments, he became an assistant director, then a second-unit director on action pictures. He started directing TV films for Universal in 1963 and theatrical features in 1968. Medak reached the high point of his career early, in 1972 with the release of two highly acclaimed black comedies: the sincerely

human *A Day in the Death of Joe Egg* and the robustly irreverent *The Ruling Class* (1972). A California resident since the early 80s, he still works frequently in Europe. Along with his features and several TV movies, both in Britain and the US, he also directed the operas 'Salome' in Minneapolis and 'La Voix humaine' in Paris. FILMS INCLUDE: *Negatives* 1968; *A Day in the Death of Joe Egg*, *The Ruling Class* 1972; *Ghost in the Noonday Sun* 1974; *The Odd Job* 1978; *The Changeling* (Can.) 1980; *Zorro the Gay Blade* (US) 1981; *The Men's Club* (US) 1986; *The Krays* 1990; *Let Him Have It* 1991; *Beverly Hills Cop III* (act. Only), *Pontiac Moon, Romeo is Bleeding* 1994; *Species 2* 1998." Medak has done a lot of TV series work, e.g., "Hannibal" (2013-2014), "Breaking Bad" (2009), "Law & Order: Special Victims Unit" (1999), "Homicide: Life on the Street" (1993), "China Beach" (1988), "Beauty and the Beast" (1987), "Magnum, P.I." (1980), "Hart to Hart" (1979).

Peter O'Toole (b. Peter Seamus O'Toole, August 2, 1932, Connemara, County Galway, Ireland—d. December 14, 2013 (age 81) in London, England, UK) Biography from Leonard Maltin's *Movie Encyclopedia*: "Slender, blond, blue-eyed Irish actor who brings passion and intensity to his screen characters, more than a few of whom have been wildeyed visionaries. A graduate of London's Royal Academy of Dramatic Art and an acclaimed Shakespearean actor, O'Toole debuted on film in *The Savage Innocents* (1959), but shot to stardom in the title role of *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), earning an Academy Award nomination to boot. It's possible he'll always be associated with the role of T. E. Lawrence (though, ironically, he was a secondary choice, replacing Albert Finney); his intensely credible portrayal of this desert dreamer is one of the most dynamic in movie history. He's had no trouble moving on, however, to other larger-than-life roles, and has in fact earned another six Oscar nominations for playing King Henry II in both *Becket* (1964, opposite Richard Burton) and *The Lion in Winter* (1968, opposite Katharine Hepburn), the shy schoolteacher in the musical *Goodbye, Mr. Chips* (1969), a wacked-out British lord who thinks he's Jesus Christ in *The Ruling Class* (1972), maniacal movie director Eli Cross (inspired, O'Toole said, by David Lean) in *The Stunt Man* (1980), and washed-up, Errol Flynn-ish movie swashbuckler Alan Swann in the sweetly comic *My Favorite Year* (1982)....An admitted alcoholic, O'Toole squandered his fame (and, some say, his talent) on many projects clearly beneath his abilities. Nonetheless, he remains a compulsively watchable actor whose presence brings color (and some measure of respectability) to any film or TV project in which he appears. In 1985 he lent his voice to a series of animated features about Sherlock Holmes. Among his television ventures: the miniseries "Masada" (1981), a 1983 remake of *Svengali* with Jodie Foster, a 1984 remake of *Kim*, *Crossing to Freedom* (1990), and *The Dark Angel* (1992). In 1992 he published his first volume of memoirs, "Loitering With Intent," which was greeted with rave reviews. OTHER FILMS INCLUDE: 1960: *Kidnapped*, *The Day They Robbed the Bank of England* 1965: *Lord Jim*, *What's New, Pussycat?* 1966: *How to Steal a Million*, *The Bible* 1967:*Night of the Generals*, *Casino Royale* (just a cameo); 1968: *Great Catherine* 1969: *Brotherly Love* 1971: *Murphy's War* 1972: *Man of La Mancha*1973: *Under Milk Wood* 1975: *Rosebud* 1976: *Man Friday* 1978: *Power Play* 1979: *Zulu Dawn* 1980: *Caligula* 1984: *Supergirl* 1985: *Creator* 1986: *Club Paradise* 1987: *The Last Emperor* 1988: *High Spirits* 1990: *Wings of Fame* 1991: *King Ralph* 1993: *The Seventh Coin*." And, after Maltin's 1993 note, O'Toole did a bunch of made-for-tv films, among them "Gulliver's Travels" (1996) in which he played the Emperor of Lilliput, "Joan of Arc" 1999 in which he played Bishop Cauchon, "Hitler: the Rise of Evil" in which he played Paul von Hindenburg, and "Augustus" (2003) in which he played Augustus. He was also in a number of films, the most recent of which are *Bright Young Things* (2003), *Troy* (2004), *Casanova* (2005), *Lassie* (2005), *Venus* (2006), *Ratatouille* (2007),

Stardust (2007), and *Katherine of Alexandria* (2012). Noel Coward famously said to him, "If you'd been any prettier, it would have been *Florence of Arabia*." O'Toole somewhere said, "I can't stand light. I hate weather. My idea of heaven is moving from one smoke-filled room to another." And, another time, "The only exercise I take is walking behind the coffins of friends who took exercise."

PETER BARNES (b. January 10, 1931 in London, England, UK—d. July 1, 2004 (age 73) in London, England, UK) based the screenplay of *The Ruling Class* on his highly-successful stage play of the same name. Some of his other plays are *Red Noses*, *The Bewitched*, *Laughter*, *Auschwitz*, and *Dreaming*. His 1991 screenplay adaptation of the Elizabeth von Arnim novel *Enchanted April* was nominated for an Oscar in 1993.

ALISTAIR SIM (9 October 1900, Edinburgh—19 August 1976, London (cancer). From IMDB: "The son of Alexander Sim JP and Isabella McIntyre, Alastair Sim was educated in Edinburgh. Always interested in language (especially the spoken word) he became the Fulton Lecturer in Elocution at New College, Edinburgh University from 1925 until 1930. He was invited back and became the Rector of Edinburgh University (1948 - 1951). His first stage appearance was as Messenger in *Othello* at the Savoy Theatre, London. He went on to create some of the most memorable (usually comedic) roles in British films from 1936 until his death in 1976." Biography from Leonard Maltin's Movie Encyclopedia: "If he'd never played any character other than Scrooge in the 1951 *A Christmas Carol* (surely the definitive screen version of that oft-filmed Dickens tale), this lanky, pop-eyed, rubber-faced character actor would rate a spot in this book. A former elocution teacher (not surprising, considering the precision of that deliciously rich voice), Sim worked on stage in Britain during the 1930s before appearing in his first film, *The Case of Gabriel Perry* in 1935. Very busy on-screen from that time on, most often in supporting, comedic roles, he stole scenes right and left...He achieved star status in the postwar period; *Green for Danger* (1946), one of the classiest whodunits ever made, starred Sim as Inspector Cockrill, a saucy detective who very nearly bungles a murder investigation. He played a frazzled headmaster of a prep school in *The Happiest Days of Your Life* Jane Wyman's father in Hitchcock's *Stage Fright* (both 1950), a girl's school headmistress (!) and her brother in *The Belles of St. Trinian's* (1954, and a 1957 sequel, *Blue Murder at St. Trinian's* another detective, albeit one with a strange secret, in *An Inspector Calls* (1954), and a laughable clergyman in *The Ruling Class* (1972), among many others. He remained active on stage throughout his life." Trivia from IMDB: "Was awarded the CBE. He was also offered a knighthood but turned it down because it would impinge too much on his privacy. Was made the rector of Edinburgh University in 1948. Appeared in 61 films and 46 West End productions. He met his wife 'Naomi Plaskitt' when they both appeared in a stage production of "The Land of Heart's Desire" by William Butler Yeats. He was 27, she was 12. They married when Naomi was 18. When he was made Rector of Edinburgh University, he beat Harold Macmillan (the future Prime Minister) by 2078 votes to 802."

<u>Ian Christie: "The Ruling Class" (Criterion Essays, 2001)</u>

T*he Ruling Class* may not be recognized as a neglected masterpiece—at least, not yet. But if we remember how long it took for Welles' *The Magnificent Ambersons* and Renoir's *Rules of theGame* to be recognized as supreme anatomies of social unease, perhaps its time will come. Returning to Peter Medak and Peter Barnes' film nearly thirty years after first reviewing it

and being carried away by the bravura set-pieces, I'm reminded of how paradoxical it was from the outset. A film seemingly out of its time, tilting at windmills such as the aristocracy, the church, foxhunting, the House of Lords. Who cared about these symbols of Old England after the swinging Sixties? And yet, however much it parodies a traditional farce - mad earl, bibulous butler and sadistic German psychiatrist - both play and film appeared between the great Profumo-Keeler society sex scandal of 1963, which rocked the British government, and the mysterious disappearance of Lord Lucan in 1973, after apparently murdering his nanny in mistake for his wife. Here life, and indeed death, seemed to imitate art, even in its most caricatured form.

The truth is that Barnes' play, at least, was very much a product of the rupture of 1968, and its political message is that, beneath a veneer of modernization, very little had changed in Britain. An advocate of hanging and flogging ("we've forgotten how to punish," Gurney proclaims to a rapturous House of Lords) will always be more welcome to the Establishment than a gently deluded religious mystic. But Barnes was never merely a cynic or a polemicist: steeped in the history of drama from the Jacobeans and Shakespeare's rival Ben Johnson to Artaud and Brecht, he wanted to challenge English audiences' cozy relationship with their theatre of "reassurance." So the violent gear-changes from comedy, to pathos, to horror, are central to his eruption onto the British stage in the '60s, along with such figures as John Arden, Edward Bond, and Peter Nichols.

But is it a true *film*? Critics spent what now seems an inordinate amount of space debating how something so "theatrical" could be true cinema (apparently forgetting how steeped the beginnings of cinema had been in the great melodrama tradition, how much Welles owed to the Mercury Theatre and, more recently, how much the revival of British cinema in the 60s depended on the Royal Court Theatre—think of Osborne, Richardson, Finney). Certainly *The Ruling Class* isn't "filmic" in the style of the French or Eastern European New Waves, but what it succeeds in doing, after a decade when location shooting and naturalistic acting had become fashionable, is reinventing the great studio tradition of British '40s cinema, which produced such films as Lean's Dickens adaptations and Powell and Pressburger's melodramas. More than this, it brings back allegory, fantasy, and phantasmagoria in such remarkable scenes as the killing in a hallucinated Whitechapel and the depiction of the House of Lords as a grisly chamber of horrors.

In revolting against naturalism, we should not forget that Medak (a refugee from Hungary) and Barnes were in good company. Roeg and Cammel's *Performance* (1970) had plunged fearlessly into bravura fantasy (compare the "Memo to Turner" sequence with *The Ruling Class'* disconcerting use of musical numbers); while such otherwise very different filmmakers as Kubrick and Anderson had also forsaken realism in their two great "state of the nation" films of the same period: *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) and *O Lucky Man*! (1973). And Medak's fellow countryman, Peter Sasdy, was leading Britain's horror specialist Hammer into post-Freudian terrain with *Hands of the Ripper* (1971), another tribute to the enduring fascination with the Whitechapel murderer.

This fascination had undoubtedly been stoked by the previous decade's new views on perversion and madness. In France, the Marquis de Sade had been culturally rehabilitated; while in Britain, under the influence of "existential" psychiatry, madness was increasingly seen as a social construct. R. D. Laing's account of schizophrenia as essentially family-induced—a logical response to irrational pressures—was proving influential as a counter argument against advocates of ECT and drug treatment; and this is the backdrop to *The Ruling Class'* elaborate staging of

Jack's madness and its "cure," through a surreal confrontation with his opposite, the "electric messiah."

The Ruling Class is unashamedly theatrical, and it emerges from a particularly interesting period in English culture when theatre and cinema together were mining a rich vein of flamboyant self-analysis. Many stage works of this period cry out for filmic extension—in fact, Medak had just filmed a very different play that mingled fantasy and reality by a writer often bracketed with Barnes, Peter Nichols' *A Day in the Death of Joe Egg*. But what makes *The Ruling Class* exceptional (and difficult for some) are its outrageous mixing of genres and its sheer ambition. Not only are there allusions to Shakespeare and Marlowe, but also to Wilde and Whitehall farce; to the gentility of Ealing Studios, with a plot that distantly evokes that other great black comedy *Kind Hearts and Coronets*, and to Hammer's gore-fests. It *is* perhaps all very un-English, as William Mervyn's cynical Sir Charles says of Dr. Herder, but only in terms of a very censored notion of Englishness. And among its starry cast of great character actors relishing their chance to go over the top with Peter O'Toole in what is surely his greatest role after Lawrence, there are also some remarkable purely filmic inventions. The image of Dr. Herder embracing the police cut-out silhouette of Lady Claire has an eerie pathos, and the chilling final scream that rings out over the brooding exterior of the Gurney mansion after Jack has stabbed his wife, flushed with his acclaim in the House of Lords, seems to unite the bloody poetry that Hammer aspired to with a real protest against Britain's decaying aristocratic tradition.

This will never be a film for purists, but its ripeness and excess, its alert self-parody and breadth of cultural reference, mark it out as one to be cherished—and also appreciated, as an avatar of the renewed interest in high-voltage performance that runs through much distinctive cinema of the '80s and '90s, from Russell and Gilliam to Greenaway and Jarman. Above all, it's a great, disturbing black comedy, and deservedly now a cult classic.

Tom Vallance: "Jules Buck" (*The Independent*, July 23, 2001)

…Jules Buck was a multi-talented film executive who during the course of his career photographed one of the greatest of war documentaries, *The Battle of San Pietro*, co-wrote with John Steinbeck the script for *Viva Zapata!*, and was an associate producer of such film classics as *The Killers* and *Naked City*. He became a leading producer of feature films, notably during a long partnership with the actor Peter O'Toole, with whom he formed a production company and made such prestigious titles as *Becket* and *The Ruling Class*.

Born in St Louis, Missouri, in 1917, Buck began his career as a photographer, and in the mid-Thirties took celebrated candid shots of such stars as Clark Gable, Errol Flynn and W.C. Fields. During the Second World War he served as a cameraman with the Signal Corps.

He was the principal photographer on two notable wartime documentaries written and directed by John Huston, *Report from the Aleutians* (1943), photographed in colour and the only non-fiction film on the *New York Times*"ten best" list for the year, and *The Battle of San Pietro* (1944). The latter was the only complete record of an infantry battle, a 30-minute film described by one critic as "unmatched in evoking the physicality and human price of war", and regarded now as a classic of its kind.

Filmed in black-and-white with 35mm hand-held Eyemo newsreel cameras in the midst of gunfire, it featured low camera angles, some from the ground. It presented the battle in the Liri Valley as a continuing one rather than a decisive victory, and was the first film to show American dead. The US Army

cut it by nearly 30 minutes, then banned it completely, complaining that it was "pacificistic – against war". Huston replied, "Well, sir, whenever I make a picture that is for war – why, I hope you take me out and shoot me."

In 1945 the ban was reversed by the Army Chief of Staff, General George C. Marshall, who said, “This picture should be seen by every American soldier in training. It will not discourage them but rather will prepare them for the initial shock of combat.”

After his discharge with the rank of captain, Buck went to Hollywood and became an assistant producer to Mark Hellinger on Robert Siodmak's classic *film noir* based on the Hemingway story *The Killers* (1946), co-written by John Huston (though uncredited since he was under contract to Warners). Buck was also associate producer on two of the seminal thrillers of the period produced by Hellinger, both of them directed by Jules Dassin, the prison drama *Brute Force* (1947) and the detective story *The Naked City* (1948), one of the first films to be made entirely on the streets of New York and a prime influence on later film and television makers….

In 1947 Buck, along with the writer-director Philip Dunne, John Huston and others, had founded the Committee for the First Amendment, which marched on Washington to protest against the actions of the House Un-American Activities Committee. Though never a Communist, Buck became disenchanted with the atmosphere that the ensuing witch-hunts created (several critics attacked *We Were Strangers* for its perceived leftist slant) and in 1952, realising too that the Hollywood studio system was breaking down, Buck and his wife moved to Paris. Forming a partnership with Jacques Tati, he arranged American distribution for the comic actor's films *Jour de Fête* and *Monsieur Hulot's Holiday*.

…He formed Keep Films Ltd with Peter O'Toole and produced many of O'Toole's films (often in association with American producers) over the next 20 years. Though there was a bias towards pieces originating in the theatre, their output was adventurous and not overtly commercial. It included John Guillermin's suspenseful *The Day They Robbed the Bank of Englandb*(1960), Peter Glenville's sumptuous version of Jean Anouilh's play *Becket*(1964), in which, as Henry II to Richard Burton's Thomas Becket, O'Toole won one of his seven Oscar nominations as Best Actor, Richard Brooks's worthy but flawed version of Conrad's *Lord Jim* (1965), Gordon Flemyng's *The Great Catherine* (1968), with Jeanne Moreau as the flamboyant queen in an adaptation of a one-act play by Shaw, and Andrew Sinclair's *Under Milk Wood* (1971), which despite the marvellous voices of Burton, O'Toole, Glynis Johns and Sian Phillips was criticised for making the poetry of Dylan Thomas peripheral to the pictures.

One of the most controversial of the films made by Buck and O'Toole was Peter Medak's *The Ruling Class* (1972), adapted from Peter Barnes's irreverent and outrageous stage comedy about an earl who is released from a lunatic asylum when he inherits the family estate and arrives with flowing blonde hair, a beard, monk's robes and tennis shoes. Convinced he is Jesus Christ, he habitually hangs from a wooden cross in his living room, though later he decides that he is instead Jack the Ripper.

Described by O'Toole, who won another Oscar nomination for his performance, as "a comedy with tragic relief", it scathingly satirised the depravity of the English aristocracy and organised religion, sharply dividing critics. The official British entry at the Cannes Film Festival in 1972, it was condemned by *The Los Angeles Times* as "snail-slow, shrill and gesticulating" and Newsweek as "sledgehammer satire", while to *The New York Times* it was "fantastic fun" and *Variety* labelled it "brilliantly caustic".

When United Artists, who had acquired the American rights, announced that it would be cutting the film extensively for its US release, Buck dealt the company's London representative a punch across a

table at Mr Chow's and bought the film back. Avco Embassy then obtained the rights, and cut its 154-minute running time by only six minutes…..

Jack the Ripper (Wikipedia)

Jack the Ripper was an unidentified serial killer active in the largely impoverished areas in and around the Whitechapel district of London in 1888. In both the criminal case files and contemporary journalistic accounts, the killer was called the **Whitechapel Murderer** and **Leather Apron**. Attacks ascribed to Jack the Ripper typically involved female prostitutes who lived and worked in the slums of the East End of London. Their throats were cut prior to abdominal mutilations. The removal of internal organs from at least three of the victims led to proposals that their killer had some anatomical or surgical knowledge. Rumours that the murders were connected intensified in September and October 1888, and numerous letters were received by media outlets and Scotland Yard from individuals purporting to be the murderer. The name "Jack the Ripper" originated in a letter written by an individual claiming to be the murderer that was disseminated in the media. The letter is widely believed to have been a hoax and may have been written by journalists in an attempt to heighten interest in the story and increase their newspapers' circulation….. The public came increasingly to believe in a single serial killer known as "Jack the Ripper", mainly because of both the extraordinarily brutal nature of the murders and media coverage of the crimes. Extensive newspaper coverage bestowed widespread and enduring international notoriety on the Ripper, and the legend solidified. A police investigation into a series of eleven brutal murders committed in Whitechapel and Spitalfields between 1888 and 1891 was unable to connect all the killings conclusively to the murders of 1888. Five victims—Mary Ann Nichols, Annie Chapman, Elizabeth Stride, Catherine Eddowes, and Mary Jane Kelly—are known as the "canonical five" and their murders between 31 August and 9 November 1888 are often considered the most likely to be linked. The murders were never solved, and the legends surrounding these crimes became a combination of historical research, folklore, and pseudohistory.

Michael Hollinger: PETER BARNES: IMPUDENT CLOWN

At a key dramatic moment in Peter Barnes' anarchic comedy THE RULING CLASS, an indignant character turns to the audience and explodes, "All right, who's the impudent clown responsible for this?"

A good question — especially here, where the plays of this impudent clown are staged less often than in his native England. Because his is not a household name, it's easy for us to underestimate the stature and influence of his subversively funny playwright, whose extreme, audacious work has goaded British complacency for three decades and influenced many of his contemporaries. In addition to having authored dozens of original works for the stage — encompassing full-lengths, one- acts, and adaptations of plays by Feydeau, Wedekind, and others — Barnes has also written extensively for radio, television, and film, including the screenplays for HEART OF A DOG and ENCHANTED APRIL, which earned him an Academy Award nomination. His first major play, THE RULING CLASS, was recently optioned for a major revival at London's Royal National Theatre next year.

Which is not to say that Peter Barnes is universally loved and admired. On the contrary, his contribution to modern theater remains violently debated, a fact about which he remains philosophical. "I think any true artist must speak with his own voice and then accept the fact that it's going to divide people," he has said. "With bland voices, the reactions are never as strong as to somebody with something very individual."

What's individual about Barnes' work is its bold theatricality, its extravagant language, its unflinching portrayal of human brutishness, and its skepticism of social, political, and religious

institutions. Perhaps most individual of all is his humor, which alternately tickles and impales. Sometimes it appalls as well, challenging audiences' notions about what can be laughed at by making them laugh at it anyway. Philadelphia- area productions in recent memory include the short plays NOT AS BAD AS THEY SEEM and MORE THAN A TOUCH OF ZEN (which derive much of their humor from characters who are blind and palsied, respectively), and university productions of the comedies RED NOSES (which deals with the misuses of power during the Black Plague) and LAUGHTER (part of which is set in a Nazi death camp).

Peter Barnes' screenplay for ENCHANTED APRIL (1992) was nominated for an Academy Award.—Though his work is not frequently produced in the United States, Barnes actually prefers American audiences to their British counterparts. "I've always found that Americans instinctively are a more receptive audience," he asserts. "The English basically like the same things that they were given in the 1930s; they're still stuck, to a great extent, in the 1930s. Generally, American audiences don't go to a theater with preconceived ideas. They go in with the attitude 'Show me, and I'll tell you if I like it or not.' I think that means they can respond to things that are different and fresh."

Ironically, in his quest for a theater that is different and fresh, Barnes has often looked backward for inspiration: to Brecht, with his dogged commitment to educate as well as entertain; to theater visionary Antonin Artaud, for his passion and extremity; and especially to the great Jacobian playwrights, such as Ben Jonson, Thomas Middleton, and Christopher Marlowe. "Not Shakespeare," he adds, "because Shakespeare can't influence anybody. He's on his own, as it were."

Despite its sometimes anarchic nature, Barnes' comedy has very clear targets. It explodes beneath the royal thrones, papal seats, judicial benches, and occasionally even our own comfy chairs in the theater, but no innocent bystanders are ever wounded. For Barnes is a humanist — and optimist — at heart. "I've always said that the reason I write plays is to change the world," he says. "Well, thirty years on, I haven't changed it; probably not at all. However, that doesn't mean to say you shouldn't keep trying. These things take aeons of time to really change, the deep, deep changes. And so, if nothings seems to have changed, one mustn't despair; one just carries on and keeps working."

As rehearsals for THE RULING CLASS began at the Wilma, I spoke with Peter Barnes by phone.

Michael Hollinger: To what degree is THE RULING CLASS a product of its origins — England in the late 1960s? Are its targets as viable now as then?

Peter Barnes: Unfortunately, it's as valid today as it was when it was written. And I say that with deep regret, because the class system's still very, very prevalent over here. In the deepest sense, I hope the play is always relevant because repression always has to be watched and attacked. And freedom, not only freedom of speech, but freedom of the spirit, always has to be encouraged and made relevant by writers. But even the surface material — about class, privilege, cowtowing, servility, the inability of the English to throw off old, worn-out institutions and attitudes — is unfortunately very relevant. Of course, the wider aspects of freedom, liberty, oppression, and incipient fascism are just as relevant to America and its right- wing redneck attitudes towards civil liberties and spiritual liberties.

MH: Why do you suppose the English are less receptive than Americans to your work in particular?

PB: I always try to give a three-course meal, and the English like two courses or one course. American's like their money's worth, and I guess that's one of the reasons why they're more responsive to my work.

MH: When you refer to a three-course meal, do you mean ideas as well as entertainment?

PB: Absolutely. I try to give entertainment — songs, dances, humor. And I also try to give something more in the sense of ideas and an attitude

to life, which I think is tremendously important.

MH: These entertainment elements are all over THE RULING CLASS, creating a sort of vaudeville effect at times. Do you have a background in the British music hall tradition or other popular entertainments?

PB: My parents had stalls on the piers at Clacton-on-Sea, which is a sort of Coney Island place. They did those games you used to do in fairgrounds where you throw hoops over vases or ping pong balls through clowns' mouths to get prizes. I don't know if this rates as entertainment, but it did have certain grounding in that. And I guess it comes through in the sense that I like that sort of "carnival rowdiness" from time to time in my plays.

MH: Could you talk a bit about the use of songs in your work?

PB: The thing about THE RULING CLASS is that it was the first one to do that — to bring songs into a straight play and make it integral. Other people copied it afterwards, so now it's much more familiar, but when I did it, it was the first time it had ever been done. And the reaction was one of great puzzlement; people thought I'd got my wires crossed somewhere. But now it's much more acceptable, so I've moved on from that.

MH: Obviously, thought they sometimes break out of a given scene, these musical forays function as something more than mere non sequiturs.

PB: I believe that there are some moments in theater ere the pressure of the emotion gets so strong that the only thing you can do is sing. It's like opera, only with opera, people are singing all the time. That's what I'm against, and that's why I'm against modern musicals, because they sing all the time. If you come in and starting singing, "I got the train from wherever and I had to walk and it's raining," that really is ridiculous. Whereas if you're under great emotion or stress, it somehow seems to me that you have to find another way of expressing yourself. That's what songs can do — they are emotions depicted on the stage in their most vivid form. So out of either love, or hate, or embarrassment, or some other emotion, my characters start singing or dancing. And to me, that's perfectly valid. That's what one's always looking for — some way of targeting the heart and emotions of an audience, and making the arrow whiz through the air and hit them.

MH: Have you ever written anything in which humor was not a major component?

PB: My last play didn't have much humor in it; it's a bit more melancholic, actually. It's much more difficult to start laughing as the years pass and not much changes for the better. However, I am a humorist. I am a comedy writer. The most important thing about comedy — and this is terribly important — is that comedy is not something you put in to "sweeten the pill" of the message. Comedy is the message. And the trouble with a lot of comic writers is the fact that they do a bit of comedy and then they stick a bit of serious stuff in. They don't understand that the serious stuff *is* the comedy. It can make you laugh hilariously, but the good comedy is serious, it is deeply disturbing. Great comedy writers are serious writers. Shaw is a terrifically good example of that; he's at his best when he's being funny. Same with Oscar Wilde. THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST is a wonderful, great play, and seems to be very not serious, but if you look closely at it, it's quite serious about lying, and about the secret lives that people live, and how they try to hide it. And it's all done through comedy.

MH: Why is it you admire the plays of the Jacobeans above all others?

PB: Their language, and power, and the size of it all is impressive... and the poetic power of the language is so

PB: Where it comes from, really, is the Jacobeans. Their marvelous sense of size and weight, and just the pictures. The difference about writing plays is not dialogue — it comes out in reams once you get started. And even creating characters isn't so difficult. It's no good having two people stand on stage talking; even if the talk is wonderful, that's not the answer. That's either television, or a novel, or

radio really, where just talk carries you through. You need something else, something that dramatizes what they're talking about even as they're talking. And that's not easy to do. For me, each scene has to be a dramatic scene, and dialogue doesn't necessarily carry it forward. You have to think of the visual all the time. That's where my interest in the cinema feeds into the theater, in the sense that it's a visual medium.

MH: Since you recently married an American and do a lot of Hollywood film work, I imagine you come to the states rather often.

PB: I love going to America, to New York particularly. Though I am sometimes terribly sad because Americans don't live up to their origins, to their charter as it were. And sometimes you feel they've lost what makes them so unique, which is the optimism, and the hope, which is wonderful. I have to say that, with the religious right, you feel that there is a darker and more menacing side to American, which fortunately I don't come into contact with very much. So I tend to see the best of Americans, and when I go it's always invigorating.

MH: Do you think that optimism is a requirement for a satirist?

PB: Funnily enough, usually they say that satirists are pessimists, but they're not; they're usually disappointed optimists. The disappointment rarely lasts, though, and then you write another play, and you think that's going to cure it. You have to be an optimist if you feel, as I do, that writing a play is going to change anything. You wouldn't be a satirist if you weren't an optimist, because if you were a pessimist you'd think nothing you ever wrote would ever make any difference. I mean, it's ridiculous really. It's a contradiction in terms, but there you are. That's what art is about — being a contradiction in terms.

Allen P. Radway" "Noblesse Oblige" NOBLESSE OBLIGE

Although our Senate and House of Representatives echo Britain's Houses of Lords and Commons, America's bicameral Congress enjoys an equivalence of power now foreign to Parliament's twin chambers. The British aristocracy, represented by the Lords through inherited estates and titles, has for more than a century seen its bonafide political power stripped away by democratic reforms. In THE RULING CLASS, playwright Peter Barnes finds ample fodder for satire in the paradox of a ruling class that no longer rules; whose former clout has been reduced to political pomp of little circumstance.

The development of the modern British ruling class has its roots in 18th Century nobility such as the great Tudor and Stuart lines. The failure of many of these old families of Britain, Wales, and Scotland to produce male heirs meant estates passed on to heiresses, who married into urbane families often living far from the old rural estates. Many smaller estates thus began to amalgamate, causing a consolidation of land between the 1760s and the 1820s under the ownership of more cultivated and nationalistic families. As fewer landowners possessed increasingly larger estates, a landed aristocracy replaced the local country nobility.

The wealth accompanying land ownership provided a foundation for a new patrician hierarchy. Along with the vast territories came their respective political constituencies. Fewer landowners meant that a single-family dynasty had much greater representation in Parliament. The aristocracy further flourished during the American Revolution and the French Wars, as natural resources were in great demand, and conveniently located in their own backyards.

By the 19th Century, the elected House of Commons was almost completely comprised of the landed elite, who already governed the House of Lords. While the older men of the families tended to the political business, their sons sought to further the family by pursuing prestigious careers in law, church and military. Landowners further secured their fortunes by reaping the financial fruits of the Industrial Revolution and rising technology.

The 1880s, however, brought drastic changes and marked the beginning of the end for the ruling class. The words "democracy" and "middle class" entered common vocabulary in Europe and threatened every aspect of the aristocracy; French, German and British governments alike began to incorporate the working class parties, and for the first time, patrician rule was questioned. The effect weighed heavily on British landowners. Reform bills calling for the redistribution of constituencies from landowners back o the countryside barred the aristocracy from the House of Commons. When the House of Lords' resistance to the Commons' legislation became a persistent hindrance to reform, the Lords' power to veto was removed altogether.

In the 20th Century, two world wars gave the British ruling class an opportunity to redeem itself as a body of natural leaders. But World War I only succeeded in decimating its ranks and wealth, and World War II — despite Winston Churchill's indisputably blue blood — could not restore the elite to their former status. Severe debt, accumulating since the turn of the century, forced many aristocrats to sell, liquidate, or reduce their estates. And so THE RULING CLASS begins with an ironic toast to "the memory of England," that "teeming womb of privilege," whose aristocratic glory days have themselves been reduced to a thing of nostagia. —*Source: The Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy by David Cannadine*..

COMING UP IN BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS, SPRING 2021, SERIES 42

March 30 1978 Terrence Malick *Days of Heaven*
April 6 1981 Karel Reisz *The French Lieutenant's Woman*
April 13 1989 Spike Lee *Do The Right Thing*
April 20 1993 Jane Campion *The Piano*
April 27 2000 Joel and Ethan Coen *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*
May 4 1982 Ingmar Bergman *Fanny and Alexander*

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