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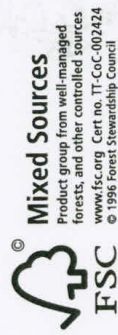
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For Cerri

Contents

List of Illustrations	ix
Acknowledgements	xi
Introduction	1
Chapter One: Out of the Valleys	7
Chapter Two: The Man you Love to Hate	24
Chapter Three: Becoming a Tough Guy	42
Chapter Four: The Hero of Rorke's Drift	62
Chapter Five: Acting for Losey	81
Chapter Six: From Actor to Producer	97
Chapter Seven: The Journey Home	118
Conclusion	130
Bibliography	136
Filmography	139
Index	149

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Introduction

The first image of Stanley Baker that comes into my mind is that of Lieutenant John Chard in *Zulu* (1964). In his blood-red uniform, his dark eyes staring out intensely from under that furrowed brow, the granite jaw set firm, he is the embodiment of the tough, noble British hero. *Zulu* has become one of those Bank Holiday traditions, wheeled out by television companies for every festive occasion; it is still guaranteed to attract healthy viewing figures more than forty years after it was first released. In a poll conducted by the British Film Institute, *Zulu* was ranked thirty-one in their list of the 100 favourite British films, while viewers of the satellite television channel Sky Premier voted it the eighth best film of all time, the second highest position achieved by a British film (only 1997's *The Full Monty* did better). As this book is being completed, the *Radio Times* has published a readers' poll of the greatest British films in which *Zulu* finished ninth overall and appeared at the top of the list of war films. The film has a peculiar place in the affections of the British public, keeping its star and producer in the public consciousness.

The film was the making of Stanley Baker, but it had its downside in that the film's popularity so overshadowed the rest of his career that his other achievements were rather forgotten. As a young film fan, my own initial knowledge of Baker's roles didn't extend much beyond *Zulu* and Joseph Losey's masterly *Accident* (1967). To a degree, Baker's decline from public recognition was a consequence of his own decision to work largely within British film and television. Unlike his young co-star in *Zulu*, Michael Caine, he never succumbed to the lure of Hollywood and so many of his finest films were small-scale British genre films which have unjustly faded from memory. When I came to research his career it was something of a revelation. I wrote an open letter to several of the newspapers covering south Wales where Baker had grown up, not knowing what response I might get. To my pleasant surprise, I had a large postbag of replies from people who had grown up with him or knew him at school in the mining village of Ferndale in the Rhondda valley. What particularly struck me was the pride of which the letters spoke, a genuine and unpretentious affection for a man who was clearly regarded as something of a hero, not just as a successful actor and film star but as someone who had never forgotten his roots, and had remained connected to the people he had come from. Baker had always expressed these feelings

publicly himself: in an interview he gave for *Photoplay* in 1969 he said: 'Acting can be an artificial business. That's why I go home whenever I can to the Rhondda valley. I do it to be with my own people. They live in a real way. It's a great leveller.'

Baker's journey took him a long way from his harsh upbringing during the depression of the 1930s. It was a progression that was both unusual in British cultural terms and yet indicative of a number of key changes which were to occur in British society, and cinema, during his lifetime. The story of how individuals from working-class backgrounds began to impact fundamentally on the cultural landscape of Britain from the 1950s onwards, particularly in the popular arts, has been well documented, and Baker is a characteristic example. Yet few of his generation had quite such a monumental climb towards the light. Growing up in a Welsh mining village with a disabled father who was unable to work following a mining accident was a situation from which few would have had the determination to escape. There was a general assumption during Baker's childhood that this wild, rough youngster would work in the mines along with his friends and his elder brother. Like his friend Richard Burton, it was an encounter with an inspirational teacher which changed his direction in life. Acting became his exit from the narrow world of the Rhondda, just as it might easily have been boxing, rugby or singing that provided the escape route. As a teenager he appeared in *Undercover* (1943) for Ealing Studios and acted with Richard Burton in the stage production of *The Druid's Rest* by Emylyn Williams. Success seemed to beckon, but the transition from promising juvenile to the world of adult stardom was not straightforward. An apprenticeship with Birmingham Rep followed, as well as an interruption for his National Service. As a struggling actor in the London of the early 1950s it was hard enough just to get walk-on roles, but then came *The Cruel Sea* (1953) and his film career was finally underway.

The transitions in his progress occurred rapidly as he established himself as a creditable villain in films such as *Knights of the Round Table* (1954) and *Helen of Troy* (1956), before becoming British cinema's favourite tough guy with *Hell Drivers* (1957) and *Hell is a City* (1960). By the early 1960s he was one of the most popular British stars as far as domestic audiences were concerned, as well as one of the highest paid. For film historian Andrew Spicer, his rise coincided with the development of youth culture in Britain, making Baker a perfect star for a new generation of discontented young people: 'an attractive, virile and ambitious hero, pursuing a combination of personal and social aspirations against a hostile environment'. These figures could be policemen or soldiers and sometimes, with the increasingly blurred moral boundaries of the 1960s, they were sympathetic criminals. As

INTRODUCTION

the decade progressed these roles continued, but he began to harbour new ambitions in two distinctly different areas. Working with expatriate American director Joseph Losey he began to exhibit a depth and complexity as an actor which had not previously been apparent, in art-house projects like *Eye* (1962) and *Accident*. He also found an interest in working behind the camera; *Zulu* was the first of several films he was to produce with his own companies, including the equally popular *The Italian Job* (1969). The actor had become a producer and executive, a player in the world of British cinema whose desire to come to the aid of a failing national film industry eventually led him into an abortive attempt to buy Shepperton Studios. The fallout from this was to damage his acting career, but ironically it was the small screen that came to his rescue. He had appeared on television from the early 1950s and been a key figure in founding HTV. At the end of his career it was on television that he achieved a kind of epiphany in the BBC version of *How Green Was My Valley* (1975).

These on-screen achievements are, obviously enough, reflections of the kind of man Stanley Baker was, but other parts of his career are equally illuminating in how they illustrate the typical lot of a jobbing actor. Baker was always at pains to play down the mystification of the film star, seeing it as a job of work, albeit a well paid one, and acknowledging how fortunate he had been. As he told Clive James in a television interview for Granada's *Cinema* programme in 1972:

I think acting, just acting, in someone else's movies for me is really like having a holiday. I enjoy acting very much and I suppose I can be described as indiscriminate when it comes to the choice of parts that I play in movies, because I like acting. I will act in anybody's movie if I think the part is right, you know, if I think I can add something to the part or the part can add something to my career – to what I want to do as an actor – and the money's right, then I'll do it. And it's good – I enjoy it. It's my life.

There is a touch of false modesty in this statement, and it's noticeable that he is referring only to acting, not producing, but it does convey the pragmatic view that he often took of his own career. An examination of his life in film is revealing in showing how that career was shaped by the wider British production context. Baker was a contract player with Alexander Korda and with the Rank Organisation in the 1950s. As such, he was often a chattel to be shunted into whichever acting slot needed to be filled at that moment. He was perfectly aware of the pecking order which kept him as a supporting player at Rank and was one of the first British stars to buy out his own contract and go freelance. His filmography reflects some of the dominant genres in British filmmaking with crime, action and war movies accounting for many titles. Changing audience tastes are apparent as films

like *The Games* (1970) and *Perfect Friday* (1970), reflect the ambience of Swinging London, just as *The Cruel Sea* mirrored the attitudes of 1950s Britain. Baker was well aware of the degree to which the cinema is shaped by audiences; he told Clive James, 'In the final analysis what you do in the cinema comes from the public. If they like it, then it's good and successful.' His career also followed the changing economic patterns of British production with a fair share of 1960s European co-productions, American-backed costume epics, and low-budget caper films.

It was a career with many appealing dimensions to it. There was Baker the working-class hero. This was evident not just in the films, where he seemed to prefigure the emergence of a new generation of proletarian British stars like Michael Caine, Sean Connery and Albert Finney, but also in his private life where he strived to maintain his connection with the working-class culture which had formed him. Unlike Burton, Baker was regularly back in the Rhondda with *his people*; his commitment to local good causes never flagged. It was also apparent in his political beliefs; a lifelong socialist, he played an active part in supporting the Labour Party, particularly in their election campaigns in Wales. He was to speak movingly to Vincent Kane of BBC Wales in a television interview about how his upbringing in Ferndale, where poverty bred a fierce community spirit, instilled in him the roots of his socialist beliefs. If class was part of what he meant to audiences, then his Welshness was also crucial. In what was essentially an English national cinema he was inevitably an outsider, a quality which came through in many of his film roles and inadvertently added to his appeal to the young generation of the 1950s. It also maintained that sense of authenticity that was central to his appeal. Film historian Geoffrey Macnab sees Baker as a complimentary figure to Burton, 'two Welshmen who were truculent and self-destructive, not at all the types to do the publicists' bidding'. His abiding love of sport, gambling and the odd drink were also part of the mythology. The loyalty he felt to his family, both the one he was born into and the one he made with his wife Ellen, as well as the degree to which the land of his birth remained in his thoughts, were the stuff of reality, not myth.

These qualities were central to his contribution to British cinema, where he helped to break the stranglehold on stardom held by the English middle-class actors like Dirk Bogarde and Kenneth More. He became part of a cinematic revolution, connecting the films of the 1950s to the radicalism of the 1960s. In a national cinema which tended to favour nice, well-behaved chaps, he was awkward, explosive and refreshing. As Ellen Baker testifies, Americans liked him for this. This included directors like Losey and Cy Endfield, producers such as Joseph E. Levine, and the actors who became his friends, such as Robert Mitchum and Edward G. Robinson.

INTRODUCTION

He had none of the affectations of class which Americans tended to read as British snobbery; he was a democrat, a 'working Joe' just like them. This tough guy persona has also helped to keep his screen persona relevant: the young Baker might just as easily have found employment as a hero or villain in the action genre of recent years. These aspects of his screen work, along with his class and nationality, are evidence of his considerable importance to the way British cinema developed in the 1960s and 1970s, as well as relating to ideas about the nature of masculinity in this period. He might well have been, as his friend Henry Cooper put it, 'a real man's man' but he was also able to suggest a vulnerability and complexity which made that masculinity more compelling and revealing.

Academic historians are often asked to justify their reasons for undertaking research and I can offer two in defence of this study of Stanley Baker's career. Baker has been an unjustly neglected figure in the recording of British film history, even overshadowed among Welsh stars by Richard Burton and Anthony Hopkins. When my own students ask who I am writing about and I offer up Stanley Baker's name, I am frequently greeted by blank faces. My response is to utter the magic word '*Zulu!*', to which they invariably reply 'Oh, you mean the other guy – not Michael Caine.' I hope this book may go some way to explaining the not inconsiderable impact Baker had on the development of popular cinema in Britain. In researching this book, I sat through one or two films which might best be forgotten, but even in poor films the eye is often drawn towards Baker. As his previous biographer Anthony Storey put it, 'he carried himself beautifully as if aware of how he wanted to look and well able to achieve his intentions.' His qualities as a star and actor deserve to be celebrated. As a consequence, this book is principally concerned with his working career and only draws on the more private aspects of his life inasmuch as they affect that on-screen image. Secondly, on a more personal note, there is clearly something about Stanley Baker that many have found inspiring. In an age when it is commonplace to find fault with the stars of popular culture, Baker seems pretty close to the real thing: a screen hero. Perhaps the romantic instinct responds to his abiding love for his wife and children, or it's the sentimentalist who can't resist the image of Baker arriving back in Ferndale in his latest Rolls-Royce and filling up the seats with local children to give them a ride through the streets where he grew up. Nonetheless, there remains something moving in the notion that whatever success he achieved, he never forgot that it was those streets that made him.

most memorably depicted in the sequence where the ship's commander, Ericson (Jack Hawkins), is forced to kill British sailors who are stranded in the water directly over the U-boat that he is pursuing.

More characteristic is the focus on male friendship and camaraderie. In a key scene, Donald Sinden's Lockhart tells his fiancée (Virginia McKenna) that his friendship with Ericson is the only positive thing that he can think of in his wartime experiences. Christine Geraghty has suggested that British war films of this period tend to emphasise the importance of male groups and bonding, so that entering into a relationship with a woman is 'to open oneself up to fears about her safety or her faithfulness and such fears are incomparable with the masculine task of fighting the war efficiently'. In *The Cruel Sea*, Sinden's character is offered the chance of his own command but would rather remain at the side of Ericson. This is certainly a world of stiff upper lips, dominated by highly traditional notions of what it means to be male. As Geraghty suggests, 'unable to admit to feeling, the heroes of the war films can scarcely articulate emotion, let alone act on it, and what pleasure they have seems to come from their skill with and control over machines'. Again, *The Cruel Sea* doesn't entirely fit with this analysis as one of its most powerful scenes is of Ericson's breakdown after the death of the sailors when he is seen with tears running down his face, even if this has only been released with the help of several gins. What is also noticeable about this particular group of men is just how overwhelmingly middle-class they are. It may be a problem of seeing the film fifty years after it was made, but even audiences of the time must have been struck by the gentlemanly tones and clubbable manner of Denholm Elliott, Donald Sinden and John Stratton as Ericson's officers, although this is undeniably a feature of many British films of the period. It's in this context that Baker's appearance in the film is so startling. As Andrew Spicer describes it, 'when he returns, drunk, from his shore leave, he is shown framed in the doorway, the gross outsider, as seen from the point-of-view of the sober middle-class group'.

We first encounter Baker as he makes his way across deck, striding towards the camera. The lighting is low, but not as dark as the scowl across his face. He looks tough and intimidating, his eyes hard as he barks: 'I'm the First Lieutenant around here and don't you forget it.' He immediately catches sight of the callow faces of the two new officers, played by Sinden and Stratton, and interrogates them on their knowledge of the ship. The key to his character is quickly revealed, however, when Sinden confidently answers his inquiry as to how many fire points there are on board. Stratton is amazed that Sinden's character knew the answer, but in fact he didn't. He just guessed that the First Lieutenant didn't know either and therefore couldn't contradict his answer. Bennett is revealed to be a phoney and a

CHAPTER TWO

The Man you Love to Hate

There was no doubt as far as Stanley Baker was concerned as to just how important *The Cruel Sea* was to his career, and this despite the fact that the role of Bennett was by no means the lead. If anything, his character is the villain of the piece. He explained to Vincent Kane, 'It wasn't the star part, but it was the best part, the flashiest part.' He also acknowledged that it was the easiest part, if only in the sense that, despite appearing for merely the first twenty minutes of the film and in barely half a dozen scenes, the part of Bennett was virtually guaranteed to make a sizeable impact on audiences. When Vincent Kane puts it to him that this was his lucky break, there is an unmistakable glint of determination in his eye as Baker replies that luck is not enough on its own; he was ready to take full advantage of his chance when it came, he argues. Pragmatically, he also knew that being unknown had increased his chances of getting this small role as he was relatively cheap to employ.

The Cruel Sea belongs to a group of British films made during the 1950s and early 1960s which recall the events of ten or twenty years earlier when Britain was in the midst of war. Many of them portray events from the Second World War with more than a hint of nostalgia, harking back to Britain's 'finest hour' to commemorate individual heroism and the community spirit of the 'people's war' in such a manner that even tragic events tend to be seen through rose-tinted spectacles. Films in this cycle include *633 Squadron* (1964), *Carve Her Name with Pride* (1958), *Reach for the Sky* (1956) and *The Dam Busters* (1954). Film historian James Chapman has suggested that these films recreated what seemed, from the perspective of the 1950s, a time of moral certainties when Britain was sure of its place in the world, offering a 1950s audience something innately comforting, if conservative. In retrospect, *The Cruel Sea* doesn't entirely conform to the usual pattern of these films. It is certainly made in Ealing's established house style, with the emphasis on low-key realism, seen here in the meticulous build up of detail depicting life on board the *Compass Rose* and in the dovetailing of documentary footage into the fictional narrative. What is strikingly different is the nearly relentless emphasis on the horrors of war,

STANLEY BAKER: A LIFE IN FILM

bully. When Denholm Elliott joins the crew it is quickly evident that the three young officers have an affinity that they don't share with Baker's character. Much of this is based on class. In their civilian lives they were previously a journalist, a barrister and a bank employee, occupations differentiated from Bennett who was a used car salesman. He reveals his lack of class credentials in other ways too: he gets drunk and is the only crew member who seems to enjoy the nasty sausages the chef serves for dinner. Ellen Baker told me that Stanley actually shot a scene with Megs Jenkins (another fine Welsh actor) in which his roughness is made so apparent that the censor objected; she and Stanley were shown the initial version by the film's director and producer. Nonetheless, Baker's judgement about the potential of his role is proved right. Although Bennett is a thug and a fraud, escaping active duty by faking an ulcer (a course of action that is actually subtly suggested to him by the other three, so that they can get rid of him), he is still a more compelling figure than his fellow recruits. It is their cut glass accents and glib manners that have dated, whereas Baker's pushy, swaggering Bennett still seems fresh and dynamic. Within twenty minutes he is out of the film, but not out of the memory.

The film proved to be a major critical and commercial success in Britain. Other than the odd disparaging comparison with the original novel, the press reception was full of praise. Jack Hawkins was singled out in particular, with reviewers regarding it as his finest performance to date, but both Donald Sinden and Denholm Elliott were also well received. Stanley fared less well, with few critics paying him much attention. However Leonard Mosley writing in the *Daily Express* was more prescient: 'At the beginning of the film there is a performance from a newcomer named Stanley Baker, playing the part of a braggart and a bully - and he looks so genuine that you hate him from the moment you first notice his sneer and hear the nasty rasp of his voice.' The film received a BAFTA nomination as Best Film and one for Hawkins as Best Actor, as well as an Oscar nomination for Eric Ambler's adaptation. A more surprising plaudit was the award of a Selznick Golden Laurel for encouraging 'mutual understanding and good will between the peoples of the world.' Ealing made little use of Baker in their publicity campaign. Despite fifth billing, his name does not appear on the main poster used and his image is not among those released for the central promotion of the film. In press books released by Ealing his name appears a long way down and he is referred to only as an 'athletic Welshman' and the son of a miner. Nonetheless, he had acquitted himself well in what was one of the key British films of its year. His success was never in doubt for at least one fan; his mother. The film was shown at a special screening in Ferndale and at Stanley's first on-screen appearance Mrs

THE MAN YOU LOVE TO HATE

Baker apparently leapt from her seat to inform the audience 'that's my son'. They suggested that she take her seat again but nothing could stop her from crying when he is invalidated off the ship.

One immediate consequence of Baker's appearance in *The Cruel Sea* was that he now found himself in regular employment in films, a situation which was to continue for the rest of his career. He initially found himself working for Warwick Films, a company recently founded by two American producers, Irving Allen and Albert 'Cubby' Broccoli; the latter was to gain fame for bringing James Bond to the big screen. They had relocated to Britain as it offered lower production costs than Hollywood, as well as the chance to obtain funding via the Eady Levy (a tax on cinema admissions used to boost British production). Their films were to be low-budget but would strive to give the impression of having Hollywood production values. They were also aimed squarely at an international market, something which was not always the case with British films of the period. A distribution deal with Columbia gave them access to world markets. This strategy was apparent in their first outings, and Baker's debut with them, *The Red Beret* (1953), released in the United States as *Paratrooper*. Although put together on a tight schedule, the film was still shot in Technicolor and puts much of its emphasis on battle scenes. To appeal to international audiences the American star Alan Ladd takes the lead and the British actors are deployed in supporting roles. The film was co-scripted by Richard Maibaum and directed by Terence Young, both of whom would also be central in bringing James Bond to the cinema.

Seen now, the film is a fairly routine wartime action-adventure yarn based loosely on real events and characters. It tells the story of the Parachute Brigade, including the raid on the German radar station at Bruneval. Historical fact is thinly disguised, so that the real life Major John Frost who led the attack has become Major Snow (Leo Genn) and the radar specialist, Sergeant Cox, has been renamed as Sergeant Box. Reality is manipulated to allow Ladd to appear as a gulf-stricken volunteer known as 'Canada' who steps into the breach when his commanding officer is wounded. War movie clichés abound and the dialogue sequences separating the action are mainly turgid. The film gave Harry Andrews his first film role (he was to appear in a remarkable number of films with Baker during the 1950s), but for Stanley the experience was something of a mixed blessing. Apart from playing a relatively minor role, and being well down the billing, the producers seem to have decided that his accent was too difficult for American audiences and he was dubbed over. Baker had already suffered the fate of many other Welsh actors, Burton included, in having spent some years trying to smooth the

stage and an English dominated film industry based in London. Apparently this was not enough for *The Red Beret* and so he was robbed of one of his most distinguishing trademarks. Ironically, the film also features another Welsh actor, Donald Houston (whose brother Glyn had been in *The Cruel Sea*), playing a Welsh character inevitably called 'Taffy', but he was deemed sufficiently understandable to escape dubbing.

One positive thing to come from the film was the friendship which Baker struck up with Alan Ladd. It was the first of a number of such friendships he was to forge with American actors, including Edward G. Robinson and Robert Mitchum. Ellen Baker suggests that they found in Stanley none of the snobbery or affectedness which they sometimes encountered with British actors. To them he seemed as classless as any American archetype. Baker was to appear with Ladd again in the second of Warwick's British-based action films, *Hell Below Zero* (1954), rather vaguely adapted from a Hammond Innes novel and helmed by the accomplished American director Mark Robson. The film is set largely in the Antarctic and features Joan Tetzl as Judie Nordhal whose father, the captain of a whaling fleet, has seemingly committed suicide. Ladd is the American adventurer, Duncan Craig, who joins up with her as she heads south to find the truth about her father's death. Baker plays Erik Bland, the villainous son of her father's business partner who, of course, has actually murdered the unfortunate captain. To add a little extra spice, Erik is also Judie's former lover. For Baker the film meant an extraordinary fourteen week trip to the Antarctic for the location shooting. As he told Clive James, 'I would have paid if I'd had the money, but they were paying me and that was just an incredible thing.'

The film has the typical merits and deficiencies of Warwick's output. Little effort was put into the dialogue and the actors are given flatly drawn characters to play. The cheap sets used for interiors and close-ups contrast badly with the exteriors shot on location which are striking and make full use of Technicolor. The semi-documentary scenes depicting the everyday business of a whaling fleet, with much bloody hacking about of the whales, are liable to horrify the sensibilities of many modern viewers but undeniably provide a remarkable visual record of the industry. Baker again catches the eye in another dastardly supporting role, although we have to wait until nearly halfway through the film for him to make his first appearance. The script gives him precious little to work with, but he is allowed a couple of glowering close-ups to establish an appropriate sense of menace. As is so often the case with villains, he at least proves more memorable than the two leads, with Ladd rather bland as the hero and far from believable in his action scenes. Similarly, there is little romantic spark between Ladd and

Joan Tetzl. Baker eventually receives his inevitable comeuppance after an ice pick fight with Ladd on some decidedly unconvincing studio-made ice floes.

Ladd was to make another feature with Warwick, the inadvertently humorous Arthurian fantasy *The Black Knight* (1954), although this time without Baker. Their friendship was further cemented when several of Baker's friends from south Wales were used, at his behest, on the film as extras or on stunt work. Part of the film's location work was carried out at the picturesque folly Castell Coch, not far from Cardiff. Baker took the opportunity to give his new American friend a tour of his home town of Ferndale. What Ladd made of Ferndale or Ferndale made of him is unrecorded. Between these projects for Warwick, Baker appeared in a twenty-minute short film, *The Tell-Tale Heart* (1953), adapted from the macabre story by Edgar Allan Poe, with Baker taking the part of the author, and then the more substantial *Knights of the Round Table* (1954). The film was made by the American giant MGM at their British studios at Elstree, with extensive location work in Ireland and Devon. It was an expensive retelling of the Arthurian legends, shot in the new cinematic marvel of Cinemascope (making it the first use of a widescreen process in a British film). Baker was not the initial choice for the film's chief villain, Mordred, but stepped in to replace George Sanders after he had fallen out with the producers. As reported by the *Sunday Chronicle*, this was a considerable break for the man who had played the 'boor and braggart' Bennett in *The Cruel Sea*; they suggested that he was making a name for himself – 'as a bully'. Baker seems to have made the most of the opportunity: 'I enjoyed doing it – riding horses and wearing costume and bathing in the grand manner. It was like Hollywood set in Devon – it was very funny, a great experience and very enjoyable.'

Baker was given fifth billing on the film behind its American stars, Robert Taylor (Lancelot), Ava Gardner (Guinevere), Mel Ferrer (Arthur), and Anne Crawford (Morgan le Fey). Again, MGM's publicity campaign made little use of Baker and in most of the posters the typeface for his name is noticeably small in comparison with the Hollywood names who were expected to ensure its box office appeal with American audiences. The film was released for Christmas in the United States and did reasonable business, but it was poorly received by the British press who felt that it took itself far too seriously. However, Baker was singled out for praise by a number of the critics, with the reviewer for the *Sunday Graphic* admiring 'the fiery villainy of Stanley Baker' and the *Sunday Express* describing him as 'properly murderous.' Seen now, the film certainly suffers from slow pacing and a ponderous approach, as well as from the unfortunate decision to use a format

of cod Shakespearean language and delivery for the dialogue. This results in such tortuous gems as 'ride alone you shall not' and 'she ever grows more beautiful'. The film's chief appeal is visual: the cinematography by David Lean's future collaborator and multiple Oscar-winner Frederick A. Young and his assistant Stephen Dade (who would later photograph *Zulu*) makes sumptuous use of colour (the film was shot in Eastmancolor, but printed in Technicolor) and of the Irish landscape. The set designs by Alfred Junge, who had done such wonderful work on Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's *Black Narcissus* (1947), are certainly fine and were recognised with an Oscar nomination. The battle scenes teem with extras, although some of the stunt work is inferior. Baker is striking in his scenes, first appearing suitably clad in black and establishing himself as the villain by having one of Arthur's men thrown from a cliff into a muddy bog. Mercifully, he is allowed to speak in his own voice and delivers his lines with a real sense of conviction and theatrical panache, something lacking in Robert Taylor's flat delivery.

In these films Baker had begun to establish a recognisable screen persona as British cinema's favourite bad man of the moment. Sheldon Hall suggests that this typecasting was 'dictated by his brusque, surly manner, deep-set brown eyes, stony brow and strong jaw'. The press began to latch on to this image and build stories around it. For the London *Evening Standard* he was 'the face Britons hate', although they quoted Baker as complaining 'even an actor with a face like mine sighs for an audience's love sometimes'. Readers were informed by *The Star* that 'you will love hating Mr Baker'. They went on to suggest that 'in Stanley Baker British filmmakers have found a young man capable of bringing back the great days of screen villainy' and compared him favourably with Hollywood villains of the silent era like Erich von Stroheim. In an interview with the *Evening Standard*, Baker seemed sanguine enough about these developments: 'I should worry. The money's good. And, furthermore, I have a wife, twins, a large house in Wimbledon and a Jaguar to support. Besides I haven't got the face to be a glamour boy. Look at it closely, describe what you see.' The accompanying photograph shows a suitably intense, glowering figure. Later in the same piece Ellen corrects this impression, suggesting that 'actually he's a pet. A devoted father and an obedient husband. The face? I think it's charming.' Looking back now, Ellen agrees that he took a pragmatic view of the typecasting that was beginning to occur. For Stanley, these films were enjoyable to make (often involving an expenses-paid trip to a pleasant location), he was becoming better known to audiences and, in any case, it was a great deal better to be an employed actor than the unemployed one he had been just a few short years before. And there was the new house in Wimbledon, as well as a growing taste for expensive cars and for gambling.

More importantly, on 8 March 1953 the family had been expanded by the addition of the twins, Martin and Sally.

Baker was blunt in explaining to Clive James his attitude to these roles:

I'd heard and read a lot of this stuff of actors being typecast and things like that, that it was an awful thing. All I knew it was a chance to act, a chance to earn money, a chance to gain experience — so I wanted to do it. And I don't care what the part would have been at that stage in my career. I would have done anything, you know.

When Vincent Kane asked him about his typecasting as a villain, he smiled broadly and explained that for him it was simply a means to gain experience as an actor while being paid well for it. He knew even then that a point would arrive when these roles would no longer be enough for him, but for the moment they were serving their purpose. And so the villainy continued in a spate of expensive costume films. *Helen of Troy* (1956) was shot during the latter part of 1954 and early 1955 on location in Italy. It was again produced by an American company, this time Warner Brothers, who were taking advantage of favourable exchange rates and the locations which Europe could offer them. Hollywood was already beginning to feel the impact of changes in the leisure habits of audiences at home. The arrival of television was spreading alarm among normally steely studio executives who, for the first time in cinema's short history, could see that this was a genuine challenge to their monopoly on providing the public with visual entertainment. As a result, they poured money into ensuring that the cinema could provide attractions which television could not compete with. If the television image was small, the cinema screen would get even bigger (or wider, at least) and if television was monochrome then films would be in glorious colour. What better vehicle to show off these spectacular attractions than an historical epic, hence the proliferation of such films in the 1950s and early 1960s. *Helen of Troy* was to be presented in Warnercolor and Cinemascope and, according to its publicity, cost a then unheard of \$6 million and featured a staggering cast of 30,000 extras.

The Baker family found themselves ensconced in sunny Rome for the duration of the five-month shoot. If this wasn't sufficient incentive, Baker was to be paid the not inconsiderable sum of £30,000 for his services. It's not difficult to see why such offers proved hard to resist. Ellen Baker recalls the holiday atmosphere of that time and the pleasure of escaping from a damp, dreary Britain. At one point, a mix-up in the shooting of the film's elaborate battle sequences resulted in a delay of several weeks. To keep the cast happy they were shipped to Capri while they waited for work to begin again. Weekly expenses of £300 per person continued to be paid during this enforced vacation and Ellen remembers the money arriving each week by

boat! There were other pleasant distractions back in Rome, including the starlets and models who would hang around in hope of catching someone's eye. Among them Ellen remembers a very young and beautiful Ursula Andrews who would later star opposite Baker in *Perfect Friday* (1970).

Helen of Troy featured two relative unknowns, Jack Semas and Rossana Podesta, in the lead roles of Paris and Helen, but their relative inexperience and lack of box office appeal was to be offset by a roster of notable British character actors in supporting roles. Alongside Baker as Achilles were Sir Cedric Hardwicke as Priam, Niall MacGinnis as Menelaus, and Harry Andrews as Hector. A youthful Brigitte Bardot took a small supporting role as Helen's servant. The director was the distinguished American Robert Wise, who had edited Orson Welles's masterpiece *Citizen Kane* (1941). Wise was the first in what was to be a long line of American directors who found themselves impressed by Baker. Startlingly, Ellen Baker recalls that Wise would subsequently offer the leading male role in *The Sound of Music* to Baker but he decided against it. Stanley seems to have found the whole experience highly entertaining, as he told Clive James: 'First of all *Helen of Troy* was directed by Robert Wise who was a very good director. I played Achilles. Again it was a marvellous part – a heavy!'

The film is an undeniably spectacular, if superficial, adaptation of Homer's *Iliad*. Its first half focuses on the Romeo and Juliet-style doomed love affair between Paris and Helen, while the second half shifts into more conventional epic mode with an enormous battle sequence followed by the unveiling of the giant wooden horse of Troy. Baker makes an impressive entrance as we see him approaching in extreme long shot down a corridor where the other Greek nobles await him. As he arrives we move into a close-up as he tells them how much he despises them all. His character is quickly established as courageous but hot-headed, arrogant and vain. If Menelaus emerges as the story's principle villain, Stanley runs him a close second. He takes the lead in the fight scenes as the Greeks lay siege to Troy and is given one of the film's most memorable set pieces when he battles Hector. Having confirmed his vicious reputation by hacking Hector to the ground and stabbing him in front of his wife, he then drags his body behind his chariot while the Trojans rain arrows down on him (they cannot harm him as he is a partially divine creature). It's an impressive sight, although justice is eventually served when an arrow from Paris finds his vulnerable heel and he falls to his death. The role is still relatively small, but again carries sufficient interest to make his performance memorable among a large cast. In a blaze of publicity, the film opened on 26 January 1956 in fifty-six countries simultaneously. The trailer promised audiences spectacle, romance and 'Bacchanalian revels of unsurpassed debauchery' as Wallace

providing a glimpse of the 'invincible Achilles'. Box office was reasonable but, perhaps unsurprisingly, the critics weren't terribly impressed.

Richard III (1955) offered a much smaller role to Baker, but in a considerably more prestigious and artistically ambitious venture. It was to be the third of Laurence Olivier's Shakespeare adaptations following on from his patriotic wartime *Henry V* (1944) and the more introspective, Freudian-inflected version of *Hamlet* (1948). The film was financed by Alexander Korda's London Films; Stanley had signed a contract with the Hungarian-born Korda in the autumn of 1953, the year before *Richard III* went into production. Baker was happy enough to be allied to the charismatic mercurial Korda who had, over a period of twenty years, been one of the most adventurous and successful of British producers. He was joining the likes of Olivier, Eric Portman and Ralph Richardson, who were all on Korda's books. Ellen remembers her husband being impressed with Korda: 'He made actors feel safe and secure with him. Whatever his own plans, he always put their careers first and wanted them to succeed.' This was apparent in the way he allowed his contract actors to appear in projects for other producers. As a result, Baker made only a few films directly for Korda's own companies, but appeared in a number of American-backed projects in the mid 1950s. Korda was also famously generous to his actors, ensuring that they were paid well.

Richard III was an outstanding project to be involved in (eventually winning the BAFTA as best film of its year) and its location work again took Stanley abroad, this time to Spain where the battle of Bosworth was to be filmed; rather bizarrely, Olivier claimed that he couldn't find a suitable British location and settled instead on Spain, despite the fact that the battle then appears to take place in a sun-blached landscape with high mountains in the distance. The film adopts a deliberately theatrical, stylised approach, from the superb sets by Roger Furse to Olivier's own memorable performance as Richard. He modelled his evil monarch on cartoon drawings of the Big Bad Wolf (the reason for the false nose) and clearly relishes every line of melodramatic villainy. Baker seems to have been cast as Richmond because Olivier wanted specifically to play on his Welshness. John Wilders, the former governor of the Royal Shakespeare Company, has suggested that there was a historical pattern of Wales coming to the aid of England which can be found in several Shakespeare plays, including *Henry V* and *Cymbeline*, hence Olivier's desire to have an actor who could give Richmond an authentic Welsh accent. It is pleasant to imagine the ironic smile this argument might have solicited from Baker. It is also a happy change to see Baker cast in a heroic role, here as England's saviour from Richard's malevo-

the play which gives Richmond two more speeches of substance, Baker again makes a striking entrance. It is Lord Stanley (Laurence Naismith) who first sees him as he approaches his tent smiling in recognition. Emblems of Wales are all around, on his tent and his chest, in the form of a red dragon. He is tall and imposing, and when he speaks it is a real pleasure to finally hear his Welsh accent. Things had moved on from the painful dubbing of *The Red Beret*. He retains just the one speech of importance when he prays before the final battle and he delivers it with quiet authority.

In his television interview with Clive James, Baker talked in some detail about the making of *Richard III*, first describing how he came to be cast:

Up until this time I'd been playing all the heavies and all the villains in films. I had a contract with Alexander Korda who produced that picture and one day I had a call to say I want you to come in to the office and meet Laurence Olivier. I met him and he said 'I've seen two of the films you have made and one thing I must tell you as an actor is the easiest parts to play are the villains' and I recognised that because they are easy to play. He said the hardest thing to do as an actor is to stand up with a suit of white armour on waving a Union Jack or the Cross of St George and cry 'God for England, Harry and . . .' and I said I seem to recognise that. He said I'm going to ask you to do that because I want you to play Richmond in *Richard III* because I think you can do it. I was delighted.

He also describes the pleasure he took in being able to play Richmond with a Welsh accent, especially as he is more commonly played as a character who speaks like a public schoolboy and is 'the captain of the rigger fifteen'. Playing the role helped him start to formulate his own plans to distance himself from the villainous roles he had been playing, although the fruition of this was still a couple of years away. Curiously, Baker describes Olivier setting up a complex tracking shot in which Richmond is seen being crowned as king and over which they disagreed. The shot doesn't appear at all in the final version as we don't actually see Richmond crowned. Instead the camera stays on Olivier's Richard.

The film suffered a rather strange fate on its initial release. Korda came up with the idea of selling the film to the American television giant NBC for \$500,000. They broadcast it on the same afternoon in March 1956 that it opened nationwide in American cinemas. The television version was edited for length, cropped from its original widescreen VistaVision print, and broadcast in black and white instead of Technicolor. The broadcast, which was watched by more than sixty million viewers, seriously damaged its box office receipts which were disappointing. This failure may have been instrumental in ending Olivier's ambitions to film any further Shakespeare plays; he had long nurtured the idea of filming *Macbeth* but this never came

about. *Richard III* is now rightly recognised as one of the finest filmed versions of Shakespeare.

It was back to yet more dastardly deeds for Stanley on his fourth costume epic in as many years, *Alexander the Great* (1956). This was planned as a substantial Hollywood project which would combine epic production values with a more serious approach to its subject than was usually expected of the genre. It was also an important vehicle for its star, Stanley's old friend Richard Burton, whose growing status in Hollywood was hopefully to be confirmed by the film. It was also very much the personal project of its Oscar-winning writer producer and director, Robert Rossen, who had developed the idea over a number of years. It would be shot on location in Spain between February and July of 1956. Burton had sufficient clout to bring a small entourage of his friends and family to the shoot, and it's likely that it was through him that Baker was given his role. A good time was evidently had by all, particularly Burton who was by then having an affair with his co-star Claire Bloom. Despite the serious intentions, the film was a disaster at the box office and seriously damaged Burton's reputation with the studios. He, as the focal point for the film, was assumed to be principally to blame for its failure. He said of the film himself: 'I know all "epics" are awful, but I thought *Alexander the Great* might be the first good one. I was wrong.'

Looking at the film in retrospect, although it is far from the weighty project Burton had in mind, it isn't quite as poor as his assessment suggests. The first half of the film, which focuses on the political intrigues in the court of Philip of Macedonia (Frederic March), is probably closer to what both Rossen and Burton intended. It is slightly reminiscent of the BBC's later television adaptation of Robert Graves's *I, Claudius* in its attempts to uncover the motivations of the young Alexander, and his decidedly oedipal relationship with his father and mother (Olympias is played by French actress Danielle Darrieux). The second half degenerates into a seemingly endless series of battles, so that by the time we reach the admittedly spectacular confrontation with the Persians the audience is likely to be as weary as Alexander's foot soldiers. There is repeated use of one of Hollywood's clumsiest narrative devices when Alexander's progress is indicated by the camera tracking across a map while montages of battle scenes are superimposed on top. Unsurprisingly, the focus is on Burton who, despite an unfortunate wig, is athletic, handsome and in fine voice. Baker is given his usual villainous supporting role as Atralus, Philip's second-in-command, who hankers after greater power. He fares a little worse in this film than in his other costume roles of the mid 1950s, often relegated to the back of shots looking sinister. He isn't aided by the fact that a period of many years elapses in the story between his first two appearances, seemingly without him aging.

However, he is given one memorable scene when he brawls with Burton, something which might have brought back a few memories of their time together in London as youngsters. The film is, as ever, bolstered again by a roster of British actors including Harry Andrews and Niall MacGinnis, but it's Peter Cushing who makes most impact here with a subtly drawn performance. Looking back on these films Baker was philosophical: 'I don't regret the passing of those kinds of films. I think that possibly they were right for their time, but I don't think they would be right for 1972. I think that films and audiences have progressed a great deal since that time and people and filmmakers are more serious and pertinent now than they were then.'

Baker's typecasting in period costume films spilled over into his television work of the mid 1950s. He continued to work occasionally for the small screen where his rising status in feature films seems to have persuaded the BBC to offer him more prominent roles. For television he took two leading parts at this time which were more substantial than anything he was being given in films. *The Creature* (1955) was a ninety-minute drama about the abominable snowman written by one of the BBC's most exciting talents, Nigel Kneale. Baker took a central role opposite Peter Cushing and Eric Pohlmann in an atmospheric, unnerving production. It benefits from Neale's thoughtful writing, and all the performances are convincing. Cushing was to appear in a film version, *The Abominable Snowman* (1957), made by Hammer which didn't disgrace the original. More significant was Baker's role in the BBC's prestige six-part adaptation of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1956) where he played Rochester. The series was one of the BBC's flagship productions of its year and proved a considerable success with critics and in terms of audience ratings. Although Baker is rather young at twenty-eight to play a man ten years older, he made a suitably seductive, forceful Rochester during the first half of the story, with just a hint of underlying menace. In the final scenes, as a blind, scarred figure, he extracts every grain of pathos from the part. It's a powerful performance which shows a depth and range he was rarely allowed to demonstrate in his film roles. These television appearances also brought him into millions of homes, helping to make those dark, saturnine features recognisable to a larger British audience.

By the mid 1950s another element had begun to appear in his screen persona which would prove to be more significant for his later development than his villainous roles in togas; that of the sympathetic tough guy. The first real evidence of this was in *The Good Die Young* (1954), made by the production company Romulus. Romulus was the brainchild of the entrepreneurial producers James and John Woolf. These Eton-educated brothers had begun in the industry working in distribution but moved into

production in the early 1950s as a result of their disillusionment with the poor quality product they felt they were receiving from British companies. Their objective was to make films which could be sold outside the domestic British market, particularly in America, to which end they brought in American stars and directors to work in the UK. They had already achieved some success using this policy with two films directed by John Huston: *The African Queen* (1951) and *Moulin Rouge* (1953). The consequences of their approach are also apparent in *The Good Die Young* which features three American stars: Richard Basehart, John Ireland, and Gloria Grahame. The film also carboars a passing resemblance to the American film noir genre, a fact established from its opening shots of a gang of four desperate men driving a stolen car through night-time city streets glistening with rain. In classic noir style, we then go back in time (with the assistance of a voiceover) to discover how they came to be in this situation in the first place.

There are other noirish aspects to the film. Its realistic elements, such as a number of strikingly photographed street scenes and the authentically tough-looking boxing sequence, are combined with highly stylised sections, particularly the final chase across a graveyard and through the tunnels of the London underground. The ending has the moral tone of classic noir, as our four wrongdoers are brought to their just end as a result of their own weaknesses and greed. The film boasts impressive technical standards throughout, with cinematography by Jack Asher and art direction from Bernard Robinson, both of whom would go on to work for Hammer. The music is by the French composer Georges Auric and future director Jack Clayton was in overall charge of the production. Lewis Gilbert, whose later credits include *Alfie* (1966) and three of the Bond films, directed and co-wrote. The film benefits from a remarkably strong cast, with Margaret Leighton and a very young Joan Collins in key supporting roles, as well as a cameo from Robert Morley. At the centre of the film is a telling performance from the frequently maligned Laurence Harvey who is cast perfectly here as 'Rave' Ravenscourt, a vain, philandering upper-class cad who is finally revealed to be a gun-toting psychopath. His combination of suave good looks, ambition and unpleasantness appears not to have been too far from the private reality. Ellen Baker recalls that Harvey made life on set difficult for all concerned with his petulance and his petty demands; in the frequent scenes which take place in a pub, Harvey insisted on being served with chilled white wine which had to be precisely at the right temperature. This behaviour was employed to emphasise his star status on the film. The fact that he was also involved in a more personal way with one of his co-stars, as well as with one of the film's producers, only increased the tension on set. In an act which turned out to be unique in his career, the usually pragmatic

Baker finally had enough and, as Ellen remembers it, walked off the set. After calming down, he recovered his normal professionalism and rejoined the shoot. It's easy to imagine the clash of temperaments between the urbane Harvey and the driven, proletarian Baker. The tensions here can be seen as a precursor for the way Baker's character was to be used creatively by directors like Joseph Losey.

Despite his seventh billing, Baker is given the most interesting role of his film career to date. As Mike Morgan, a ring-wearer prize fighter, he is provided with a character who generates considerable sympathy. Having saved enough money to retire from the game, Morgan suffers the loss of a hand after winning his last bout fighting while it was broken. To add to his woes, his wife lends their savings to her unreliable brother for his bail money and he then promptly flees the country. The scene in which his wife reveals the truth of their situation provides Baker with his best acting opportunity. As he breaks down with the realisation that all his suffering in the ring has been for nothing, director Lewis Gilbert heightens the emotional impact with expressionistic lighting effects and extreme camera angles. There is a real sense of the vulnerability of the character beneath his hardened exterior. Baker is convincing enough as a boxer, his angular, heavy features look the part and appropriately enough he had been an outstanding boxing prospect as a youngster himself. Audience sympathy for his character is brought to the fore at the end of the film when, in the middle of a bungled post office robbery, he decides to give himself up to the police only to be shot in the back by the murderous Ravenscourt. With his familiar toughness softened by pathos and strengthened by a sense of moral integrity, Baker was laying the foundations for his roles later in the decade.

Although well down the billing, the posters used for the British publicity campaign feature Baker's image quite prominently (in his boxing gear, clutching his injured hand), although unsurprisingly it is Laurence Harvey who is the centre of attention. British critics didn't think much of the film and some objected strongly to what they saw as its nastiness. The pessimistic violence of its final scenes seems to have placed it into the category of low-life crime film which many critics of the period were not keen to encourage. A spate of so-called 'spiv' films had appeared in the immediate postwar era and proved popular with audiences. They can now be seen as fascinating historical phenomenon, pointing to then current anxieties about the country's moral decline and, in particular, to public concerns about juvenile delinquency. This is central to *The Good Die Young* as two of the characters are ex-servicemen and the other is still in the US Air Force. The problems of postwar readjustment to civilian life, as well as feelings of resentment over the lack of public appreciation for the sacrifices made, are

themes conveyed through Richard Basehart's character, Joe Halsey, who returns from Korea to find himself out of work and in marital difficulties. If these elements seem pertinent now, contemporary British critics appear to have been more concerned about the negative image these films might create abroad. However, virtually all of the reviewers picked out Baker's performance for praise, commenting on his ability to make his character emotionally engaging. Paul Dehn in the *News Chronicle* is typical when he described it as a 'really moving performance'.

Baker made three other films while under contract to Korda, none of which added greatly to his reputation or development as an actor; but they do give an indication of the life of a jobbing actor in steady employment within the studio system of that time. Ellen suggests it was a happy time for him, in contrast with the struggles he had experienced at the beginning of the 1950s when he was finding it difficult to get anything other than walk-ons. He now found himself 'bouncing from film to film', as she put it, and usually in supporting roles of reasonable importance. *Beautiful Stranger* (1954) was a curiosity. It was produced by Marksman, a small independent company established by Maxwell Setton and John R. Sloan, and was distributed by British Lion (where Korda was effectively in charge). British Lion, which was in receivership but kept afloat by government loans, acted as an outlet for a variety of modest, low-budget producers who could use its facilities at Shepperton and release films through its distribution arm. The film itself was a crime melodrama designed as a vehicle for the declining Hollywood star Ginger Rogers. The complex narrative has Rogers's character living on the French Riviera with Baker's married businessman who, it turns out, is actually an international criminal. Herbert Lom appears as a confidence trickster who eventually murders Baker's character, and French actor Jacques Bergerac is the hero who eventually rescues Rogers. The imported American director David Miller handles the drama in a perfunctory manner, making little use of the settings, and the whole film has a sorry, neglected feel to it. Baker does his professional best with a part for which he seems ill suited, particularly as he is required to appear a good deal older than he actually is in order to make him a credible lover for Rogers. This is achieved none too convincingly by some grey streaks in the hair.

Child in the House (1956), made by B-movie specialists Eros, is principally memorable for teaming Baker with the American-born director Cy Endfield for the first time. Endfield was to become a significant figure in Baker's later career, but this wasn't a particularly auspicious start. Endfield had arrived in Britain in an attempt to escape the attentions of Senator McCarthy's anti-communist witch-hunt in Hollywood and initially made the film under the name of another director, Charles de la Tour, who acted

as a 'front'. The film was eventually released under the name *C. Baker Endfield*. It is a sentimental family drama featuring the popular child star Mandy Miller as a young girl temporarily orphaned when her father goes on the run from the police and her mother is taken ill. She goes to the home of her aunt and uncle (Phyllis Calvert and Eric Portman) where she brings warmth into their cold lives. Baker is inevitably cast as the errant father, albeit a devoted one.

A Hill in Korea (1956), produced by Ian Dalrymple's Wessex Films and again distributed by British Lion, was the first British film to be set in the Korean War and is a more substantial piece of work. The film adopts a downbeat, realistic approach, with the familiar mix of heroics and tragedy that audiences had come to expect from the British war film. The emphasis is mainly on action, separated by sequences of rough-edged dialogue as a British patrol finds themselves cut off behind enemy lines. The film has an impressive line-up of acting talent, including future stars Robert Shaw and Michael Caine, as well as George Baker as the well-meaning but naive officer and Harry Andrews as the tough, experienced sergeant. The neatly handled battle scenes are, unfortunately, let down by the clichéd writing and threadbare production values. Most disappointing of all, Baker is cast again as the villain of the piece. His Corporal Ryker is a borderline psychopath who gets rather too much enjoyment out of killing innocent Korean civilians before being shot himself by the Chinese. In between, he spends his time threatening to kill his fellow soldiers, his barely suppressed violence causing him to break out in a stutter. Baker brings his usual conviction to the part, but by now there was something wearying about the regularity with which he was appearing in these typecast roles.

Baker kept up a remarkable work rate during this early stage of his career. Between the winter of 1952 and the middle of 1956, a period of less than four years, he had made eleven feature films and one short, as well as appearing in two major television productions. In eight of the eleven films he is cast as a villain, the only exceptions being *The Red Beret*, *The Good Die Young*, and *Richard III*. The majority of the films are relatively routine commercial productions and he is always cast in supporting roles, with only *The Cruel Sea* and *The Good Die Young* providing him with the combination of a strong part and a memorable film. Nonetheless, he had established himself as a reliable performer trusted by the industry and had made himself recognisable to domestic and American audiences as British cinema's current villain of choice. But why always the villain? Clearly his dark, brooding features played their part, but there was already something of the outsider about Baker within the context of British cinema. His working-class origins were central to this and his Welshness may have contributed to

well; for a predominantly English, middle-class industry Baker must have seemed an oddity and was, as a result, typecast in these disruptive roles. However, as the decade progressed and British society began to experience radical changes these same qualities would turn him into a star. Fortunes were about to alter dramatically for Baker himself. On 23 January 1956 Alexander Korda died and when the dust had settled on his business affairs Stanley Baker found that, along with a number of Korda's other contracted stars, he had been 'sold' to the Rank Organisation.

Conclusion

It is now late November and I am driving up to Ferndale again. It's a dark, wild day with the wind whipping rain down the valley, as I make my way through the former pit villages into the Rhondda. BBC Radio Wales are broadcasting their afternoon programme from Ferndale Rugby Club and a plaque is to be unveiled in the Sir Stanley Baker lounge. We are commemorating the thirty years that have passed since Stanley Baker died. Lady Ellen is there, along with Stanley's sister Muriel, and all three of his sons. They have been joined by what seems to be half of Ferndale; the bar is packed to overflowing and there is laughter rolling out into the street. The comedian and broadcaster Owen Money is presenting the programme and attempting to keep some semblance of order, but he has a hard job on. The weather is so awful that the live radio transmission has been abandoned. The interviews are being recorded instead for broadcast on Monday. The local choir performs and one of its members sings solo. It's a warm, joyful scene and one can imagine how much Stanley would have enjoyed it himself.

Ellen is telling affectionate stories about Stanley. She has been talking to one of the BBC crew who can remember accidentally meeting him as a child on a visit to London. He was shooting *Perfect Friday* and she still recalls his kindness and how pleased he was to discover she was from south Wales. Muriel is astounding everyone with her precise memory for Ferndale and its inhabitants. Glyn, Stanley's second son, has been bowled over by the affection he has encountered today. He talks about what a unique place this is and what determination it took for Stanley to drive his way from here to success. He remembers how, at his own wedding, Stanley's great childhood friend Billy Rossiter has been invited but then felt so uncomfortable on the day that he couldn't come in from outside. Stanley, by contrast, never felt at a disadvantage to anyone. Adam, who is similarly overwhelmed by the occasion, reflects on the difficulties of being raised with a famous father and the challenge all the children faced in making their own way in the world from under his shadow. This event itself is a remarkable testimony to how much Stanley Baker still means to the people here in Ferndale.

Many of the stories told are of Baker the private man. They return repeatedly to his loyalty to this place and to the kindness he showed to people when he was out of the public gaze. Muriel remembers how Stanley provided the deposit for the first pub which she and her husband ran, as

well as how he helped them to buy their first house. She recalls how he paid for their brother Freddie's daughter to go to Vienna to train as a singer. He always regretted that while he had escaped to a better life, it was Freddie who remained and worked down the pit. When his brother became ill he helped to support him. Muriel says: 'He was the most generous man you ever met. He always looked after people.' She always remained close to Stanley, spending one of her two weeks' annual holiday from the pub with him. Similarly, Glynne Morse's son Gareth told me of Stanley's loyalty and gratitude towards his father, remembering the occasion he discovered him at his father's bedside when Glynne was in the Bristol Eye Hospital.

Ellen has many stories in the same vein. She recounted how, after his death, she was going through his papers and discovered a cheque book which she had never seen before. It detailed a series of payments he had made over the years to various people who had come asking for his help. They included out-of-work actors, friends down on their luck, and even Henry Cooper's old manager. She remembered these people coming to see Stanley over the years but had no idea that he was helping them in this way. For her, what was typical of Stanley was not so much the generosity, but the fact that he didn't want anyone to know what he was doing, not even her. Another story takes her back to 1970 and the making of *The Last Grenade* on location in Spain. Stanley leapt out to stop a car which was heading down the wrong side of the road. Behind the wheel, to his amazement, he found none other than Daphne Rye, the casting agent who had discovered the young Baker and signed him up for Tennants, the agents who also handled Richard Burton. He hadn't seen her for fifteen years but they soon got talking and he ended up giving her the money to set up her new business in Spain, a kind of bar cum library which he became a frequent patron of afterwards.

As well as the private kindness, there is the loyalty to his childhood roots. His son Martin reflected on the impact of that upbringing in Ferndale:

The influence of his background never left him. He always remained at heart a working-class Welshman. He kept the same friends for years and was always drawn to people in the film crew who shared his background to some degree. He loved boxing, pubs and gambling. He was always a Labour-voting socialist. His sense of ambition came from his background. If you didn't want to work down the mine, you got out. He was able to walk both sides of the line, talking to aristocrats or working-class crew members. He was always himself and people accepted him for that.

His cousin John Wyatt said of him: 'I don't think he ever forgot where he came from. It was always a part of him. He was proud of his background and I know the people of the valleys were always proud of him.' Stan

Phillips, in an interview for Steve Freer's affectionate BBC documentary on Baker, remembered going on a journey to the valleys with him during the making of *How Green was my Valley* and realising that:

He was adored by everyone and, in a funny sort of way, he was the one who hung on to his roots more. Although his career was international and he lived abroad and lived in London, there was something about Stanley that never did leave the valleys and that, of course, was very attractive and people sensed this.

A section of the BBC's website covering south east Wales includes a discussion board where people can attach their views or memories of Baker. A number come from people currently living in south Wales who continue to feel a direct connection to him. One says: 'While I was growing up in Ferndale in the Rhondda, Stanley Baker was my hero. A 'boy from the valley' who managed to avoid the colliery and become an international star. Another describes him as 'a proud part of the Rhondda's heritage'.

The press had always been attracted to the story of a poor boy making good and many of his press cuttings over the years return to this theme. The other angle that they were often fascinated with was of how the on-screen tough guy was in private a tender, loyal family man. Back in 1965, *Showtime* magazine was delighted to inform its readers about his 'soft side'. The evidence they give for this comes in the form of his comments about Ellen: 'I could stand losing everything I had gained materially without getting suicidal, but losing Ellen would really finish me. I just can't imagine life without her.' Six years later, with his twenty-first wedding anniversary to celebrate, he told another magazine: 'There's no formula for a happy marriage. We stay married because we still want to live together.' One only has to see Ellen talking about Stanley now, thirty years after his death, to see how much they meant to each other and how that love has continued.

The comments on the BBC's web pages offer fascinating evidence as to his continued popularity with fans. There are those who want to acknowledge his talents as an actor: 'Stanley Baker was a consummate film actor, as effective at portraying "hard men" as he was in his more sensitive roles.' Another praises his performance in *Accident*: 'His Oxford don Charley is a masterpiece of acting [...] Bogarde plays Bogarde, and does it as well as ever. But Stanley acts him off the screen. It's Stanley's film.' As flattering as these comments are, there is something else here. It is not so much Baker's acting as his screen image which has made the lasting impression on audiences. One says: 'There is a certain magnetism about Stanley Baker – when he is on screen with other actors, it is always him you are watching', while another suggests that the only reason for watching a routine film like *Hell Below Zero* is to see Baker. One comment says simply that he was 'an

actor of great screen presence'. These descriptions suggest something other than just acting ability at the core of Baker's appeal. In his book *Stars*, Richard Dyer tries to define the nature of 'charisma' which is so central to our understanding of screen stardom. For Dyer, this aspect of stardom is not some magical, inexplicable occurrence, but a synthesis of the star's own intrinsic qualities, the historical context in which they appear, and the inclinations of the audience. It is evident from the BBC's website that Baker's impact is indicative of this combination of elements.

It's worth considering the estimation of Baker made by other commentators. Anthony Storey's account of him frames his life by focusing almost entirely on his final days and the legacy of his early years. Storey is concerned principally with Baker the working-class hero and in examining the influence of his upbringing. He spends little time looking at Baker the actor, star or producer. As a result, he too easily buys into the myth of Baker the 'hard man'. Although recognising the determination which drove him from those valleys to success, he assumes that the sense of 'threat' which gave his screen performances their edginess was a true reflection of the inner man. This underestimates both Baker's abilities as a performer and the vulnerability which often made his tough-guy roles interestingly complex. Peter Stead's short essay on Baker celebrates his Welshness (justifiably enough), but is sidetracked by unhelpful comparisons between Baker and Richard Burton. Stead accepts the prevailing mythology of Burton as an intellectual and artist, crediting Baker's commercial success to his more pragmatic, career-minded approach. He contrasts Burton, with his 'poetic love of language', somewhat disparagingly with Baker, whose acting is a matter of natural instinct rather than the studied skill of Burton. Again, there is an assumption that achieving this naturalness on screen involves no conscious effort, as well as an unwillingness to recognise that the power of film stardom lies in the performer's ability to represent something which is relevant and meaningful to their audience. It's difficult to accept the image of an uneducated, inarticulate man which both accounts present. There may have been few books in the family household of the young Baker but, as Ellen recounts, Stanley was an avid self-improver who read voraciously as an adult. Anyone who has seen footage of his interviews with Vincent Kane and Clive James will have trouble recognising the man of limited vocabulary and simple thoughts described by Storey. Instead they will see a lively, keen intelligence at work, and a man whose choice of words was measured and expressive.

Other accounts of Baker take fuller account of his achievements as an actor and his appeal as a star. For David Berry, Baker was Britain's first 'authentic virile working-class screen hero', who paved the way for a new

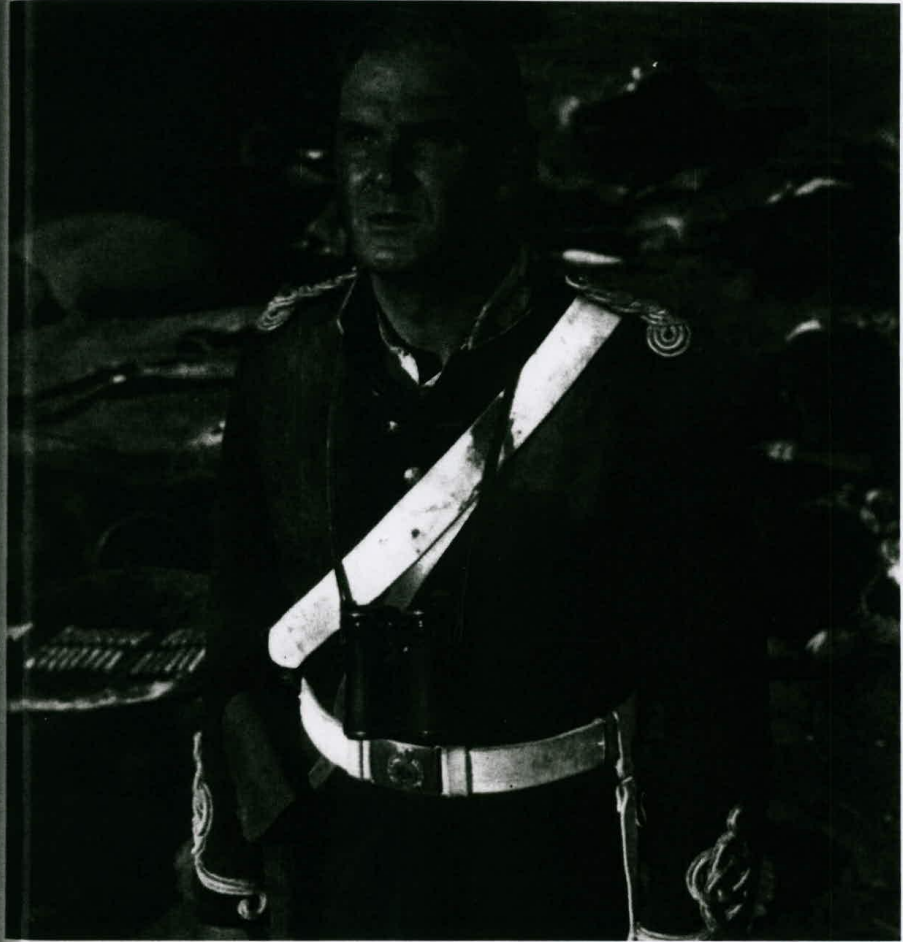
generation of proletarian stars. But he was also a subtle actor who could suggest the inner tensions in his characters, an ability which made him 'for almost two decades one of the most compelling of British male performers'. Julian Upton's essay on Baker, 'The outsider', provides a balanced comparison with Burton which recognises that 'in many ways Baker had a more effective on-screen presence than Burton, and, in retrospect, he seems to have contributed more to the British cinema of the 50s and 60s'. He also recognises the complexities achieved by Baker in his roles for Joseph Losey, especially in *Accident*. Other film historians, examining stardom in the kind of terms described by Richard Dyer, have sought to place Baker in his historical context in order to gauge his meaning for audiences. For Geoffrey Macnab, it is the Celtic qualities of both Baker and Burton which made them so startlingly different in the staid British cinema of the 1950s. In contrast with the ineffable 'niceness' of Rank's roster of contract players (mainly English), Baker and Burton 'were truculent and self-destructive [...] notions of loss, disappointment and betrayal are central to any understanding of their careers and how they managed to become stars.' At a time marked by youth rebellion and a disillusionment with Britain's ruling elite, these 'valley boys' were the outsiders who could give voice to these feelings of unrest. Andrew Spicer also acknowledges Baker's tough-guy roles of the late 1950s as a symptom of the social unease of the period and a forecast of the changes that were to occur in the class landscape of 1960s Britain. He points out how these roles helped establish the figure of the anti-hero in British cinema, the man of honour who is forced to use questionable methods for a worthy cause. This analysis also sits well with some of Baker's later roles in films like *The Last Grenade* and *Innocent Bystanders* where the dangerous edge of his earlier persona has hardened into a more vengeful figure. These later characterisations can be seen to chime with the mood of cynicism which typified British culture in the early 1970s, as the optimism of the 1960s faded.

Beyond the specifics of the historical background which helped make Stanley Baker a star, there is something more. This can be found in his screen roles and the persona created in the media, but also in the life of the private man. Baker was a star whose public image was often a projection of the values he held personally. This quality had much to do with that upbringing in the south Wales valleys and the working-class family and community to which he belonged. It includes some contradictions, not least of which is that the background which forged his talents also drove him away in his pursuit of success. This was a source of regret and was partly expressed in his abiding generosity to others from similar backgrounds. The quality which made him loved included a sense of grievance, an anger which

spoke to the personal experiences of many of his fans, but just as important was the warmth and generosity which made him a romantic figure, as well as an archetypal tough guy. Baker was that rare thing, an authentic screen hero.

STANLEY BAKER

A LIFE IN FILM



Robert Shail