



Promotional advertisement for *Pygmalion*, Anthony Asquith's first major commercial success.

Asquith, Anthony (1902-1968)

by Patricia Juliana Smith

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Discreet and refined are adjectives usually applied to director Anthony Asquith's films, which, for an international cinema-going public, continue to represent a certain quintessential "Britishness."

While his works focus on the psychological dilemmas of the upper class into which he was born, Asquith was nevertheless a pioneer in securing union benefits for the working-class men and women who perform the necessary if unglamorous jobs of the film industry. His characteristic discretion and refinement, moreover, were not merely a facet of his art, but rather a highly developed way of life for the gay son of a famous politician in a society in which homosexual acts were criminal.

Anthony Asquith was born in London on November 9, 1902. His parents were Herbert Asquith (later Earl of Oxford and Asquith), who was British Prime Minister from 1909 to 1916, and the witty Margot Tennant Asquith, a highly visible figure in London literary and social circles. The gay eccentric Stephen Tennant was a cousin, and contemporary actress Helena Bonham Carter is his great-niece. Small, effeminate, and hook-nosed, Asquith was nicknamed "Puffin" (or "Puff") as a child, because he reminded his mother of a bird of that species. The name remained with him for life.

Asquith was educated at Balliol College, Oxford, where he was very much an aesthete and where he first became interested in film. In 1925, after graduating, he became a founding member of the Oxford Film Society and traveled to the United States to learn cinematic techniques from the Hollywood studios. His social connections gave him a rapid start in the fledgling British film industry; he co-directed his first film *Shooting Stars* (1927) at twenty-five.

Asquith's early films, however, did not bring him success, as they were deemed too "arty" for the public's taste. His commercial breakthrough came with *Pygmalion* (co-directed with Leslie Howard, 1938), an adaptation of George Bernard Shaw's play. Soon thereafter, he embarked on a professional partnership with gay playwright Terence Rattigan, whose drawing-room dramas were then much in vogue.

Their collaboration began with an adaptation of Rattigan's hit comedy *French without Tears* (1939), and reached its high point with *The Winslow Boy* (1948) and *The Browning Version* (1951), the latter of which is memorable for Michael Redgrave's compelling portrayal of a teacher who has failed personally and professionally.

Other Asquith-Rattigan films include *Quiet Wedding* (1940), *Uncensored* (1942), *Way to the Stars* (1945), *While the Sun Shines* (1947), *The Final Test* (1953), *The V.I.P.s* (1963), and *The Yellow Rolls-Royce* (1965). In addition, Asquith also directed notable adaptations of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1952) and Shaw's *The Doctor's Dilemma* (1959) and *The Millionairess* (1960); war films such as *We Dive at Dawn* (1943) and *Carrington, V.C.* (1954); and psychological dramas such as *Libel* (1959).

Although his films are almost exclusively concerned with heterosexual subjects, some critics, particularly Stephen Bourne, argue that they are permeated with a gay sensibility.

Despite his privileged background, Asquith was a modest and unassuming man who was deeply concerned for those less powerful. For three decades he headed the British film technicians union and fought for workers' rights and government subsidies to the film industry. While many simply assumed his homosexuality, he was quite repressed in his personal life and apparently sublimated his desires into his films.

Anthony Asquith died in London after a long battle with cancer on February 20, 1968.

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