

Anton Walbrook by James Downs



James Downs is a volunteer at The Bill Douglas Centre. He has worked as an archivist and librarian in Scotland before moving to Devon and has published a number of articles on the history of early photography.

Austrian-born actor Anton Walbrook (1896-1967) was a familiar face for British cinema-goers during the 1940s. After being cast as Prince Albert opposite Anna Neagle's Queen Victoria, he delivered memorable performances in a series of Powell and Pressburger productions including *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* (1943) and *The Red Shoes* (1948.) Details of his early career in Germany before the war are less well-known, but material held in the BDC reveals the extent of his achievements on both stage and screen. An acquisition of a set of Walbrook memorabilia, donated by the BDC's principal donor Peter Jewell, is complemented by contemporary publications and postcards. The extensive and eclectic nature of the Centre's collections allows Walbrook's work to be examined from varying perspectives.

Born Adolf Anton Wilhelm Wohlbrück in Vienna on 19 November 1896, he belonged to a theatrical family who had performed on stage for several generations. His father

Adolf, a clown with the famous Schumann Circus, married into a respectable family in Vienna, where young Adolf began his schooling. After completing his education in Berlin, he entered the drama school run by actor-director Max Reinhardt. In addition to a growing number of stage performances, he began appearing in silent films while still in his late teens. The first of these was probably *Marionetten* (1915), in which he played – appropriately – a circus director. After wartime service in France as a grenadier, Wohlbrück returned to acting, performing on stage in Berlin, Vienna, Riga, Kassel, Hamburg, Dusseldorf and Munich, trying his hand at writing and directing, and appearing in films such as *Mater Dolorosa* (1923) and another circus film *Salto Mortale* (1931). A cousin of his father, Olga Wohlbrück (1867-1933) had already made her reputation as a scriptwriter and director. Details of this part of his career can be found in *Das Buch von Adolf Wohlbrück* (EXE BD 55452), a rare biographical booklet from 1935 that contains several photographs of Wohlbrück's childhood and early stage roles.

Wohlbrück's first major film was *Walzerkrieg* (1933) about the rivalry between Johann Strauss and Joseph Lanner. This success was followed by a string of starring roles – often ironically playing English gentlemen - in films such as *Maskerade* (1933), *Viktor und Viktoria* (1933), *Zigeuenerbaron* (1934) *Regine* (1935) and *Ich war Jack Mortimer* (1935), all of which are featured in copies of the weekly magazine *Illustrierte Film Kurier* (EXE BD 55511 – 55521) that are held in the BDC. Further proof of his popularity can be seen in the numerous cigarette cards and promotional photographs contained in the collection. One of these (EXE BD 55473), produced in Dresden, is remarkable for showing Wohlbrück without his trademark moustache and probably dates to around 1930. Another photograph is worth noting for a more sinister reason. A 1935 publicity shot of Wohlbrück in *Regine* (EXE BD 55487) bears the blindstamped emblem of the *Filmprüfstelle*, or Nazi Censorship Office, which was increasing its stranglehold on German cinema: Paragraph 4 of the 1934 Cinema Law decreed that all publicity photographs had to be thus stamped before release, and by the following June Goebbels had personal power to ban any films or scripts he wished without reference to the Censors.

These repressive conditions in the film industry, coupled with Nazi laws against 'Non-Aryan' employees, caused a mass exodus to Britain and America. Eminent emigrés included Fritz Lang, Billy Wilder, Peter Lorre and Emeric Pressburger, but the total was in excess of a thousand. One of the most stylish photographs of Wohlbrück in the BDC was taken by Gregory Harlip, a Jewish photographer in Berlin who transferred his business to London in 1937. Wohlbrück's route from Nazi Germany was circuitous. Having played the title role in *Michael Strogoff/Der Kurier des Zaren* (1936), he signed up to RKO Radio Pictures after the American company bought the rights and re-edited the film for English-speaking audiences.

After the film was released as *The Soldier and The Lady* in 1937, Wohlbrück chose not to return to Germany and settled instead in England, changing his name to Anton Walbrook. Admired for both his acting skills and anti-Nazi stance, Walbrook played the "good German" as Prince Albert in *Victoria the Great* (1937) - his first British film - and *Sixty Glorious Years* (1938), as well as peaceful Hutterite Peter in *The 49th Parallel* (1941) and Theodor Krestchmer-Schuldorf in *Colonel Blimp* (1943.) He was, however, equally convincing playing villains such as murderous husband Paul Mallon in *Gaslight* (1940), Captain Suvorin in *Queen of Spades* (1949) - both

directed by Thorold Dickinson - and Major Esterhazy in his final film, *I Accuse* (1958.) Walbrook was also a gifted musician who played both piano and guitar and performed on the soundtrack for the hugely popular *Dangerous Moonlight* (1941). Walbrook's contribution to most of these films can be traced through a variety of pressbooks, scripts and publicity materials held in the BDC. Although associated closely with Powell and Pressburger productions for many years, Walbrook's diverse work included London theatre, west end musicals and – in the 1960s - German television shows. Although he died in Bavaria, a few months after suffering a heart attack on stage in Munich, his body was returned to England and buried in Hampstead Cemetery. His career is assessed in an obituary in *The Times* – a copy of which is held in the BDC (EXE BD 55648) – but Walbrook has not yet received the scholarly attention he deserves.

BDC Curator Phil Wickham adds:

As well as its insight into the career of Anton Walbrook, who as James argues is one of the most interesting transnational stars of this era, this collection of material is also fascinating for other reasons. The run of *Illustrierte Film Kurier* covers much of the 1930s and through its issues the growing influence of the Nazis on German cinema can be identified. The magazines were used, together with other holdings such as German cigarette card albums from the period, in a German class on propaganda, taught by Chloe Paver. The students discovered from the material that propaganda was not always overtly political. As the 1930s progressed escapist cinema, especially historical romances, were heavily promoted by Goebbels as a more subtle way of establishing Nazi ideals. No film criticism was allowed and the film industry was purged of Jews and those who objected to Nazism. Like Walbrook, many directors, actors, and technicians left Germany and became an important part of both Hollywood and British cinema.