

Walbrook's royal waltzes

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On Monday 15 February 1937 *The Times* announced that 'a Viennese actor' had been secured to play the part of Prince Albert in a forthcoming film about Queen Victoria.¹ Over the following months the British public learned a great deal more about Anton Walbrook through press conferences, newspaper interviews, magazine features and screenings of films he had made on the continent as Adolf Wohlbrück. Publicity for the film was aided by the serendipitous timing of George VI's coronation, which provided a further, contemporary, layer of comparisons between real events and their cinematic representation. Adolf Anton Wilhelm Wohlbrück, as *The Times* rightly noted, was born in Vienna on 19 November 1896, but most of his life had been spent in German cities such as Berlin, Dresden and Munich. In several respects his life would mirror that of the Prince Consort, with continual ambiguities about national identity, loyalty and belonging. As the star of both German and English depictions of the Victorian court, his career offers a unique double perspective on the representation of the British monarchy.

Although his father Adolf Wohlbrück (1864–1940) was a clown, a family tradition of acting stretched back for several generations. Almost incredibly, young Adolf grew up unaware of his distinguished ancestors, as his father had joined the circus as a child after the death of both parents. The future actor was educated in Vienna and Berlin, where he left the Gymnasium at the age of fifteen to enter Max Reinhardt's theatre school next door to the Deutsches Theater. Once the drama students proved their abilities, they were given minor roles in productions at either the Deutsches Theater or the smaller, more intimate Kammerspiele. Fittingly, the British monarchy provided the setting for his first stage role – as a young page-boy in Friedrich Schiller's *Mary Stuart*. A few years

later he played the part of Mortimer in the same play in Munich, with Hermine Körner playing Elizabeth I.² Mortimer – a creation of Schiller's rather than a real historical figure – is a passionate young admirer of the Scottish queen who conspires to free her from prison, but commits suicide when his love proves unrequited and the escape plan is foiled. Schiller's portrayal of the Queen as a tragic heroine, driven by passion and opposed by cold-reasoning foes, rehearsed the tension between private feeling and public office that would feature in *Victoria the Great*.

Wohlbrück's acting career, however, was interrupted by the First World War. He saw action on both the eastern and western fronts before being captured in 1917. He spent the rest of the war in a POW camp in France where he whiled away the time organising dramatic performances. The productions were ambitious and included works by Rilke and Strindberg, as well as a performance of Georg Büchner's satirical comedy *Leonce und Lena* with Wohlbrück reading the text while a fellow soldier operated puppets.

After the war, he returned to the stage and soon became a leading player in theatre companies in Munich (1920–26), Dresden (1927–30) and Berlin (1930–35). His technique owed an enormous debt to his early formation under Max Reinhardt's direction and the accomplished actors and actresses with whom he worked as a youth. He later said that Hermine Körner taught him 'what a lift of the eyebrow or a turn of the wrist could mean on stage'.³ As an actor, he became a master of subtle gestures: viewers of his films will often be rewarded for keeping their eyes on his hands, and the 'Victoria' films are no exception.

Wohlbrück first appeared on the screen in 1915, and had minor roles in three more silent films before starring opposite Anna Sten in *Salto Mortale* (E. A. Dupont, 1931), a romantic thriller set in a circus. Over the next few years he appeared in some twenty films, mainly romantic comedies and musicals, establishing his reputation as a player of suave, sophisticated heroes. He had not abandoned the theatre, either, and by the mid-1930s he had appeared in over 200 productions. These included several adaptations of English-language works, such as Oscar Wilde's *The Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It*, *Midsummer Night's Dream* and *King Lear*, as well as George Bernard Shaw's *Candida*. In another play about the British monarchy he played the part of Essex in Ferdinand Bruckner's *Elisabeth von England*.

He already had a sound knowledge of English literature and drama, plus extensive experience of performing the role of the English gentleman, before

his first screen encounter, so to speak, with the British monarchy, the 1933 musical comedy *Walzerkrieg* (Ludwig Berger). This light-hearted film is based upon several real-life incidents in the life of Johann Strauss the Elder, centring on his visit to England and the court of Queen Victoria in 1838 – an event referred to in *Victoria the Great*. The film's comedy relies on a series of misunderstandings. Firstly, Victoria's court ball director is sent to Vienna to learn about the new waltz, witnesses a drunken brawl involving orchestra and dancers and presumes this riotous behaviour to be part of the dance. This uproar is a consequence of the intense rivalry between Strauss and fellow waltz composer Joseph Lanner, who led his own orchestra in Vienna. When Lanner demonstrates the waltz with his daughter Katti in the presence of Victoria, they have a heated discussion and the young Queen mistakes their gestures for dance steps. When she later replicates these at a court ball, the rest of the dancers feel obliged to follow suit. No attempt was made at historical authenticity in the appearance of the royal couple: slim, fair-haired Hanna Waag plays the Queen, while Heinz Max von Cleve plays Prince Albert without moustache. Wohlbrück, on the other hand, was persuaded to grow one for the part of Strauss.

Moustaches provide a source of comedy when a drummer tries to impersonate Strauss with a fake moustache dyed black, which then smudges the Queen's glove when he kisses her hand. The composer later bursts in and confronts his doppelgänger – an amusing version of a more sinister image Wohlbrück would explore in *Der Student von Prag* (*The Student of Prague*, Artur Robison, 1935). Underlying these farcical scenes there runs a current of gentle mockery of the British, who are portrayed as being as pompous and rigid as they are gullible.

These same characteristics recur in another Wohlbrück comedy, *Die englische Heirat* (*The English Marriage*, Reinhold Schünzel, 1934), in which he was again paired with Renate Müller. Here, he plays an English lawyer, Warwick Brent, who is drawn into a series of misunderstandings caused by a secret marriage. The scenes of English society life depicted in the film appear to date from long before the 1930s. The women dress in elaborate costumes laden with pearls and carry oversize fans; at their centre is the matriarchal figure of Lady Mavis, whose appearance seems modelled on that of Queen Victoria. The men are portrayed as weak and foolish, dominated by the women, and overawed at the sight of Müller's stylish car as it sweeps up the driveway bringing German modernity into the ancient mansions of England. Later on she rescues Lady Mavis from a road accident with a hay wain, driven by a peasant whose costume might have been lifted from a Constable painting.

Müller and Wohlbrück co-starred in four films, the last one being the sparkling comedy *Allotria* (Willi Forst, 1936) with Jenny Jugo and Heinz Rühmann. While they were filming this in February 1936, *Mädchenjahre einer Königin* (*Girlhood of a Queen*, Erich Engel) was released, starring Jugo as the young Victoria. In addition to comic scenes, such as the tiny queen struggling to lift a sword in order to knight Lord Aberdeen, there are imaginative embellishments to the familiar story of the royal courtship: while away from the palace, Victoria meets a charming young man at Dover with whom she falls in love, only to discover – by an extraordinary coincidence – that he is in fact her cousin Prince Albert, who has been sent against his will and (like her) resents the machinations of their respective families. This sympathetic portrayal of Victoria is perhaps due in part to the fact that its Jewish playwright, Geza Silberer, lived in London in the early 1900s and had a warm appreciation of English personalities and history.⁴ The actor who played Prince Albert, Frederick Benfer, actually married Jenny Jugo a few years after the war.

At the time *Mädchenjahre einer Königin* was showing on German screens, rumours were already starting to circulate among cinemagoers about Wohlbrück's departure from Germany.⁵ As a homosexual and a *Mischling*, or half-Jew, he was in a dangerous position and it remains unclear as to why he did not leave sooner. The Nazification of the film industry began immediately after Hitler came to power. Anyone working in the industry was required to hold membership of the Reichsfachschaft Film (RFF), which could only be obtained after completing detailed questionnaires about racial descent. The Nazi authorities seemed doubtful about the Jewish-looking surnames 'Lewien' and 'Kohn' on his mother's side, and pressed Wohlbrück for further documentary evidence of his Aryan credentials. This investigation lasted for over a year.⁶

However, he continued to work, and by late 1935 had completed the filming of *Der Kurier des Zaren* (Richard Eichberg), an adaptation of Jules Verne's swashbuckling adventure *Michel Strogoff* in which he played the eponymous hero, wrestling with bears and fighting off Tatars as he galloped across Siberia with a vital message for the Russian Tsar. A French-language version was also made, and when RKO offered Wohlbrück a contract to come to Hollywood and make an English version, he saw an opportunity to leave Nazi Germany behind. He slipped out of Berlin just as the Olympic Games began in August 1936, and sailed for America in the early autumn, arriving in Hollywood in October. Here, he changed his name to Anton Walbrook.

On 3 December 1936, while Wallbrook was filming *Michael Strogoff* in Hollywood, the following notification appeared in the British press:

The Lord Chamberlain is authorised to announce that, by permission of His Majesty the King, plays dealing with the life of Queen Victoria can now be considered for production after the 20th June 1937, subject to the usual regulations for the licensing of stage plays. This date has been scheduled as being the centenary of Queen Victoria's appointment to the throne.⁷

The initiative for this seems to have come from Victoria and Albert's third son, Prince Arthur, the Duke of Connaught (1850–1942), who spoke to the Lord Chamberlain about the 'inevitable necessity for lifting the ban on plays dealing with the life of Queen Victoria'. Although this ban was a matter of protocol rather than law, as Licensor of Plays the Lord Chamberlain used his power to veto any public representations of the late Queen.⁸ Connaught was 'naturally anxious that the impersonation of Queen Victoria should be by a British actress and not by a foreign one'.⁹ According to Herbert Wilcox, however, the original impetus came from Wallis Simpson, who had seen Laurence Housman's play *Victoria Regina* in New York and asked Edward VIII why there was no film about his great-grandmother.¹⁰ Within twenty-four hours of the Lord Chamberlain's proclamation no less than three British producers announced their intention to make a film about the life of Victoria: Alexander Korda, Michael Balcon and Herbert Wilcox.

Korda was still basking in the success of his direction of a previous royal biopic, *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (1933), which had provided Charles Laughton with his first Oscar and saved Korda's London Film Company from financial ruin. Although the film's popularity owed much to strong performances and shrewd marketing, Korda had proved that historical dramas could bring in huge box-office returns: this would have significant impact upon the course taken by the British film industry. Simon Callow has argued that much of the credit should go to Laughton, for 'It was he who instigated the passionate quest for authenticity; he who dragged Korda down to Hampton Court again and again. Such texture as the film possesses derives from his research and drive.'¹¹ Certainly, Korda was unable to replicate the success of *The Private Life of Henry VIII*, and the disappointing returns for *Rembrandt* at the end of 1936 may have made the prospect of another royal project look appealing. In a series of lavish advertisements, Korda boasted that his film on Queen Victoria was already in 'active preparation'.¹² This was a characteristically bold move designed to discourage

competitors such as Michael Balcon, who staked his claim by announcing that MGM-British were adapting Silberer's play *Girlhood of a Queen* and had already secured seventeen-year-old Nova Pilbeam for the role of Queen Victoria.¹³ Pilbeam had just appeared as Lady Jane Grey in *Tudor Rose* (1936), directed by Robert Stevenson from a screenplay by Miles Malleison. Stevenson began work on the film as a scenarist, but was promoted by Balcon to the director's chair because of his 'deep-seated respect for accuracy'.¹⁴ For the production of films on the British monarchy, 'authenticity' and 'accuracy' were already recognised as being of critical importance.

Korda's film was never made, but then he was notorious for announcing projects that were little more than aspirations; the trade papers at the time were full of such mirages, so much so that the editor of *Film Weekly* had recently urged him to 'dream in private, not in public'.¹⁵ After Balcon's film fell through because of financial problems at Gaumont-British, the way was clear for Herbert Wilcox to proceed without fear of competition.¹⁶ He may well have enjoyed some advantage because of his relationship with King Edward, as the two men had been on good terms for many years; early in his career, Wilcox had made a short documentary film about the Prince of Wales.

According to Anna Neagle, it was she who drew Wilcox's attention to Walbrook after watching him in *The Student of Prague*, when she was struck by his physical resemblance to Prince Albert.¹⁷ This may be so, but it is almost certain that Wilcox knew about Walbrook, as he had been in Hollywood negotiating a distribution deal with RKO while *Strogoff* was in production. Walbrook was unhappy in Hollywood and as soon as filming was completed in January 1937 he left America, arriving in England on the same day that Anna Neagle's casting as Queen Victoria was announced. When *The Times* announced that he had been given the role of Prince Albert, production of *Victoria the Great* had already begun.

On 11 February Lawrence Williams, the film's art director, wrote to Buckingham Palace seeking photographs or measured drawings of the royal residences of Kensington, Osborne and Balmoral, for the purpose of constructing accurate sets at Denham Studios. The appearance of many of the buildings, both interior and exterior, had changed dramatically since Victoria's reign, and strenuous efforts were made to research and reconstruct these in detail. Thus began a lengthy and convoluted exchange of correspondence with the royal household. Williams visited Windsor Castle, as did Charles de Grandcourt, who had been commissioned to co-write the screenplay with Miles Malleison.

Grandcourt's letter to Norman Gwatkin, Assistant Comptroller at the Lord Chamberlain's Office, reveals much about how Wilcox's team regarded the film. He referred to his

very considerable efforts ... for over a year in petitioning the authorities to enable this tribute to the Crown to be made by a British company, with British artistes, on the actual sites with which it deals. ... I am speaking not merely of a piece of motion picture entertainment, but of what is potentially the greatest piece of British Empire propaganda that has yet been attempted by the cinema.

Grandcourt proceeded to stress the patriotic appeal of the film, asking for royal co-operation 'to enable this production to be not only an outstanding piece of patriotic entertainment, but an historical record worthy of being revived again and again in the years to come'.¹⁸ He was not alone in his aspiration to historical accuracy. Gwatkin, reporting back on his meeting with Grandcourt in a memo to the Lord Chamberlain (the 2nd Earl of Cromer), shared this concept and believed 'that the film should not only be a commercial enterprise, but should be regarded as a historical representation, accurate in every detail'.¹⁹ The ambition is proclaimed in the film's opening intertitle, which proudly announces: 'Every incident is founded on historic fact, and political utterances by various statesmen are authentic.'

The defensive tone of these claims was tactical. The question of historical accuracy had been debated in the House of Lords in December 1936, a few days after the Lord Chamberlain's announcement. Viscount Mersey proposed a motion calling for 'some form of control over the historical accuracy of films produced or shown in this country'.²⁰ He criticised Laughton's portrayal of Henry VIII as 'a comic buffoon' in Korda's film, as well as the historical inaccuracies in John Ford's RKO flop, *Mary of Scotland* (1936), which had been released shortly before Walbrook's arrival at the studio. Lord Mersey seems to have been particularly offended by the film's inclusion of an entirely fictitious meeting between Queen Mary (Katherine Hepburn) and Queen Elizabeth (Florence Eldridge), but the same fantasy had been entertained by Schiller in *Mary Stuart*, and the Marquess of Dufferin wisely pointed out that cinema's presentation was little different from the romantic stories passed on by Shakespeare, Scott and Dumas. Lord Mersey withdrew his motion.

Wilcox was already well aware of such sensitivities. He had directed Anna Neagle in two earlier costume dramas, *Nell Gwyn* (1934) and *Peg of Old Drury* (1935),



7 Anton Walbrook as Prince Albert at the piano in *Victoria the Great* (Herbert Wilcox, 1937). Copyright © STUDIOCANAL Films Ltd.

and knew the value of historical pretensions for increasing a film's market appeal. Promotional material for *Nell Gwyn* followed the same pattern as the *Victoria* press books, emphasising the time spent on historical research and the care taken to model the sets and costumes on architectural plans and paintings in the National Portrait Gallery.²¹ Walbrook's casting can be seen as part of the programme of verisimilitude pursued by Wilcox and his team. Press coverage and promotional materials made constant reference to Walbrook's resemblance to Prince Albert in matters of height, age, appearance and accent. Not all of these claims were true. Albert was probably two inches shorter than Walbrook, who was actually twice as old at the time of filming as Albert was when he met Victoria.²² British cinemagoers were now getting more familiar with Walbrook's appearance. *Michael Strogoff* had been shown in London since mid-February, fuelling interest in Walbrook and strengthening public perception of him as a romantic hero. Until then, he was known best for his performance in the Viennese comedy *Maskerade* (Willi Forst, 1934), which had proved popular with 'arthouse' audiences.

Films evoking ‘old-time Vienna’ were very much in vogue at this time. *The Times* had emphasised Walbrook’s Viennese origins and there had been a spate of similarly titled films. Lilli Palmer, another émigrée from Nazi Germany who also starred in a Wilcox production – *Sunset in Vienna* (1937) – referred in her autobiography to the popularity of ‘Viennese schmaltz’.²³ Anna Neagle’s first big film was *Goodnight, Vienna* (Herbert Wilcox, 1932), then there was *Reunion in Vienna* (Sidney Franklin, 1933) starring Walbrook’s later co-star Diana Wynyard, and even a Hitchcock musical called *Waltzes in Vienna* (1934). Walbrook’s films *Walzerkrieg* and *Maskerade* were marketed in English as *Waltz Time in Vienna* and *Masquerade in Vienna* respectively.

Both Walbrook’s associations with romantic old Vienna and Neagle’s background as a dancer contributed to the prominence given in both films to magnificent ballroom scenes and numerous references to the waltz. In reality, protocol had prohibited Victoria and Albert from dancing the waltz together – their high status, combined with the physical intimacy of the dance, meant that this was considered improper.²⁴ These were not the only liberties taken with historical details. Prior to their engagement Victoria appears with Albert, showing him photographs of herself and her mother in an album. In October 1839 no photographs of the Queen had ever been taken: the first photographic portrait of a member of the royal family was a daguerreotype of Prince Albert, taken in 1842 by William Constable.

While their representation of photography may have been anachronistic, the designers used genuine photographs to ensure the accuracy of the interior sets for the ballroom scenes. On the first day of filming, Tuesday 13 April 1937, photographs were taken of Grand Reception Room at Windsor Castle. Although Wilcox often claimed that filming was completed in five weeks (i.e. by 18 May 1937), it is clear from press reports that shots were still being taken at the end of the month.²⁵ According to cameraman Freddie Young, this was a tactic of Wilcox’s to fool his bankers that he had finished: ongoing filming was disguised as ‘inserts’ being added to existing footage.²⁶ It was unsurprising that production costs were high, given the visual splendour of the coronation scenes that were filmed on 3 May on the vast Stage Four at Denham.

Nine days later, the real coronation of George VI took place, filmed for BBC television by Jack Cardiff, who would later shoot Walbrook in Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger’s *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* (1943) and *The Red Shoes* (1948). The occasion was marked by numerous royal documentaries, including Paramount’s *Crown and Glory* (director unknown), John Drinkwater’s

The King's People and Fred Watts's *House of Windsor*. Coronation week also saw the premiere of *The Prince and the Pauper* (William Keighley) starring Errol Flynn. Audiences were not watching *Victoria the Great* in a vacuum: it was released into a market already awash with royal films.

Victoria the Great premiered on 16 September 1937 at the Leicester Square Theatre, a cinema originally opened in 1930 as a venue for Anna Neagle's former dance partner Jack Buchanan. The first film shown there, appropriately enough, was *Viennese Nights* (Alan Crosland, 1930). Vast crowds besieged the theatre for the premiere, filling the square and blocking the adjacent streets, while inside an audience studded with celebrities and aristocracy watched the film, offering rapturous applause for individual scenes. Afterwards, Walbrook took the stage along with Wilcox and Neagle, using microphones to address the audience. The enthusiasm at the premiere was echoed by both critics and the general cinema-going public. Aided by an energetic publicity campaign that saw Wilcox and Neagle travel to America and Canada, the film proved a huge success at home and abroad. German cinema audiences, however, had to wait until after the war to see *Königin Victoria* on their own screens.²⁷

There is no doubt that the film was a triumph – it even won that year's Venice Trophy at the Venice Film Festival – but its weaknesses are more apparent to modern audiences. Conceived and promoted as a 'panorama of the reign of Queen Victoria', the film needed to sacrifice depth in order to achieve the long perspective. Lacking sufficient time to provide a nuanced treatment of complex historical events and social issues, it became in essence a series of short tableaux – an impression underscored by the use of captions to introduce important scenes. Reports of audiences applauding individual scenes indicates that the film was experienced in episodic form. In contrast to these presentations of public office, the private lives of Victoria and Albert provided a much-needed depth of feeling and dynamism.

The success of these scenes depended heavily upon the acting talent of Neagle and Walbrook, but there seems little doubt that the latter's performance was the superior one. As *The Times* critic noted:

In so uninquisitive a film, there is little room for close inspection of character, and only the Prince Consort is allowed to emerge as a complete human being. Mr. Walbrook makes the most of his opportunity and contributes an original and accomplished study, suggesting a man of real intelligence, capable of detachment and irony.²⁸

Intimate scenes between Walbrook and Neagle, such as the royal couple lying beneath the trees at Windsor or singing together at the piano, provide a series of domestic vignettes to break up the more formal episodes of state business. Critic Lionel Collier noted that this portrayal of the couple's private relationship 'lifts the picture above the purely documentary', adding that 'Anton Walbrook is brilliant as the Prince Consort. His performance in a large measure ensures the success of the piece.'²⁹ The image of Walbrook playing the piano for his wife would reappear in *Gaslight* (Thorold Dickinson, 1940) and *Dangerous Moonlight* (Brian Desmond Hurst, 1941), making use of the actor's renowned musical skill: one British journalist reported that 'Almost as soon as he could walk he was able to play the piano by ear.'³⁰ Music plays a significant role in the film's presentation of Albert's life with Victoria, often providing a medium for the Prince to communicate powerful feelings that words cannot articulate.³¹ When Victoria insists that Albert play music rather than discuss politics with Peel, he gets revenge by drawing all the ladies across the room to listen to him singing at the piano. Likewise in Wilcox's *Sixty Glorious Years* (1938), after arguing with his wife about the appointment of a private secretary, he storms off to play the organ at full volume. Such scenes ring true to what Albert's biographer recorded: 'In [music] he found a vent for all that world of deeper emotion, for which it is given to few to find an adequate expression in words ... to [the organ] he could speak out his heart, with no fear of being misunderstood.'³²

Albert faced another obstacle to finding 'adequate expression in words' and Walbrook's accent throughout the film is a constant reminder of the Prince Consort's foreign origins. Victoria is shown correcting Albert on his pronunciation of 'waltz', just as Valerie Hobson would chasten Captain Hardt (Conrad Veidt) for his pronunciation of 'butter' in *The Spy in Black* (Michael Powell, 1939). Such scenes must have resonated with the real experiences of the émigré actors. Walbrook knew only a few words of English when he left Germany, and kept a dialect coach with him on the set of *Victoria the Great*.³³ Modern audiences are probably less aware of the strong Germanic strain in Queen Victoria's ancestry and upbringing: she spoke only German until the age of three and was surrounded by German-speaking relatives throughout her youth. While Helen Hayes was preparing for her stage role in *Victoria Regina*, Gilbert Miller arranged for her to meet the Queen's granddaughter, the Marchioness of Milford Haven. Concerned about her American accent, Hayes asked if Victoria had spoken with a German accent. The marchioness shook her head. 'No, no. My grandmutter spoke chust as gut English as I do.'³⁴



8 Anton Walbrook and Anna Neagle as the royal couple in *Victoria the Great*.
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As if in reaction to playing the part of a prince, Walbrook's next role took him as far down the social ladder as it was decent to go, doubtless in a deliberate move to stress his acting range and versatility. *The Rat* was a romantic melodrama set in the Paris underworld, in which Walbrook played jewel thief Pierre Boucheron. Despite exchanging the ballrooms of Windsor for the bars of Montmartre, the film was produced along very similar lines: Wilcox delegated direction to Jack Raymond, but it was made at Denham Studios under the auspices of Emperor Productions, for RKO distribution, featuring many of the same actors – such as Felix Aylmer, Gordon McLeod and Hugh Miller – with dialogue provided again by Miles Malleon. Walbrook was involved in filming during the summer, finishing at the end of September 1937. A few days later his former UFA co-star Renate Müller, who had been hounded by the Gestapo, was found dead after a mysterious fall from a hospital window; it was a dark reminder of the fate that might have awaited Walbrook had he remained in Germany.

The Rat was released on 11 November 1937, but with the success of *Victoria the Great* confirmed, Wilcox pressed ahead with his plans to make another film about the Queen that would emphasise different aspects of her reign. This time, he asked Sir Robert Vansittart, just ousted from his post as Permanent Secretary at the Foreign Office because of his implacable hostility to Chamberlain's appeasement policy, to co-write the screenplay with Miles Malleon. Sir Robert already had strong links to the film industry, including personal friendships with Basil Dean and Alexander Korda. He helped the director with dialogue and song lyrics for films including *Burmese Silver* (another of Korda's abandoned projects), *Elephant Boy* (Zoltan Korda and Robert Flaherty, 1937), *The Four Feathers* (Zoltan Korda, 1939) and *The Thief of Baghdad* (Alexander Korda, 1940).³⁵ Before his political career developed Vansittart had dabbled with poetry, novels and plays – Miles Malleon had acted in a production of his verse play *Foolery* – and the loss of his position at the Foreign Office encouraged him to return to his literary pursuits.

In addition to writing the dialogue, Vansittart acted as a mediator between King George and Wilcox, managing to obtain royal permission to use the properties of Osborne, Balmoral, Buckingham Palace and Windsor Castle. The royal household appears to have been under the impression that Vansittart was in charge. Lord Cromer referred to the film being made 'under the auspices of Sir Robert Vansittart of the Government Propaganda Bureau'.³⁶ A few days later he wrote to Sir George Crichton, again emphasising Vansittart's role, asking if Crichton would like to be employed by Wilcox as an official adviser. He enlarged upon this in June 1938:

The way in which you could be of service to them is to prevent them either in dress, make-up or other details from introducing foolish and inappropriate things such as are apt to be introduced when these pictures are made in America, where they are wholly ignorant about such details.³⁷

Further support was provided by passing a series of questions to Princess Helena Victoria (1870–1948), granddaughter of Albert and Victoria. The Princess sent a handwritten letter on 6 June 1938, in reply to a list of eleven questions on royal protocol. The first two concerned Walbrook's portrayal of Albert. Would the Prince Consort's secretary deliver a despatch box to him at Windsor Castle, and would the Prince unlock the box himself? Secondly, would the Prince Consort have worn 'Windsor dress' to a state ball around 1845? The Princess replied to these questions in the affirmative, having checked with her

uncle, the aforementioned Duke of Connaught. Extra information was added, probably by Crichton, describing exactly what Windsor dress looked like: 'blue cloth tail-coat, scarlet collar and cuffs, brass buttons, worn with knee breeches and white waistcoat'.³⁸

The scene in which Walbrook wore the tail-coat was actually set in 1857, rather than 1845, and depicts the ball following the engagement of their daughter, Princess Victoria, to the Prussian Prince Frederick, later Frederick III. It occurs almost an hour into the film and mirrors a similar scene at the beginning of the film that uses almost identical dialogue. These two waltz scenes are thus used to frame the entire life of Victoria and Albert in *Sixty Glorious Years*, for the second one is followed immediately by his collapse and subsequent death. Despite the fact that Albert was married to Victoria for only twenty of these years, Walbrook is on the screen for most of the film's ninety minutes. The prominence of his performance in the film is reflected by a programme from the Birmingham Paramount cinema, which devotes much more space to him than to Anna Neagle.³⁹

Sixty Glorious Years does without the screen titles of *Victoria the Great*, adopting a slightly more fluid and natural mode of narrative, rather than the pop-up book tableaux of the first film. As before, however, many scenes are modelled closely on famous paintings. In a contemporary article in *Photoplay Studies*, H. E. Fowler invited students to compare stills from the film with nineteenth-century portraits and decide 'which of these parallels you consider the closest'.⁴⁰ The visit of Albert and Victoria to a military hospital, for example, is a shameless attempt to recreate Jerry Barrett's 1856 oil painting *Queen Victoria's First Visit to her Wounded Soldiers*.

Elsewhere there are intriguing differences between the versions of events presented in the two films. In *Victoria the Great*, the royal couple's support for repealing the Corn Laws originates with Victoria, whose fireside reading of Charles Dickens arouses her concern for the poor. In the second film, however, it is Albert who has been reading Dickens, and he tells Victoria about the novelist's social concerns while playing a long sequence on the piano. Dickens inspires him to do something useful with his life, and this fusion of music and literature then leads into a display of Albert's cultural achievements and the contribution he made to the arts in Britain. Walbrook's Prince Albert, like the Polish pianist Radetzky he played in *Dangerous Moonlight*, represents a noble tradition of European high culture suggested to be not only worth fighting for, but with the power to transcend national boundaries as an almost mystical force for unity.

However, both Walbrook and Albert learned that the possession of culture offers scant protection against national prejudice. Shortly after the triumphant sequence on the Great Exhibition, a mob of misguided and poorly educated patriots is shown attacking the Palace, daubing walls with graffiti that read 'Albert the Traitor. Down with the Cobug [*sic*]'. Lord John Russell then reports rumours to the Queen that Albert is 'a foreign agent, an avowed enemy of this country'.

Likewise, despite his highly acclaimed contribution to this patriotic 'Empire film', within eighteen months Walbrook had his car and radio confiscated as a result of suspicions about German nationals in wartime Britain.⁴¹ Unlike Conrad Veidt, who chose to support British propaganda by playing Nazi villains, Walbrook consistently avoided such roles. Prince Albert was the first in a series of 'good Germans' he would play on both screen and stage: his role as the pacifist Peter in Powell and Pressburger's *49th Parallel* (1941) was followed by that of anti-Nazi Theo Kretschmar-Schuldorff in *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp*, which was filmed while he was playing another anti-Nazi campaigner, Kurt Müller, at the Aldwych Theatre in Lillian Hellman's *Watch on the Rhine*. Vansittart, whose contribution to *Sixty Glorious Years* had arguably done so much to enhance Walbrook's reputation, became increasingly hostile to Germany and attacked *Watch on the Rhine* with harsh words:

For nearly a year [the English] have been flocking to see a play called *Watch on the Rhine*, under the deliberate delusion that just Germans, as portrayed in that play, are flocking back from the security of the United States to fight Hitler underground. No such thing has ever happened, even once ... the underground movement in Germany has produced no substantial evidence of its existence. Yet the London critics reviewed *Watch on the Rhine* as a moving play instead of as a well-constructed delusion. I like delusion – we all do – and I like nonsense, even flagrant nonsense, but not about Germany. It is too expensive.⁴²

Walbrook and his co-star Walter Rilla did in fact use their acting skills to support the fight against Germany. Rilla worked on the 'black operations' project at Woburn Abbey, broadcasting misleading information on German airwaves, while Walbrook played a German major in an RAF training film, *Information Please* (1944), that prepared pilots for interrogation in the event of capture. A letter written by Walbrook's secretary to a fan described him as being busy with making 'propaganda films'⁴³ (author's italics) and there may have been other contributions that he made to the British war effort in addition to the

substantial financial assistance he gave to the Red Cross and the Association for Jewish Refugees.

Changing attitudes to Germany are evident between the two films, but it is more subtle than Vansittart's later belligerence might suggest. The scene in *Victoria the Great* where the royal couple sing together in German was absent from *Sixty Glorious Years*, as is Victoria's statement that she spoke German until the age of nine.⁴⁴ By beginning with her engagement to Albert, the 1938 film avoids showing the young Queen's early life, when German relatives were prominent. It was therefore easier to imply that Britain was different from Germany, with its own independent traditions and national identity that needed defending. The Queen's warning about 'doing nothing' before the Crimea crisis might be interpreted as a condemnation of appeasement.

Walbrook played Albert as a strong character with a degree of political maturity and wisdom that exceeds that of his wife, so the weight he gives to the peace process cannot be dismissed. His reference to talk of the inevitability of war as 'like living in a madhouse' is based on an actual letter from Albert.⁴⁵ The films constantly link the Prince Consort's name to work for peace: his aim for the 1851 Great Exhibition was 'a greater understanding between all peoples', he would 'pursue peace and conciliation to the end' and he watches his daughter's courtship with the observation 'Princess Victoria of England, Prince Frederick of Prussia ... with those two children, so much could be done for the peace of the future.'

As in the earlier film, a strong link is made between Albert's tireless work for peace and his death from typhoid fever brought on by exhaustion and overwork. Victoria's servant John Brown (played by Gordon McLeod), however, sees things differently:

'Aye, he's sick of something more than the fever.'

'Mr Brown, what's that?'

'The English. Aye, they can be a cold, stand-offish lot if they want to. They dinna ken that he's always been working for them. They've never taken him to their hearts – that's what's brought this.'

Such a sympathetic alliance between the Scots and the Germans against the cold-hearted English was conveyed in *Das Herz der Königin* (*The Heart of the Queen*, Carl Froehlich, 1940), which starred Zarah Leander as Mary, Queen of Scots. A blatant propaganda movie, the film laid strong emphasis on the contrast

between the emotional Mary Stuart, who is guided only by her heart, and the ruthlessness of the loveless English queen, the figurehead for British cruelty and greed. The part of Riccio, incidentally, was played by Frederick Benfer, who played Prince Albert in *Mädchenjahre einer Königin*.

Unsympathetic portrayals of Queen Victoria and John Brown appeared in another German propaganda film released shortly after *The Heart of a Queen*. A harsh condemnation of British conduct during the Anglo-Boer War, *Ohm Krüger* (*Uncle Krüger*, Hans Steinhoff, 1941) presents historical events as a commentary on the present, taking special care to demonise the actions of Winston Churchill. Joseph Chamberlain is also cast as a villain, and played by Gustaf Gründgens, an actor who worked closely with Walbrook on the stage in the 1930s and was responsible for his return to German theatres in 1951. Krüger and his wife were both played by former co-actors of Walbrook: Emil Jannings was another of Reinhardt's students and Lucie Höflich (1883–1956) was Walbrook's mother in *Der Kurier des Zaren* (*The Czar's Courier*, Richard Eichberg, 1936). Sixty-five-year-old Hedwig Wangel played Queen Victoria, who is shown with John Brown at her side, filling her glass from a whisky bottle. Brown of course died in 1883, long before the Anglo-Boer War. Despite these inaccuracies *Ohm Krüger* was a brilliant piece of propaganda, directly countering the claims about Britain's colonial heritage that Korda and Vansittart had presented in *Elephant Boy* and *The Four Feathers*.

Sixty Glorious Years was premiered on 14 October 1938 with Queen Mary, the Duke of Kent and the Countess of Antrim (a former Lady-in-Waiting to Queen Victoria) in attendance. It anticipated successor films' provision of a sympathetic screen portrayal of the British monarchy in return for the film's use of prestigious iconography and brand names as part of its marketing. Ever the showman, Wilcox embellished his material to such an extent that the line between reality and representation was blurred. Both films were made by his own company, 'Imperator Film Productions', which he registered in March 1937 with £100.⁴⁶ He had special notepaper printed for official correspondence relating to the film, which was headed with a broad red band and gold crests containing a cartouche with a miniature portrait of Anna Neagle as Queen Victoria. The image was doctored in such a way to match precisely the popular 1837 portrait of the Queen by Alfred Chalon.⁴⁷ Cinema programmes for *Sixty Glorious Years* were emblazoned with gold-leaf covers and heraldic crests.

Despite his role in all this patriotic pageantry, almost a decade would pass before Walbrook took British citizenship, swearing allegiance to King George

VI, the great-grandson of Prince Albert, on 7 January 1947. And although he received great acclaim for his performances in *The Red Shoes* (1948) and *Queen of Spades* (1949), Walbrook failed to settle in Britain and spent a large part of his later years in Europe. The world had changed, and he seemed oddly rootless, his postwar career characterised by a restless wandering that took in French film studios and German theatres, stage musicals, non-singing operatic parts and German made-for-television dramas.

It is easy to see parallels with Prince Albert, struggling to find an outlet for his talents, seeking a sense of belonging in a country of adopted citizenship that never really felt like home. None the less, it was Walbrook's final wish that he be buried in England, and after his death in Germany his remains were interred in a Hampstead churchyard. When *The Times* published news of his death they identified him exclusively with the role they had announced forty years earlier: 'Anton Walbrook: Prince Albert of *Sixty Glorious Years*'.⁴⁸

NOTES

- 1 *The Times* (15 February 1937), p. 14.
- 2 Amy Smith, *Hermine Körner* (Berlin: Kranich-Verlag, 1970), p. 102.
- 3 *Daily Express* (13 August 1952).
- 4 'Sil-Vara' was the pseudonym of an Austrian author and journalist, Gustav A. 'Geza' Silberer (1876–1938). His *Englische Staatsmänner* (Berlin: Verlag Ullstein & Co., 1916) contained character sketches of sixteen public figures including Joseph Chamberlain, Lord Kitchener and Churchill.
- 5 *Filmwelt* (2 February 1936), p. 26. A staff member reassured an anxious reader, 'C.M.G.' from Chemnitz: 'Haben Sie nur keine Sorge. Wohlbrück filmt natürlich wieder.' ('Have no worries, of course Wohlbrück will make more films.' *Author's translation*.)
- 6 Wohlbrück completed the RFF form on 25 September 1933 but the RFF did not profess themselves satisfied until October 1934. Bundesarchiv, Berlin, Reichsfilmkammer file on Wohlbrück, Mitgleids-Nr.1063.
- 7 *Western Daily Press* (Thursday 3 December 1936), p. 7.
- 8 In 1909 Lawrence Housman gave evidence before the Joint Select Committee on Stage Plays (Censorship), criticising this 'autocratic power' and the risk of abuse. *Report from the Joint Select Committee of the House of Lords and the House of Commons on Stage Plays (Censorship)* (London: HMSO, 1909), paragraphs 2530–41.
- 9 Royal Archives, Windsor Castle, RA/PS/PSO/GV/PS/MAIN/39402, Lord Chamberlain to Private Secretary, 19 November 1936. I would like to express my gratitude to staff at the Royal Archives for assistance in accessing this material.
- 10 Herbert Wilcox, *Twenty-Five Thousand Sunsets* (London: The Bodley Head, 1967), p. 111. Housman's play opened in New York on 26 December 1935 with Helen

- Hayes playing Victoria. The Lord Chamberlain's ban was sidestepped by holding a private performance at the Gate Theatre, London, around the same time. It finally opened in the West End on 21 June 1937.
- 11 Simon Callow, *Charles Laughton* (London: Methuen, 1987), p. 58.
 - 12 *Daily Film Renter* (4 December 1936), pp. 8–9.
 - 13 *Motion Picture Herald* (19 December 1936), p. 53.
 - 14 Sue Harper, *Picturing the Past: The Rise and Fall of the British Costume Film* (London: BFI, 1994), p. 34.
 - 15 Herbert Thompson, 'Korda the Dreamer', *Film Weekly* (20 June 1936), p. 3.
 - 16 Film production at Lime Grove was scaled down in 1936 because of financial difficulties, and the studio was shut down from March 1937 for over two years. Nigel Ostrer, *The Ostrers and Gaumont British* (No place of publication given: Nigel Ostrer, 2010), pp. 256–60.
 - 17 Anna Neagle, *There's Always Tomorrow* (London: W. H. Allen, 1974) p. 91. There are minor discrepancies between the chronology of events as remembered by Neagle and Wilcox and the dates recorded in contemporary press reports.
 - 18 Royal Archives, RA/LC/LCO/MAIN/110/1937, file re: *Victoria the Great*, Grandcourt to Gwatkin, 15 February 1937.
 - 19 Royal Archives, RA/LC/LCO/MAIN/110/1937, file re: *Victoria the Great*, Gwatkin to Lord Chamberlain, 17 February 1937.
 - 20 *Hansard*, House of Lords debates, 9 December 1936, vol. 103, cc. 699–708.
 - 21 Sarah Street, *Transatlantic Crossings: British Feature Films in the USA* (London: Continuum, 2002) pp. 73–7. Neagle, *There's Always Tomorrow*, pp. 76–7.
 - 22 T. R. Hooper states that Prince Albert stood at around 5ft 10in in *The Memoirs of Ebenezer and Emma Hooper, 1821–1885* (Guildford: Billing & Sons, 1905), p. 186, while Walbrook was 6ft tall ('Sixty Glorious Years', *Cinegram* 39, p. 14).
 - 23 Lilli Palmer, *Change Lobsters – and Dance* (London: W. H. Allen, 1976), p. 66.
 - 24 At the Windsor state ball for the visit of Grand Duke Alexander of Russia on 27 May 1839, '[S]he danced with vigour and enjoyment a number of quadrilles, but not waltzes, neither she nor the Grand Duke, owing to their high status, being permitted to waltz.' Cecil Woodham-Smith, *Queen Victoria: Her Life and Times*, vol. 1, 1819–61 (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1972), p. 176. Victoria's journal entries for October 1839 confirm that she danced only quadrilles with Albert.
 - 25 The final sequence in Technicolor appears to have been shot at the end of May, according to 'Tatler', writing in the *Daily Film Renter* (28 May 1937), p. 2.
 - 26 Freddie Young, *Seventy Light Years. A Life in the Movies* (London: Faber, 1999), p. 38.
 - 27 *Illustrierter Film-Bühne*, no. 836, *Königin Victoria*.
 - 28 *The Times* (17 September 1937), p. 10.
 - 29 Lionel Collier, review of *Victoria the Great* in the *Picturegoer* (25 December 1937), p. 23.
 - 30 'The Life Story of Anton Walbrook', *Picture Show & Film Pictorial* (28 August 1943), p. 11.
 - 31 This understanding of music was a tenet of German Romanticism. See Wilhelm Wackenroder, 'The marvels of the musical art', in M. H. Schubert (ed.), *Wackenroder's*

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- Confessions and Fantasies* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), pp. 178–81.
- 32 Theodore Martin, *The Life of His Royal Highness, the Prince Consort*, vol. 1 (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1876), p. 85.
- 33 In his biography of his grandfather, Kevin Macdonald states that Walbrook had his English governess from Vienna, Edith Williams, on set with him. *Emeric Pressburger: The Life and Death of a Screenwriter* (London: Faber & Faber, 1994), p. 218.
- 34 Kenneth Barrow, *Helen Hayes: First Lady of the American Theatre* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1985), p. 128.
- 35 Norman Rose, *Vansittart: Study of a Diplomat* (London: Heinemann, 1978), p. 218.
- 36 Royal Archives, RA/LC/LCO/110/file re: *Sixty Glorious Years*, Cromer to Michael Adeane (27 May 1938).
- 37 Royal Archives, RA/LC/LCO/110/file re: *Sixty Glorious Years*, Cromer to Crichton (3 June 1938).
- 38 The Windsor coat worn by Walbrook matches this description faithfully; it is now in the author's possession.
- 39 *Sixty Glorious Years*, Birmingham Paramount cinema, February 1939.
- 40 H. E. Fowler, 'A guide to the appreciation of the historical photoplay *Victoria the Great*', *Photoplay Studies* 3:8 (1937), pp. 8–9.
- 41 Christopher Robbins, *Empress of Ireland. A Memoir of Brian Desmond Hurst* (London: Scribner, 2004), p. 320.
- 42 Robert Vansittart, *Lessons of My Life* (London and New York: Hutchinson & Co., 1943), pp. 18–19.
- 43 Letter from Arthur Dreyfuss, 22 September 1943. Original in possession of author.
- 44 The chief exchange of German dialogue in *Sixty Glorious Years* occurs between Albert and Baroness Lehzen, played by native German actress Greta Wegener, who starred in *Nosferatu* (F. W. Murnau, 1922). Walbrook had appeared alongside her first husband Ernst Matray in the silent film *Marionetten* (Richard Löwenbein, 1915).
- 45 Albert wrote to Stockmar on 23 December 1853, 'One almost fancies oneself in a lunatic asylum.' Martin, *The Life of His Royal Highness*, vol. 2, p. 534.
- 46 Rachael Low, *Film-Making in 1930s Britain* (London: HarperCollins, 1985), p. 249.
- 47 See, for example, Royal Archives, RA/LC/LCO/MAIN/110/1937, file re: *Victoria the Great*, letter to Col. Nugent (15 December 1937).
- 48 *The Times* (10 August 1967), p. 8.

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