

David McGillivray discusses British sex comedies

— Written by *John Parrot* On 22nd May 2013

In the field of British sex film scholarship, one name is heard above all others: David McGillivray. Having worked as a film critic, screenwriter, actor, and producer during the golden age of British sex comedies, he is the natural authority to turn to when discussing Network Distributing's releases of the genre in their 'The British Film' collection.



As David himself puts it, "as I've got previous in smut, filth and soft porn, I've been given British sex films and sex comedies to talk about." Before adding "whether they're my favourites, that's another matter." He may be somewhat depreciating of cheeky British sexfilms, but he speaks very entertainingly of them. We caught up with him to hear what he had to say on this slightly forgotten corner of British cinema.

The Film Review: British Film is releasing a host of forgotten classics from the vaults. Are there any films that you are particularly fond of they have released?

David McGillivray: I never beat around the bush about the quality of these films... I wrote a book in 1992 called *Doing Rude Things* in which I said that these sex comedies were among the worst films ever made. I haven't changed my mind about them, but they they have become curiosities so I hope a lot of people want to see the films that previously they'd only been able to hear about.

The Film Review: Any favourite titles amongst the sex films that you think we should be seeking out?

David McGillivray: There's not that many of them as the Network schedule is concerned, but I've just had another look at a film called *Keep It Up Downstairs*. It's a sequel to one of the most famous sexfilm titles of them all *Can You Keep It Up For A Week?*. Back in the Sixties and Seventies we were making films with titles like this, *Naked As Nature Intended* and *Take Off Your Clothes And Live*. Saucy films with saucy titles. But when I was writing the book I thought that they had all disappeared and they would never be seen again, this was in the days before not only DVD but video, so there was no way of seeing a film like this after it had finished its run at the cinema.

Now there is an enormous amount of curiosity about these films themselves, and they are back again in spotless, pristine DVDs. *Keep It Up Downstairs* was made for a major studio and shot at Elstree Studio, so a lot of money went into it. It is the sort of thing that people tend to forget that companies like EMI and Columbia were producing these terrible sex comedies because they made big big money. They were very very successful, among the most successful British films ever made, and I think people will probably want to see these films just to check on what our parents and grandparents were watching in the Sixties and Seventies.

The Film Review: Any films you'd like to see come out that haven't yet?

David McGillivray: We're living in an age where nothing is on the shelf any more. Sooner or later the most obscure title will be dug up, even if it's thought lost and every print has been destroyed. I find it remarkable, I find it very enjoyable as well. I can't honestly think of any film that hasn't been relocated.

There were a few that I was involved in myself, that I hope will never be found. In fact I think I've said in the past that if a print of *The Hot Girls* ever turns up I shall break into the laboratory and destroy it with acid. Some of these films are very very bad indeed and I would prefer not to see them, but every so often there is a film like *If You Moan Now or Cool It Carol* are not bad and they also have this curiosity value.

I'm not suggesting that they're going to come out on Network, but if we're talking about the genre as a whole there's one or two films that I think people would be absolutely fascinated to see today because they are if not a window on the past, then a broken skylight.



The Film Review: Were these British sex films influenced by what was going on on the continent or around the world, or was it a purely indigenous experiment?

David McGillivray: Good God no, they weren't influenced by anything apart from dirty postcards and music hall comics. A lot of the films were full of old comedians and faded movie stars. The style of comedy is innuendo. Films like *Can You Keep It Up Downstairs* and *Spanish Fly* are just rich... dripping with innuendo; a style of comedy that is inimitably British. We weren't following any trends in other countries at all, there were no influences whatever.

We knew what we liked in this country and largely these films were just for the home market. They were never distributed abroad and they made their money back alone from the home market. I'm often working now with a comedian called Julian Clary, perhaps the king of innuendo, with whom I've just gone on and on and on working with innuendo in one way or another. It's still enormous popular today, I think it always will be part of the British sense of humour.

The Film Review: Do you think British sex comedies have influenced other cinema outside the country?

David McGillivray: I thought when I wrote my book more than 20 years ago that perhaps these films had more influence than we might have believed. That was one of the things that most intrigued me. The most surprising people were obviously seeing these films and enjoying them.

John Landis came to Britain to make *An American Werewolf in London* and included a scene in which the werewolf went to a sex cinema in Piccadilly Circus and saw a British sex film [starring Linzi Drew]. Julien Temple made *The Great Rock and Roll Swindle* and packed that film with people who were better known for appearing in sex films. Even the great Mary Millington was in *The Great Rock and Roll Swindle*, along with Irene Handl, Liz Fraser and Jess Conrad. These people were also in the sex comedies that Temple had been watching when he was younger.

The Film Review: Do you think Pedro Almodovar might have picked up something from these British sex comedies?

David McGillivray: I don't think he has. I think he's a genius, I think he's the best director in the world, he's my favourite director and every film of his I love. Because he's so talented and brilliant, I don't think he's been influenced by any British film at all. What do you think? Did you ask that because you do see similarities?

The Film Review: His films are extremely funny and sexy.

David McGillivray: Yes, but of course the British sex comedies aren't funny and they aren't sexy! That is a major difference between a typical British director and Almodovar. His films are so stylish and wonderful to look at, they are so beautifully made. The performances are dazzling. You can't say any of this about a British sex comedy.

The Film Review: Where is the cheeky British sex comedy now?

David McGillivray: Well it's on television of course. You don't have to look far either, there is a tremendous revival in interest in the old style of studio sitcom and they are using the same innuendo that we've been using for a hundred years. Just you have a look on ITV on Monday night, I dare you actually, to watch an episode of *Vicious*, it's old school British comedy. There's no difference between that sitcom and *Spanish Fly*, which is now on release through Network. It's the same jokes!

The Film Review: A good joke never dies.

David McGillivray: Obviously not in this case. We're still enjoying them, almost down the centuries. We'll never tire of jokes which refer to people 'keeping it up' or 'having a big one'. These jokes still get laughs, it's hard to believe but it's true.