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'Twelve thrills for the screen' or a 'ludicrous travesty'? Harry A. Berg's Cosmopolitan Productions Limited and *Haunted Houses and Castles of Great Britain* (1926)

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ABSTRACT

The British film production company, Cosmopolitan Productions Limited, was founded in October 1924 by Americans Harry A. Berg and Ivor M. Rosenbaum. In its short life, the company produced a series of 12 two-reel films under the umbrella title *Haunted Houses and Castles of Great Britain*. Berg employed George A. Banfield as scriptwriter and producer, as well as well-known film directors including Bert Cann, Maurice Elvey and Fred Paul. The series was trade shown in January 1926, with a general release in September. However, due to various financial problems, Cosmopolitan Productions filed for bankruptcy in February 1926. Using a variety of archival sources, this article will trace the rise and fall of Cosmopolitan Productions within the context of the turbulent British film industry of the mid-1920s. Furthermore, it will offer analysis of the surviving short films from the series including *Hampton Court Palace*, *Kenilworth Castle* and *Amy Robstart and Warwick Castle in Feudal Days*.

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There is a growing interest in the development of British cinema prior to 1930, however little research has been conducted in relation to the short films produced during the 1920s, as recognised by Alex Marlow-Mann (2002) and Nathalie Morris (2009). Much of the current work focuses on feature-length films, typically over one hour in length, an omission which I seek to address in this article. I will offer analysis of the establishment of Cosmopolitan Productions Limited in 1924, and the 12 two-reel films the company produced during 1925 under the umbrella title *Haunted Houses and Castles of Great Britain* before the company filed for insolvency in 1926. Through analysing the rise and fall of Cosmopolitan Productions, my article offers an opportunity to better understand the turbulent time the British film industry was experiencing in the mid-1920s prior to the introduction of the Cinematograph Film Act 1927 and the development of synchronised sound films. I will also analyse the surviving reels of the series of short films which captures the formal and aesthetic strategies used by established British film directors at the time.

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The rise of the series film in the British film industry

By 1924 a crisis had developed in the British film industry (Low 1971, 160). From the end of World War I, British filmmakers faced challenges in competing ‘with an extremely strong Hollywood export industry’, as producers ‘struggled to find finance for their productions, and to find space in the cinemas to show them once they were made’ due to American competition (Napper 2017, 94). This led to producers in Britain needing to ‘carve their niche’, as Laraine Porter puts it, in the face of such Hollywood dominance, and ‘many looked to European co-productions and to the adaptation of popular British authors and stage plays, as well as the use of well-known British performers’ (Porter 2017, 34). Morris explains that:

Series and serials made up an important part of early cinema programmes, which generally included a feature as well as a variety of news, topical and travel items. For domestic producers struggling to secure exhibition slots within in the block and forward-booking systems, the shorter film was a convenient niche product, likely to find a quicker release than its feature-length cousin. (2009, 263–264)

With block-booking, exhibitors were required to take a package of films from a production or distribution company rather than one individual film alone, and forward-booking meant that distributors could offer films to the exhibitor to rent before or without a film being trade-shown. This is an approach that Cosmopolitan Productions adopted in 1925. In spite of efforts made by the British government and the film trade to promote British film, particularly through events such as the British Film Week held in February 1924, Charles Barr writes that British firms

supplied only a minor – and decreasing – proportion of films shown. By the start of World War I, the figure was around 15 per cent – by 1926 it was down to 5 per cent. The reputation of British films among audiences and critics had sunk to a low level, and remained there. (2008, 148)

The British Film Week was not particularly successful, with Fred Gronbeck reporting: ‘The ideal of a British Film Week as an inaugural effort to whet the public appetite for British films, and thus to support a struggling film industry, was a bold and enterprising conception, to which execution did not do complete justice’, mainly due to little publicity and the lack of ‘quality’ feature-length British films to be shown for the duration of the week (*The Bioscope*, 21 February 1924, 35). Following this, Iris Barry called for producers of British films to make a decision either

to make films using every resource of technique in which it can lay its hands, while remaining in essence British – or attempt to imitate the films of other countries in spirit as well as form . . . Does the public prefer an American film, say, of English life or an English film of English life? I think very decidedly the latter. It is the enjoyment of these works which is international. But they are national in conception. (*The Bioscope*, 28 February 1924, 29)

Cosmopolitan Productions would attempt to address Barry’s call by ambitiously attempting to produce a series of prestigious short films that featured the great and the good of British cinema talent, including famous directors and stars. The films, often adapted from supernatural stories and myths, deployed the technique of double-exposure to depict ghosts, and made creative use of British locations when shooting individual films that formed part of the series.

The formation of Cosmopolitan Productions Limited

Cosmopolitan Productions was registered at Companies House, London, on 18 October 1924, with an issued capital of £1,000 in £1 shares. Formed by Americans Harry Albert Berg, who was previously employed by the European Motion Picture Company as its ‘Director of Exploitation’, and Ivor Morris Rosenbaum, the company’s intention was ‘To carry on the business of cinematograph film manufacturers, traders and renters in any part of the world’ (*Film Daily*, 25 November 1924, 5). The *Financial Times* explained that ‘the business consisted of acting as agents for American productions and in placing American films on the English market’ (6 February 1926, 4). Following the company’s registration, Bayly Harrison, the firm’s Director of Publicity, authored a statement which was issued to the trade press later in the month:

Cosmopolitan Productions Limited, a film company new to London, which has been formed to handle the Parent Company’s productions in this country . . . [and is] backed by British capital, intend on opening branches throughout the whole of the United Kingdom, and indications are that some novel methods will be used in the distribution of their well-known releases. At the moment it is impossible to give details of the new productions to be handled, but the new company will distribute during 1925 twelve features of the type of *Little Old New York*, *Enemies of Women*, etc. (*The Bioscope*, 23 October 1924, 46)

News of the company’s formation was not well received by everyone, particularly George F. Allison, the European representative of the International Film Service, Incorporated of New York, more commonly known as Cosmopolitan Productions, particularly given the direct association the press statement made between the two companies by referring to a ‘Parent Company’ and the two films *Little Old New York* (Sidney Olcott, 1923) and *Enemies of Women* (Alan Crosland, 1923) which were produced by the American firm. Interviewed by *The Bioscope* in response to Harrison’s announcement, Allison stated that the new British company had ‘no connection of any kind whatever with Cosmopolitan Productions of America’, continuing:

The notice is so obviously misleading that I can only assume that the statement, ‘The Parent Company’s productions’ is calculated to convey the impression that such productions will be those made by Cosmopolitan Productions of New York. More particularly so, in view of the last paragraph in which pointed reference is made to two of Cosmopolitan Productions’ recent pictures with which, I would again emphasise, the newly-registered company have not, nor have had, any connection whatsoever. (23 October 1924, 46)

Both *The Bioscope* and *Kinematograph Weekly* came to the same conclusion as Allison. *The Bioscope* noted in the same issue that the registration of the British firm ‘once again raises the question of the wisdom of registering names which are already in general use and well known as a trade name in the industry concerned’, and, acknowledging that in some cases this could be due to lack of awareness on behalf of a company’s directors of such existing names, it concluded: ‘In the present case, there can be, in our opinion, no excuse of want of knowledge of the existing concern named Cosmopolitan Productions, for one, at least, of the directors named, has a thorough acquaintance with the cinema industry both in this country and America’ (42). Similarly, *Kinematograph Weekly* thought ‘it highly undesirable that a new company should select a name already known in the Trade and the use of which, as has already been seen, is bound to give rise to confusion’ (30 October 1924, 62).

In an attempt to clarify the decision to name the company ‘Cosmopolitan Productions’, Harrison, somewhat unconvincingly, replied to Allison’s accusations, the letter of which was published in the following issue of *The Bioscope*:

May I point out that my paragraph, to which you refer, was based on facts provided to me by Mr H. A. Berg, and was distributed to the Press in good faith, there being no intention whatsoever to associate Cosmopolitan Productions Limited of 80–82 Wardour Street, London, with any other existing company of the same name. Mr Berg has given me to understand that the new company was originally intended to be registered as ‘Metropolitan Productions Limited’, but owing to the fact that another company of that name was already in existence, ‘Cosmopolitan Productions’ was chosen as being the next suitable title. As regards the features chosen as examples of the type of releases to be handled by the new company, I picked upon these three [*sic*] at random from some dozen quoted to me by Mr Berg, it being purely coincidence that two should be products of the company bearing the same name. (30 October 1924, 25)

At the beginning of 1925, *The Bioscope* was positive that ‘steady progress’ had been made in relation to the production of British feature-length films and ‘though British productions decreased in number, they advanced in merit, and, in several instances, foreign markets were penetrated successfully’ (1 January 1925, 38). It was in the face of this optimism that two months later *Kinematograph Weekly* announced that Rosenbaum had resigned his directorship of the company, citing the reason that ‘he is unable to give his time to both Cosmopolitan Productions Ltd., and Pictos Ltd’ (5 March 1926, 53). Following Rosenbaum’s resignation, George J. Banfield was employed by the company. Banfield was an American exhibitor who came to Britain in 1911 and established Kinema Exclusives. After World War I, Banfield was ‘associated with the industry in France, returning to Britain as manager of R. C. Pictures’ before going to America ‘to carry out producing contracts’ (*Today’s Cinema*, 12 January 1928, n.p.). Banfield’s employment coincided with an executive decision made by Berg to produce films rather than act as ‘agents and the placing of American films on the English market’. Banfield became responsible for the company’s film productions, was reportedly paid a salary of £25, and was contracted to receive 10% of the gross profits received by Cosmopolitan Productions (*Kinematograph Weekly*, 18 February 1926, 92).

Producing *Haunted Houses and Castles of Great Britain*

The reason for the change in direction for Cosmopolitan Productions is not explicitly stated by the trade paper. It was likely because the British film industry at the time was requesting support from the government, with discussions held between Sir Philip Cunliffe-Lister, President of the Board of Trade, and members of the Cinematograph Exhibitors Association, who proposed that a duty should be imposed on all foreign films shown, with ‘the proceeds to be devoted to subsidizing home production’. Alternatively, they suggested that ‘a scheme should be devised making it compulsory for exhibitors to include in their programmes a certain and increasing percentage of British films’ (*The Times*, 10 February 1925, 10). It was also explained in the same article that Cosmopolitan Productions had signed a contract with the ‘Truart Corporation’ of America, ‘under which four British pictures with an international appeal are to be made each year’. My analysis of the situation is that so as to avoid the potential cost to the company in

exhibiting American films in Britain, an executive decision was made by Cosmopolitan Productions to make British films to export to America.

Following the decision, the company announced it was to produce 12 two-reel films, which would form a series titled *Haunted Houses and Castles of Great Britain*. This is likely due to a rise in established British production companies making more short films by 1925, particularly Stoll Picture Productions Limited, who 'was the most prolific producer of short sequential films in Britain at this time' (Morris 2009, 265) with the company dominating much of the series market (Marlow-Mann 2002, 152). Scripted by Banfield, the Cosmopolitan Productions films were to be adaptations of novels and accounts of famous British myths and ghost stories, aimed to appeal to a wide range of audience members, with the titles including *Ashridge Castle – The Monmouth Rebellion* (C. C. Calvert, 1926), *Baddesley Manor – The Phantom Gambler* (Maurice Elvey, 1926), *Bodiam Castle – The Legend of Eric the Slender* (A. V. Bramble, 1926), *Glamis Castle* (Maurice Elvey, 1926), *Hampton Court Palace* (Bert Cann, 1926), *Kenilworth Castle and Amy Robstar* (Maurice Elvey, 1926), *The Legend of Tichborne Dole* (Hugh Croise, 1926), *The Mistletoe Bough* (C. C. Calvert, 1926), *The Tower of London* (Maurice Elvey, 1926), *Warwick Castle in Feudal Days* (Fred Paul, 1926), *Windsor Castle* (Maurice Elvey, 1926), and *Woodcroft Castle* (Walter West, 1926). It was clearly intended to be a prestigious British short-film series, involving respected directors, experienced crew and famous stars of the British stage and screen, namely Isobel Elsom, Betty Faire, Adeline Hayden Coffin, Isabel Jeans, Gladys Jennings, James Knight, Hugh Miller, Gabrielle Morton, John Stuart, Madge Stuart and Godfrey Tearle. The films were to be shot at Ealing Studios and on location in historical castles, homes and palaces around the UK, and this involved gaining permission from relevant authorities.

The plans for the production of the 12 short films was celebrated by both the national and trade presses, particularly in light of their use of historically authentic 'English' scenery and their celebration and promotion of 'Britishness', with *The Bioscope* writing: 'Ghost stories have tremendous fascination for most folk, and staged in the beautiful backgrounds of England's historic castles they [the films] should have a wide appeal' (5 November 1925, 31). Marlow-Mann has recognised that there were four main trends apparent in the formula used for British short films and serials produced during this period. First, the 'true serial' that would 'include a clear narrative progression across the individual episodes'. Second, the 'semi-serial', categorised by having an 'overarching narrative premise and a sense of progression and a consistent set of characters but which has clearly demarcated, self-contained chapters'. Third, the 'character based series', featuring 'recurring characters in a number of short films with self-contained stories but no over-arching sense of narrative progression'. Finally, the 'thematically based series', that 'utilizes different characters and self-contained narratives but maintains strong thematic links and a sense of continuity between episodes' (Marlow-Mann 2002, 148). It is the latter category that *Haunted Houses and Castles of Great Britain* falls within.

During the production of the films, Berg revealed to a *Daily News* representative in July 1925 how the series came to be commissioned: 'America is thirsting for ghost stories with a real thrill . . . The commission for the films came to us as a British company with the stipulation that only British artists should be employed', going onto explain that two films for the series, *Woodcroft Castle* and the *Legend of Tichborne Dole*, had been

completed 'and will be dispatched to America immediately' (*Portsmouth Evening News*, 21 July 1925, 8). Boasting of the creativity of the series and its potential appeal to American audiences, Berg is also quoted in the article making the bold and inaccurate claim that the films 'show for the first time the continuous use of double exposure to create a weird effect'. Though Berg wildly exaggerated the creativity and the international appeal of the films for audiences, it is evident that much time was spent acquiring the rights to shoot at a variety of locations over the summer of 1925. The *Portsmouth Evening News* believed that 'the most interesting feature of the film ghost stories is the accuracy of historic detail in dress and in furniture', noting that 'for the *Tichborne* film Sir Joseph Tichborne lent to the producers manuscripts and sketches, superintended the making of the film, and "shot" some of the scenes himself' (8).

Beyond *The Tichborne Dole*, Berg and Banfield had also approached the Lord Chamberlain's Office in order to acquire permission to film at Hampton Court Palace. In the correspondence which survives between the Lord Chamberlain's Office and the Office of Works, the department responsible for managing and maintaining Crown property on behalf of the government, the scale and scope of Cosmopolitan Productions' intention to use historic sites as a backdrop for scenes becomes evident.¹ Sir George Crichton, Comptroller for the Lord Chamberlain's Office, wrote to Sir Lionel Earle, Permanent Secretary to the Office of Works on 23 June 1925, asking for Earle to review Cosmopolitan Productions' filming application. Crichton had ascertained that the company wanted 'to photograph both the interior and exterior of the Palace, and that the work would take about six hours. There would only be three characters, and there would be no question of excluding the ordinary visitors to the Palace'. On replying to Crichton on 1 July 1925, Earle explained that the Office of Works had already spoken to a 'representative here from the company who has explained that they merely want to use the Palace as a background for some historical or legendary scenes in the costumes of the period'. Earle was happy to grant permission to Cosmopolitan Productions on the proviso that they abided by the cinematograph policy in relation to Hampton Court Palace. Photography for the film took place on 1 August 1925, with the *Daily Graphic*, *Daily Mail* and the *Daily News* publishing a still of the production unit filming Gabrielle Morton in the site's gardens (Figure 1).

Of the 12 films produced for the series, only five survive: *Hampton Court Palace*, *Kenilworth Castle and Amy Robstart*, *The Legend of Tichborne Dole*, *Warwick Castle in Feudal Days* and *The Tower of London*. Of these films, only *Hampton Court Palace*, *Kenilworth Castle and Amy Robstart* and *Warwick Castle in Feudal Days* can be viewed in full.² However, the surviving reels demonstrate the prestigious nature of the series and the appeal that these films would have had for British, if not international, audiences.

Hampton Court Palace

The narrative of *Hampton Court Palace* tells the myth of the ghost of Katherine Howard and her alleged haunting of the Processional Gallery at the site. Directed by Bert Cann, the cast included Gabrielle Morton, Banfield's wife, as Katherine Howard, Shep Camp as Henry VIII, Eric Cowley as Thomas Culpepper, and Annesley Healy as the Duke of Norfolk. The film focuses on the marriage between Henry VIII and Katherine Howard and a plot by her uncle, the Duke of Norfolk, to prove her infidelity. The film makes the



Figure 1. Photograph of location shooting for *Hampton Court Palace* published in both the national and trade presses.

most creative use of the location in comparison to the other surviving films, with archways and cloisters in Hampton Court often positioned as a framing device for the characters, particularly in scenes featuring the Duke of Norfolk and Henry VIII.

For example, when the Duke of Norfolk insinuates to Henry VIII that the relationship between Katherine Howard and Thomas Culpepper goes beyond childhood friendship, the audience view Henry VIII peering through a lattice window overlooking the gardens (**Figure 2**). This motif is similarly adopted in a scene that appears in Alexander Korda's acclaimed *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (1933), where Henry VIII (Charles Laughton) taps impatiently at a latticed window waiting for news of the execution of his second wife, Anne Boleyn (Merle Oberon) (**Figure 3**). This scene has been previously attributed by Greg Walker (2003) as reflecting the painting *A Boy looking through a Casement* (Flemish School, c.1600–10). It is possible that both Korda and Laughton were also inspired, in part, by *Hampton Court Palace* owing to the similarity of how Camp's and Laughton's Henry VIII's are framed in these scenes.

In the final scenes of *Hampton Court Palace*, it is possible that the filmmakers had been inspired by another ghost story relating to the site. After Katherine Howard's execution, the intertitle explains that midnight is when her ghost 'is said to pass through the dim courtyards and cloisters of the ancient Palace'. This is followed by footage of a policeman standing in a courtyard on duty checking his watch against the time shown on the clock in George II's Archway. As his watch displays midnight, the ghost of Katherine Howard is superimposed on the film, and the audience view her mournfully wandering through the cloisters and Fountain Court. On the clock reaching five past midnight, the ghost disappears, and the policeman proceeds to rub his eyes and wander



Figure 2. Henry VIII (Shep Camp) peering through a lattice window in *Hampton Court Palace* (Bert Cann, 1926).



Figure 3. Henry VIII (Charles Laughton) peering through a lattice window in *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (Alexander Korda, 1933).

off shrugging. Though the tale involving a policeman witnessing ghosts at Hampton Court Palace does not directly relate to the story of Katherine Howard, a story published in the *Daily Telegraph* in 1905 explains that whilst on duty, Police Constable 265 T saw a group of figures walking towards him from the East Front Gardens. He alleged that when they came within nine yards of him, ‘to my utter amazement, the whole crowd of them vanished, melted, as it seemed to me, into the air’ (31 January, 5). This story may well have provided the filmmakers with the inspiration to have a policeman witness the



Figure 4. Policeman in *Hampton Court Palace* (Bert Cann, 1926).

ghost of Katherine Howard in the final scenes of the film (Figure 4), and the *Daily News* described the film's plot as 'A Hampton Court policeman, waking up from a dream, finds ghosts of the past once again inhabiting Palace grounds' (1 August 1925, n.p.).

Kenilworth Castle and Amy Robstart

The most aesthetically and technically accomplished of the films from the series which survive in full, *Kenilworth Castle and Amy Robstart*, was directed by Maurice Elvey, and photographed by Ben Ford and Percy Anthony. It is inspired by Sir Walter Scott's novel *Kenilworth* (1821). In terms of direction, the film possesses a whimsical, lyrical and dream-like quality, making creative use of silhouette in its scenes. It begins in the present-day with the intertitle:

We may outgrow our belief in fairies – but the lure of the supernatural abides with most of us. The belief that spirits haunt the houses which were their dwelling places on Earth is evidenced by the lore of the ages – and no more fascinating stories exist than those concerning the dim wraiths of men and women who come back from the spirit world to revisit the scenes of their triumphs and sorrows.

The scene opens with an engaged couple (John Stuart and Pauline Johnson) bickering over their broken-down car, before the woman spots a light emanating from Kenilworth Castle and suggests that they could request shelter for the night. After being ushered into the castle by a sinister-looking caretaker ('No one occupies the castle but me – and the memories of the past!'), the woman is offered a place to sleep in Robert Dudley, the Earl of Leicester's (Reginald Fox) room ('All those who sleep in the Earl's chamber see strange and awful sights'). Attempting to sleep, the woman sees the ghosts of Dudley and Amy Robstart (Madge Stuart). Her sighting leads the caretaker to recount the tragic death of Robstart to the couple.

Following the intertitle explaining that Dudley and Robstart eloped in secret to be married, the scene enacts a shadow play of the couple riding on horseback. They then enter the castle, where Dudley promises to love Robstart 'forever', though the couple

must keep their marriage secret to avoid the wrath of Queen Elizabeth I (Gladys Jennings) of whom Dudley is a favourite. The film then introduces Tressilian (Edward Wallace) as Robstart's 'childhood playmate and faithful lover', who dramatically promises revenge on Dudley if anything were to happen to Robstart: 'I swear by my faithful poniard that if that villain allows ought of evil to befall Amy I will exact my full vengeance'. The narrative then skips forward in time to Dudley returning to the court of Elizabeth, with the intervening scenes including location shots taken from the gardens of Kenilworth Castle. It is here that Sir Richard Varney, Dudley's Master of the Horse, suggests that if Robstart was 'removed', Dudley would be free to marry Elizabeth and become the King of England ('And as the villainous Leicester wooed his Queen this [Kenilworth] castle saw a ghastly tragedy enacted'). The film cuts to a group of men, headed by Varney, who invade Robstart's bedchamber. A rather creative scene then follows between Dudley and Elizabeth, for Robstart's face is superimposed onto Elizabeth's as Dudley attempts to flirt with the Queen. During the scene Dudley becomes despondent, and returns to Kenilworth Castle to find the body of his wife on the floor at the foot of her bed. Abandoning himself to 'remorse', as the intertitle explains, Tressilian proceeds to kill Dudley out of vengeance. As Dudley lays dying, the ghost of Robstart appears on screen to comfort him and pray over his body. The final scenes of the film cut back to the engaged couple leaving Kenilworth Castle after providing the caretaker a tip for his 'enthraling' story.

Warwick Castle in Feudal Days

Directed by Fred Paul and photographed by D. P. Cooper and Francis Cadman, *Warwick Castle in Feudal Days* is very much shot in the 'Grand Guignol' horror style that Paul favoured, 'with strong storylines and ironic fatalistic twists' (Porter 2017, 41). In *Kinematograph Weekly*, Paul explained his approach to directing as:

I attempt to show life as it really is, its sordidness and cruelty, the diabolical humour of the destiny we call fate, which plays with us as it will, raises it to high places or drags us to the gutter: allows one man to rob the widows and orphans of their all and makes a criminal of the starving wretch who in his misery has stolen a mouthful of bread. (24 March 1921, 53)

In keeping with Paul's Gothic approach, *Warwick Castle in Feudal Days* begins, as with *Kenilworth Castle and Amy Robstart*, in the present day, with a descendant of the Earl of Warwick sitting within the castle drinking brandy poured from a decanter, smoking a cigar and reading a large tome. As he reads, two ghosts appear, with the male throwing the female ghost to the floor before fading. The man looks and then continues to drink. The scene cuts to the intertitle 'Under the feudal system the serf and all his dependants belonged body and soul to the overlord' and then dissolves to reveal two peasants, Gurton (Adeline Hayden Coffin) and her son Kinver (John Stuart). As Gurton cooks at the stove, two guards in chainmail armour break through the door, introducing Guy of Warwick (Godfrey Tearle). On Warwick telling Kinver to 'Fetch wine, varlet, and haste thee if thou valuest [*sic*] thy crooked body', Gurton's daughter, Ealitha (Isabel Jeans), enters the scene with Warwick appearing visibly impressed by her beauty. After grabbing and kissing her, Warwick and his guards leave. The intertitle that follows explains, 'In spite of many distractions the remembrance of the beautiful peasant girl lingered with the

Earl – and one night –’. The scene cuts to Warwick’s soldiers breaking into the peasants’ home, fighting Kinver, strangling and killing Gurton, and kidnapping Ealitha. Intent on revenge, Kinver follows the soldiers as they leave, carrying a large knife.

Once the soldiers have returned to Warwick Castle, leaving the unconscious Ealitha in a bedchamber, she awakens to find Warwick leering over her with a menacing smirk on his face. She rises from her bed and runs to peer out of the window. As she looks back toward the camera, despair is evident on her face, which indicates that she is trapped and cannot escape. While Ealitha kneels and pleads with Warwick to free her, a maid enters the bedchamber and Warwick intimates that Ealitha be dressed in fresh clothing. The film then cuts to Kinver, who is walking through a forest, before returning to Ealitha, who is now dressed in luxurious robes. As Warwick walks over to her, again smirking, Ealitha makes a rather comic roll of her eyes toward the camera, resigning herself to her entrapment, as Kinver enters the castle in search of his sister. In the disturbing scenes that follow, Warwick attempts to rape Ealitha with the camera continuously switching between close-ups of both actors faces – her terrified and him leering – before he catches her. As he tries to kiss her, Ealitha twists her body around to take his dagger, using it to commit suicide. Warwick kneels over Ealitha’s body before standing up and laughing, and as he does so Kinver approaches from behind and stabs Warwick in the back. Kinver attempts to escape. However, as he climbs over the castle wall one of Warwick’s soldiers stabs him with a pike leading to Kinver falling to his death. The final scene returns to Warwick’s descendant waking up from his drunken stupor and fearfully looking at his surroundings. He picks up the decanter and smiles wryly at it, shaking his head, as if to suggest that the story was a dream.

Distribution, reception, and bankruptcy

After production of the series was completed, *The Bioscope* reported that C & M Productions Limited, a subsidiary of W & F Film Service Limited, had obtained the UK distribution rights for the films, noting that the director of the company, Charles M. Woolf, ‘seems to have his fingers in more British film pies at the moment than any other British renter’ (5 November 1925, 31). Following this, *Variety* announced on 2 December 1925 that Cosmopolitan Productions ‘have a strong programme for next year’ beyond the release of *Haunted Houses and Castles of Great Britain*, including:

A series of six two-reelers adapted from W. B. Maxwell’s stories *Children of the Night*, produced by C. C. Calvert, and *Morals in Art* by Kenelm Foss, being made by R. J. Cullen under direction of Maurice Elvey. In addition this company is making a full-length feature, *Gabrielle*, adapted from W. B. Maxwell’s novel. (44)

Furthermore, *The Bioscope* reported that:

Relative newcomers in the production field, Cosmopolitan Productions Limited, have already outgrown their Ealing Studios and have migrated to Isleworth. At Warton Hall, production is well in hand, and Godfrey Tearle will make his six pictures here for Cosmopolitan. Captain Banfield is supervising the units, all of which are working around the clock. (3 December 1925, 37)

Porter explains that ‘During the slump of the early to mid-1920s, many small companies and lone producers went bankrupt and the industry was sustained by shorter films and

film series' (2017, 34). This, of course, was true of larger production firms, such as Stoll, which made serial and short films in order to sustain its production of feature-length films during the downturn. However, Cosmopolitan Productions did not take the same approach, and it soon became evident that as an independent film producing firm the company was in serious financial trouble. After the announcement of the company's programme for 1926, the *Kinematograph Year Book* explained that

the company was being pressed by a creditor, and a meeting of trade creditors was held to explain to company's position, which was done. The position as disclosed to the meeting was that the company had a substantial asset in a film [*Haunted Houses and Castles of Great Britain*] and that as soon as rights could be disposed of the proceeds would be more than sufficient to discharge the creditors' claim. It appears, however, that before any further steps could be taken the petition to wind-up the company had been presented, and the winding-up order was made. (1927, 190)

Following trade press articles announcing that production plans were likely exaggerated by Cosmopolitan Productions, I posit that the company's creditors, alongside the cast and crew of the *Haunted Houses and Castles of Great Britain* series and Reynolds & Sons, may have become suspicious about the likelihood of receiving payment for their services. The petition by the company's creditors was presented to Mr Justice Eve on 14 December 1925.³

With meetings between Cosmopolitan Productions and its creditors beginning in January 1926, *Haunted Houses and Castles of Great Britain* was released to the trade on 5 January and later to the general public in September by C & M Productions. The reasons for the delay in the series' release in cinemas was likely due to the confusion surrounding the status of the production company as it underwent insolvency and the complexities of the contracted agreement between Cosmopolitan Productions and C & M Productions to distribute the films. Much was made in the series' press book about its 'Britishness' and its use of locations: 'A brilliant series of two-reelers made in the most beautiful and historic castles in England, Wales and Scotland . . . All British throughout . . . Stirring stories, bristling with drama and comedy'.⁴

Two out of the 12 films, *The Mistletoe Bough* and *Baddesley Manor*, were screened to the trade at the Tivoli Theatre on The Strand, London. *Kinematograph Weekly* reported that both films 'augur well for the success of the group. They are adequately told . . . Double photography on the ghostly element is very good, and the acting is, on the whole, of a good standard . . . They should prove good and novel shorts for most audiences (7 January 1926, 68). *The Bioscope* reviewed *The Mistletoe Bough*:

A well produced screen version of the story of the famous song . . . Gladys Jennings makes a charming figure of the tragic bride, and the action is effectively developed in, mainly, old-world mansion interiors. As a picturesque playlet of considerable emotional appeal, *The Mistletoe Bough* should prove an excellent little booking. (7 January 1926, 84)

Not everyone, however, was impressed by the series, particularly *Hampton Court Palace*, with S. R. Littlewood taking issue with the production's use of the 'wrong' locations used in the film:

Here is a great tragic theme – one, as it happens, for which everything is ready and to hand. It has been turned, apparently 'by permission', into a ludicrous travesty, studded with 'howlers' like the presentment of Katherine Howard walking through parts of the palace

which any dunderhead should know are of the Wren period, and decorated with sentimental titles which quite rightly drew nothing but laughter. (*The Sphere*, 24 April 1926, xiv)

Meanwhile, *Kinematograph Weekly* noted in February 1926 that ‘Claims to the extent of £5,782 have been notified to the Official Receiver in connection with the winding up of Cosmopolitan Productions’, however at a meeting between the creditors and the shareholders of the company the total amount of financial liability was unknown (18 February 1926, 65). The only asset held by the company was the remaining rights of *Haunted Houses and Castles of Great Britain*, valued by the company’s directors at £3,000 (*Financial Times*, 6 February 1926, 4). In the following meetings conducted by the creditors and shareholders of Cosmopolitan Productions, *Variety* noted that Berg had ‘made another unspectacular exit to America’, leaving Banfield to ‘listen to some straight home-truths’ from the creditors, who wanted ‘not only Berg, but their fees’ (10 March 1926, 36). Furthermore, Allison, who had previously stressed that Cosmopolitan Productions had no relationship with the American firm of the same name, wrote to *Kinematograph Weekly* again to state that there was no relationship between the two. Banfield appeared to struggle in contacting the elusive Berg to assist in answering the creditors’ queries, and in May, *Variety* reported that: ‘People who were connected with the making of the Cosmopolitan shorts . . . continue to inquire when it is expected H. Berg will return to Wardour Street. Without one dissenting voice they promise him a warm welcome’ (19 May 1926, 9).

Conclusion

The rise and fall of Cosmopolitan Productions, one of the many short-lived firms created during a turbulent time for the British film industry between 1924 and 1926, coincided with attempts by film companies to revive production of quality British films. In Cosmopolitan Productions’ case, the result was a series of short films that would have both national and international appeal. However, the aim of Cosmopolitan Productions to provide a prestigious series, made by respected directors and including famous British stars at the time, ironically proved to be the company’s undoing. Through analysis of Cosmopolitan Productions, I have demonstrated that it was extremely difficult for small and independent production companies in the mid-1920s to compete with the outputs of larger and more established outfits such as Stoll Pictures and the Ideal Film Company, which were able to produce and distribute many more short films and serials during the period.

A further challenge was the financial pressure on small outfits such as Cosmopolitan Productions in an unprotected market prior to 1928, which becomes evident when analysing the production of *Haunted Houses and Castles of Great Britain* as a ‘quality’ series. It is clear that the company had difficulties securing long-term credit in order to produce its intended outputs beyond the one series of short films, and executives determined in the course of the winding-up of Cosmopolitan Productions that the failure of the company was ‘attributed to losses sustained in film production and mismanagement’ (*Kinematograph Weekly Year Book 1927*, 194). It is unknown whether Berg ever did return to Wardour Street to receive the ‘warm welcome’ promised by the creditors of the company, however Banfield did manage to salvage his relationship with those

involved with the making of *Haunted Houses and Castles of Great Britain*, and subsequently went on to form British Filmcraft Productions Limited later in 1926. He produced many short films between 1927 and 1929, including the series *Ghosts of Yesterday* (1928), *Sexton Blake* (1928) and *Dick Turpin* (1929), as well as four feature-length films: *Spangles* (Banfield, 1928), *The Burgomaster of Stilemonde* (Banfield, 1929), *Blue Peter* (A. H. Rooke, 1929) and *Power over Men* (Banfield, 1929). British Filmcraft was also short-lived, though, as the company went into receivership with the arrival of talking pictures.

Notes

1. These records are held by the National Archives (TNA) in Richmond, Surrey, under the file WORK 19/1129.
2. *Hampton Court Palace* (<https://player.bfi.org.uk/free/film/watch-hampton-court-palace-1926-online>) and *The Tower of London* (<https://player.bfi.org.uk/free/film/watch-the-tower-of-london-1926-online>) can be viewed on the BFI Player, and *Kenilworth Castle and Amy Robsart*, *The Legend of Tichborne Dole* and *Warwick Castle in Feudal Days* can be accessed by visiting the BFI's viewing services based at Stephen Street, London.
3. TNA: J 107/24.
4. The press book is available in the Gabrielle Morton and George Banfield collection (ITM-7250) held by the BFI's Special Collections.

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