MoMA FILM EXHIBITION COMMEMORATES CENTENARY OF THE ACTOR REX HARRISON

*Rex Harrison: A Centenary Tribute* Spans Acclaimed Actor’s Career, from *Night Train to Munich* to *The Agony and the Ecstasy*

**REX HARRISON: A CENTENARY TRIBUTE**

March 5–24, 2008
The Roy and Niuta Titus Theaters

NEW YORK, February 20, 2007—Commemorating the centenary of actor Rex Harrison’s birth on March 5, The Museum of Modern Art presents an exhibition of 11 films featuring the Oscar-winning actor. The exhibition *Rex Harrison: A Centenary Tribute*, presented in the Roy and Niuta Titus Theaters March 5–24, 2008, comprises musicals, comedies, and epic dramas from his wide-ranging career, including such titles as *My Fair Lady* (1964), *Cleopatra* (1965), and some of his lesser-known earlier films as *Major Barbara* (1941) and *Escape* (1948). *Night Train to Munich* (1940), the opening night film on March 5, will be introduced by his widow, Lady Mercia Harrison, and other members of the Harrison family. The exhibition is organized by Charles Silver, Associate Curator, Department of Film.

Harrison (English, 1908–90; born Reginald Harrison) began his acting career on the stage at age 18, and by 1930 was already playing bit parts in films. Throughout the seven decades of his career, interrupted only by three years as a World War II Royal Air Force flight lieutenant, he remained a stage actor, even up to his role as Lord Porteous in W. Somerset Maugham’s *The Circle* which he played three weeks before his death. But it is for his screen roles that he is best-remembered, carving out a more populist niche for himself, somewhat removed from such classically trained contemporaries as Laurence Olivier, John Gielgud, and Ralph Richardson. More comfortable with the modern idiom and plays of George Bernard Shaw than with Shakespeare (he appeared in adaptations of Shaw’s *Pygmalion* and *Major Barbara* as well as the film version of John Galsworthy’s play *Escape*) Harrison became, in the words of playwright Noel Coward, “the greatest interpreter of high comedy in the world.”

Whether playing a soldier in the Salvation Army ( *Major Barbara*, 1941), a sometimes gentlemanly phonics teacher (Henry Higgins in *My Fair Lady*, reprising his successful Broadway role, winning a Tony and an Oscar for each), a ghost ( *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir*, 1947), an orchestra conductor ( *Unfaithfully Yours*, 1948), an escaped criminal ( *Escape*, 1948), a Roman emperor (Julius Caesar in *Cleopatra*, 1963), a Muslim potentate (Saladin in *King Richard and the Crusaders*, 1954), or a pope (Julius II in *The Agony and the Ecstasy*, 1965), Harrison brought a rakish charm and elegance to his roles.

*Special thanks to the British Film Institute, Fleur Buckley, Martin Scorsese, Ed Gallagher, and Lady Mercia Harrison.*
**Please Join Us for the Following Press Screenings in the Roy and Niuta Titus 2 Theater:**

**Wed 20 Feb**
10:00 a.m.  *King Richard and the Crusaders*. 114 min

**Thur 21 Feb**
10:00 a.m.  *Major Barbara*. 101 min


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**No. 22**
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For downloadable images, please visit www.moma.org/press and register for user name and password.

**Public Information:**
The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53rd Street, New York, NY 10019

**Hours:**
Wednesday through Monday: 10:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Friday: 10:30 a.m.-8:00 p.m. Closed Tuesday

**Museum Adm:**
$20 adults; $16 seniors, 65 years and over with I.D.; $12 full-time students with current I.D. Free, members and children 16 and under. (Includes admittance to Museum galleries and film programs)

Target Free Friday Nights 4:00 p.m.-8:00 p.m.

**Film Adm:**
$10 adults; $8 seniors, 65 years and over with I.D. $6 full-time students with current I.D. (For admittance to film programs only)

**Subway:**
E or V train to Fifth Avenue/53rd Street

**Bus:**
On Fifth Avenue, take the M1, M2, M3, M4, or M5 to 53rd Street. On Sixth Avenue, take the M5, M6, or M7 to 53rd Street. Or take the M57 and M50 crosstown buses on 57th and 50th Streets.

The public may call (212) 708-9400 for detailed Museum information. Visit us at www.moma.org

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**Rex Harrison: A Centenary Tribute**

**Screening Schedule**

**Wednesday, March 5**

6:15  *Night Train to Munich*. 1940. Great Britain. Directed by Carol Reed. With Rex Harrison, Margaret Lockwood, Paul von Henreid (later Paul Henreid), Basil Radford, Naunton Wayne. The first of Harrison’s collaborations with Reed (they were reunited a quarter-century later for *The Agony and the Ecstasy*), *Night Train to Munich*—distributed by Twentieth Century Fox, then headed by Darryl Zanuck, the only non-Jewish major studio boss—was finally released in the Nazi-squeamish U.S. in October 1940, barely a week after Chaplin’s *The Great Dictator* shattered the Hollywood taboo against portraying the Third Reich as murderously anti-Semitic. For the understandably less-fastidious Brits, the film (originally...
entitled *Gestapo* had come out in a besieged and bombarded London the previous May. In some ways a more politically charged reworking of Hitchcock’s *The Lady Vanishes* (1938), this film enabled Harrison to establish himself as a potent anti-Nazi hero in Britain’s hour of need. Harrison went on to serve three years as Flight Lieutenant Reginald Harrison in the Royal Air Force. 93 min.

**New 35mm print.**

(Introduced by Lady Mercia Harrison and other members of the Harrison family)

**Thursday, March 6**


In his first foray into George Bernard Shaw territory, Harrison gives us an early example of the choreographed speechifying that would ultimately become one of his trademark virtues. If Shaw’s socioeconomic treatises have become dated, Sir Rex, Hiller, and a glorious supporting cast (including Kerr in her first screen role) are as up-to-date and explosive as the munitions plant in the film. 101 min.

**New 35mm print.**


In retrospect it seems inevitable that there would be at least one Harrison film with “rake” in the title, for he embodied this quality as no film actor has before or since. While paying only light regard to the horrors of its source—a grim series of William Hogarth engravings from the eighteenth century—Gilliatt’s version gives Sir Rex free rein to turn on the charm as only he could. 120 min.

**Friday, March 7**


Harrison’s second American film and first collaboration with Mankiewicz (all four of which appear in this exhibition) retains a wistful charm, abetted by Herrmann’s score and the always ethereal Tierney. The 1940s fantasy fad (from René Clair’s *I Married a Witch* through Jules Dassin’s *The Canterville Ghost* with Charles Laughton) was not exactly comfortable territory for the earthy Mankiewicz, nor for a male star as rooted in the real world as Harrison. Ironically, in the decades-later television series, Sir Rex’s role was played by Edward Mulhare, who also succeeded Harrison as Henry Higgins in *My Fair Lady* on Broadway. 104 min.

**8:15**  *Unfaithfully Yours*. 1948. USA. Written and directed by Preston Sturges. With Rex Harrison, Linda Darnell, Rudy Vallee, Barbara Lawrence, Edgar Kennedy.

The great Preston Sturges, whose most successful blending of romance with slapstick was *The Lady Eve* (1941), tried for 15 years to convince any studio to produce his “symphony story.” Although some critics found Sir Rex too cerebral for farce (Ronald Colman and James Mason were originally considered for his role), the film remains the last masterpiece in the director’s brief but monumental career. 105 min.

**Saturday, March 8**


This reunion with Mankiewicz—from a taut adaptation of John Galsworthy’s play by Philip Dunne, the writer of *How Green Was My Valley* and *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir*—runs only one-third as long as Mankiewicz’s own script for *Cleopatra* (see below). Photographed by
Freddie Young, who later filmed such landscape-loving David Lean classics as *Lawrence of Arabia* and *Doctor Zhivago*, *Escape*, on a smaller canvas, has a lyrical, picaresque charm of its own. Harrison, dazzling Cummins’s Dora Winton while both are under duress, remains his relaxed self as Matt Denant. 78 min.

5:30 **King Richard and the Crusaders.** 1954. USA. Directed by David Butler. With Rex Harrison, Virginia Mayo, George Sanders, Laurence Harvey.
With the advent of Cinemascope in 1953, there seemed to be a notion in Hollywood that the wide screen cried out for adaptations of Sir Walter Scott’s works. *King Richard and the Crusaders*, Sir Rex’s entry into this list, is based on Scott’s *The Talisman*, and someone deserves our undying gratitude for casting him as the Muslim general, Saladin. Although he got top billing, it takes a half-hour for Harrison to appear. Yet his whimsical performance, redolent of Douglas Fairbanks in its knowing irony, is worth waiting for. Of course, it must have taken considerable imagination to choose the ever world-weary Sanders to incarnate Richard the Lionhearted. Harrison sings a couple of songs, Mayo preaches on the need for Christian-Muslim reconciliation, and a good time is had by all. 114 min.

8:00 **The Honey Pot.** 1966. USA/Italy. Directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz. With Rex Harrison, Susan Hayward, Cliff Robertson, Capucine, Maggie Smith.
The final Harrison-Mankiewicz pairing is a lavishly photographed update of Ben Jonson’s 360-year-old *Volpone*. It had previously been filmed just prior to World War II by Maurice Tourneur, whose Hollywood period was long behind him, and who wound up working under the Vichy government; his star, Harry Baur, was apparently murdered at the hands of the same regime four years later. *The Honey Pot* attempts to be frothy and Felliniesque, and Harrison is in his beguiling element as a great, if not totally reliable, lover. 131 min.

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**Sunday, March 9**

2:00 **My Fair Lady.** 1964. USA. Directed by George Cukor. With Rex Harrison, Audrey Hepburn, Stanley Holloway, Wilfrid Hyde-White, Gladys Cooper, Jeremy Brett.
Although it has become fashionable to minimize the appeal of Cukor’s *My Fair Lady*—it’s often criticized as stodgy and too late in both his and Harrison’s careers—one is damn grateful that Sir Rex’s signature role has been so elegantly preserved on film. Perhaps the ultimate tribute came from Cary Grant when talk turned to the possibility of his playing Henry Higgins on screen; Grant made it clear that the role belonged to Harrison, and neither he nor anyone else could touch it. Sir Rex continued to appear for another quarter-century, but there was no doubt after *My Fair Lady* that, like Eliza Doolittle, he’d “got it.” 170 min.

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**Monday, March 10**

5:00 **My Fair Lady.** See Sunday, March 9, 2:00.

8:30 **Night Train to Munich.** See Wednesday, March 5, 6:15.

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**Wednesday, March 12**

7:00 **My Fair Lady.** See Sunday, March 9, 2:00.

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**Thursday, March 13**

6:00 **The Rake’s Progress (The Notorious Gentleman in the United States).** See Thursday, March 6, 8:15.
8:30  **Major Barbara.** See Thursday, March 6, 6:00.

**Friday March 14**

7:00  **King Richard and the Crusaders.** See Saturday, March 8, 5:30.

**Sunday, March 16**

4:30  **The Honey Pot.** See Saturday, March 8, 8:00.

**Friday, March 21**

Films honoring and documenting painters have had a long and rich tradition, from Charles Laughton’s Rembrandt and Jean Renoir’s homages to his father Pierre-Auguste (A Day in the Country, Picnic on the Grass); to gobs of Van Goghs; Salma Hayek’s Frida Kahlo; and, most recently, Alexander Sokurov’s magnificent single-take tour of the Hermitage in Russian Ark. The saga of Michelangelo’s struggle with the Sistine Chapel, The Agony and the Ecstasy, Harrison’s reunion with Reed, is marred by a disappointing script, intrusive dubbing, a coyness about Michelangelo’s sexuality, and the performances of some of the actors. These shortcomings are somewhat offset by veteran cinematographer Leon Shamroy’s Cinerama-inspired camera movements. Ultimately, the film is rewarding for Harrison’s rakish incarnation of warrior-pope Julius II, who goads Heston into completing his masterwork (like a Renaissance studio executive with far more charm than those of the twentieth century). The film is preceded by a short that Twentieth Century Fox released for those unfamiliar with Michelangelo and the Sistine Chapel. 138 min.

8:30  **Escape.** See Saturday, March 8, 2:00.

**Saturday, March 22**

In what might be the most talked-about movie in history, Harrison’s Caesar triumphs over Mankiewicz’s garrulous script—until the Ides of March catches up with him, and the film. With a story that has fixated audiences from the time of Plutarch through HBO’s recent Rome, Mankiewicz’s efforts to save the studio still offer plenty of pleasure, especially nearly a half-century removed from the initial hype. 251 min. Saturday, March 22, 1:00; Monday, March 24, 6:00. T1

6:00  **The Ghost and Mrs. Muir.** See Friday, March 7, 6:00.

8:15  **Unfaithfully Yours.** See Friday, March 7, 8:15.

**Sunday, March 23**

2:00  **The Agony and the Ecstasy.** See Friday, March 21, 5:30.