

The Lavender Hill Mob



Directed by Charles Critchon. Produced by Michael Balcon. Screenplay and story by T.E. "Tebby" Clarke. Cinematography by Douglas Slocombe. Art Direction by William Kellner. Original Music by Georges Auric. Edited by Seth Holt. Costumes by Anthony Mendleson. Cinematic length: 81 minutes. Companies: Ealing Studos and the Rank Organisation. Cinematic release: June 1951. DVD release: 2002 DVD/Blue Ray 60th Anniversary Release 2011. Check for ratings. Rating 90%.

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Cast

- Alec Guinness as Henry Holland
- Stanley Holloway as Alfred Pendlebury
- Sid James as Lackery Wood
- Alfie Bass as Shorty Fisher
- John Gregson as Detective Farrow

- Marjorie Fielding as Mrs. Chalk
- Edie Martin as Miss Evesham
- Audrey Hepburn as Chiquita
- John Salew as Parkin
- Ronald Adam as Turner
- Arthur Hambling as Wallis
- Gibb McLaughlin as Godwin
- Clive Morton as the Station Sergeant
- Sydney Tafler as Clayton
- Marie Burke as Senora Gallardo
- William Fox as Gregory
- Michael Trubshawe as the British Ambassador
- Jacques B. Brunius, Paul Demel, Eugene Deckers and Andreas Malandrinos as Customs Officials
- David Davies and Meredith Edwards as city policemen
- Cyril Chamberlain as Commander
- Moultrie Kelsall as a Detective Superintendent
- Christopher Hewett as Inspector Talbot
- Patrick Barr as a Divisional Detective Inspector
- Ann Heffernan as the kiosk attendant
- Robert Shaw as a lab technician
- Patricia Garwood as a schoolgirl
- Peter Bull as Joe the Gab

Review

Although Ealing Studios started making comedies in the later 1930s, the decade between 1947 and 1957, after which the studio was sold to the BBC and changed direction, was their classic period. People still remember those charming, at times whimsical comedies. Whimsy and charm were only two of their virtues: add gently indulged satire, versecuous scenes, sardonic tones and irony. There were even scenes for a good belly laugh. When mockery and satire came, it was usually directed to the pompous, the overly self-assured and the self-deluded. Bureaucrats, politicians, police and particularly aristocrats were the usual targets. Fortunately this was done without schadenfreude and English ways were the most favoured target.

The Ealing style owed much to the way film making teams would work together from one film to another. In *The Lavender Hill Mob* Ealing filmmaking regulars director Charles Critchon and writer T.E. “Tebby” Clarke would be joined by regular Ealing stars, Alec Guinness and Stanley Holloway. A strong supporting cast are a boost. Among them are the cinematic debuts of Audey Hepburn (one of four films made in 1951) Robert Shaw and Patricia Garwood.

Guinness plays the film’s central character and narrator Henry Holland. We first see him in Rio, where seemingly carefree, exuberantly happy and popular,

he splashes money round amongst his acquaintances. The Rio depicted is the English dream of Rio. Samba music plays in the background, wine flows like water, a beautiful Hispanic girl (Audrey Hepburn) who might be his mistress, flirts with this plain looking middle aged expatriate male. The Rio depicted here is all interiors, shot in a London hotel. Isn't it amazing how costumes, accents, pot plants and music can create a tropical impression? The real Rio of polluted air, beaches and ocean, of several hundred murders a month and shanties piled atop one another does not disturb Holland's dream, but then nothing does. Imperturbably he starts to narrate to another expatriate how he got there. Even in his own account he emerges as no hero: seemingly a dull, fussy, obedient human cog in the bureaucracy, his job in life was to escort the Bank of England's daily gold bullion transfers in London. He has been doing this for twenty years and for those around him he will seemingly do this for the rest of his life - for fifteen pounds and eighteen shillings a week, less deductions.

However in a voice over where we look down on a London bridge covered by bowler hatted, dark suited men like himself, carrying umbrellas and suitcases, he begins to narrate his secret dream of robbing the Bank of England to escape from his dreary life. His dull, imaginative personality is really a persona he has created so that nobody will notice or suspect what he wants or is really like. His supercilious narration reveals a hidden contempt for all of those around him, the bank and implicitly post war English society in the austerity era. This creates a subtext: how many of that anonymous army also have similar secret dreams going through their brains beneath those bowler hats? Holland has his robbery scheme all worked out –except for the last point, selling the stolen gold bullion. He needs to get the gold bars to the black market in Europe, but how? Then one day a new lodger, Alfred Pendlebury (Stanley Holloway) turns up. His escape from English dreariness is through art. His work is making souvenirs at his foundry where he shows Holland around and Holland notices how similar his manufacturing is to manufacturing gold ingots... In a striking scene that demonstrates both men's acting abilities, Holland very carefully, an innuendo at a time, tests out Pendlebury as the solution to his smuggling problems.

Initially they seem kindred spirits and they do share a desire to escape their drab lives, but Pendlebury has a decency and a loyalty the more calculating Holland lacks. After they recruit two petty criminals Lackery Wood (Sid James) and Shorty Fisher (Alfie Bass) who trust Holland, he prepares to double cross them. In keeping with his calculating character Guinness conveys his treachery to the audience through a just discernible glitter in his eyes and a slight curling of the mouth as they cheerfully say they know they can trust him. When Pendlebury disagrees about what to do next as their plan seemingly goes awry, Holland quietly and levelly tells Pendlebury that if he goes to jail Pendlebury will go with him. His imperturbable manner in Rio can now be seen differently and

with distaste. Pendlebury's sad fate was the cost of Holland's escape to Rio, but it does not worry Holland, even though Pendlebury told him to save himself.



Sid James



Alfie Bass

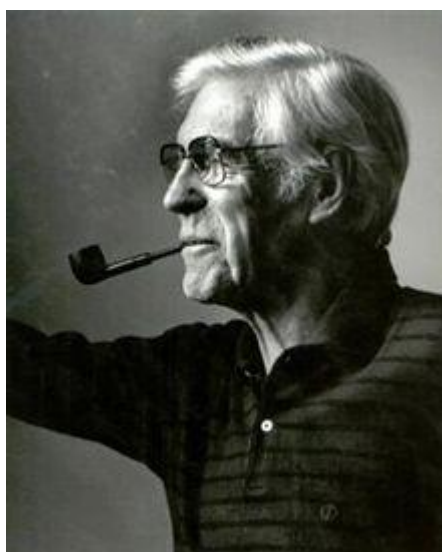
Throughout the film, establishment values and aspects of the establishment itself are mocked - and not just by Holland's actions and narration. The police are continually depicted as unknowing, gullible, bluff and easily fooled. They miss the fact that they are conferring with the robbery's mastermind about the robbery. Only Detective Farrow (John Gregson) has suspicions and director Critchon has Gregson convey this by facial expressions and voice tones, both of which are so expressionless amidst his bluff compatriots that they stand out. In the climatic chase hordes of frenetic panicky police stumble into each other while using a microphone, a superior tells them not to panic and to clear the way. The more they are told to calm down, the more they panic. Meanwhile Holland and Penlebury escape in a police car, misdirecting the police pursuit. More subtly the media are also shown to be fools, making Holland a heroic celebrity for his role in the robbery. He actually did nothing but supposedly enduring being kidnapped. Even tourism gets a satiric shot as Pendlebury's foundry manufactures tourist souvenirs for much of the world. He smuggles the gold to Paris by replacing his usual exported iron Eiffel Tower souvenirs with painted over gold ones.

In a memorably bizarre, delightfully anarchic scene, Pendlebury and Holland rush down the Eiffel Tower's stairs frantically trying to beat the lift containing the smuggled gold. Although that can only be impossible and they are initially

frantic, they become overcome with laughter. The scene shows them surrounded and overwhelmed with repressive asymmetrical tower lines as if they are at least restricted, but as they laugh the lines are filmed at tilted angles in fast paced edited shots. They throw away their bowler hats and overcoats, symbols of repression and seem free – even if they are heading for jail.

Oddly life imitated art with *The Lavender Hill Mob* – twice. In 1963 after the great train robbery netted millions, most of the gang were caught. However Ronald Biggs escaped from prison, narrowly escaped recapture years later in Australia and then fled to Rio. Year later he voluntarily returned to England and jail. In 2010 a gang of foreigners hanging around the Eiffel were involved in stealing and then selling tower replicas to tourists. They were not made of gold. Then in this morning's news the theft of the world's biggest gold coin from a Berlin museum came in. The thieves broke a window and fled with the thing in a wheelbarrow. The coin's worth seems to be several million.

The Lavender Hill Mob was a popular and critical success and has not dated. On its sixtieth anniversary it got a celebratory cinematic rerelease in London. In 1951 it marked the beginning of the humorous heist film genre, being followed by *The Ladykillers* (1955) another black comedy Ealing release starring Guinness. Then in 1960 came *The League of Gentlemen* followed in that same year by the Americans getting in on the act with *Oceans 11*. Others in the genre followed through the 1960s. Memorable examples included *The Pink Panther*, *Topkapi*, *The Thomas Crown Affair* and *How to Steal A Million*. The genre never died out and continues with remakes and occasional new original films such as *Now You See Me* (2013) and 2017's *Baby Drive*. These efforts now seems an American product.



Michael Critchon 1910-1999.