



The first and only movie directed by screen legend Charles Laughton, *The Night of the Hunter*, bombed when it was released in 1955. Adam Smith re-evaluates the man behind a film now cherished as one of Hollywood's great masterpieces

# Laughton's last stand

Robert Mitchum (left) said Charles Laughton (above and right) was "adored" on set



**C**harles Laughton's brilliant, haunting film *The Night of the Hunter* is proof that it's never too late to try something new. The legendary stage and screen actor was 55 when he finally moved behind the camera. And though it would take decades for his achievement to be properly appreciated, in doing so he delivered one of the undisputed classics of American cinema.

Laughton's early career had been a string of astonishing triumphs. He'd been a relatively late starter, arriving at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in his mid-20s, but a crescendo of memorable theatrical performances had swiftly established him as one of the most skilled and versatile stage actors of his generation. In Hollywood, he won an Academy Award for his role in *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (1933).

But by the early Fifties, his career seemed to have plateaued, the earlier towering performances having given way to the likes of *Abbott & Costello Meet Captain Kidd* (1952). He had begun to find performing, particularly with the intensity and commitment that he demanded of himself, increasingly exhausting, and had settled into a career of live book readings, deploying his astonishing voice, which could turn from mellifluous to sinister on a hairpin, as well as teaching small groups of young actors.

## THE FUN OF A PREACHER MAN

However, in 1953 his manager, Paul Gregory, sent him the galleys of a new novel by advertising man and first-time novelist Davis Grubb, with the suggestion that he direct. Grubb's novel, *The Night of the Hunter*, was a strange tale, gothic and lyrical in equal measure, about a brother and sister – John (Billy Chapin) and Pearl (Sally Jane Bruce) – pursued by a murderous preacher who is in search of \$10,000, the spoils of a bank robbery.

Laughton was intrigued. He hired *The African Queen* (1951) screenwriter James Agee to adapt the novel for the big screen. Agee, a depressive and an alcoholic, turned in a 350-page ➤

The unnerving shot of Preacher in jail hanging upside down from his bunk was suggested by Robert Mitchum. Laughton loved the idea and included the shot in the movie.



Robert Mitchum wasn't complimentary about Shelley Winters

realised the success of the film would depend on his casting, and that to captivate audiences, whoever played him would have to bring more than just menace.

In a stroke of genius, Laughton settled on one of the most prolific and, after a drugs bust five years previously, controversial actors of the age: Robert Mitchum. "The character is a bit different," Laughton had told Mitchum when he offered him the role of homicidal preacher Harry Powell. "He's a terrible, evil . . . shit of a man." "Present," Mitchum had replied.

Mitchum was the perfect choice, and the performance he gives is pretty much unarguably the greatest of his career. His Preacher is certainly sinister and terrifying. But he also gives the character one of its most utterly unexpected qualities, an occasional kind of

slapstick humour and buffoonery that really shouldn't work. That it does, and brilliantly, is a small miracle in a film full of them.

### WINTER WARMER

Laughton rounded out the cast with experienced Hollywood faces. For the role of the children's doomed mother Willa, Laughton had set his heart on Betty Grable, but cast Shelley Winters, a former student of his, at the last minute when Grable turned out to be unavailable. Mitchum was unimpressed: "She looks and sounds about as much a wasted West Virginia girl as I do," he unkindly remarked. "The only thing she'll do convincingly is float in the water with her throat cut."

Laughton had recently rewatched the works of D.W. Griffith and had been dazzled by Lillian Gish who he cast as Rachel Cooper,

the plain-spoken woman who becomes the children's saviour. Though overshadowed by Mitchum's thespian fireworks, her performance manages to bring a believable kindness and decency to the film, while staying just the right side of icky sentimentality.

### LEADING LIGHT

As important as the cast was, Laughton's choice of director of photography, Stanley Cortez, who was one of the industry's most experienced and creative cameramen and, in neophyte Laughton, he found a kindred spirit, a collaborator willing to push the boundaries and break the rules. "Apart from [1942's *The Magnificent Ambersons*], the most exciting experience I have had in cinema was with Charles Laughton on *Night of the Hunter*," Cortez would later say. "Every day I consider something new about light, that incredible thing that can't be described. Of the directors I've worked with, only two have understood it: Orson Welles and Charles Laughton."

Cortez would work with production designer Hilyard Brown to deliver a succession of stunning, bewitching images. Heavily influenced by German expressionist cinema, Laughton, Brown and Cortez would eschew realism in favour of dream-like imagery – the shadow of Harry Powell falling across young John's bedroom wall; Willa's bedroom transformed into a kind of chapel by ingenious framing; the unforgettable image of the children's mother dead at the bottom of the river, her hair swaying in the current – all adding to the outstanding visual style.

On a tight budget of \$700,000, Laughton shot almost solely on sound stages. His directing style was informal and, in an age when directors still tended towards the Stroheim-esque autocratic, refreshingly collaborative. He never called 'action' or cut, instead simply rolling the camera and letting the actors find their performances at

their own speed. "He was sort of the head of family when we were on set, which is as it should be. As a director, he was so grateful he went into ecstasy whenever he enjoyed a scene," Mitchum said.

"When I first went to the movies, audiences sat in their seats straight. Now they slump down with their heads back, or eat candy and popcorn," Laughton had said when he announced he was to direct *The Night of the Hunter*. "I want them to sit up straight again."

Sadly audiences didn't sit straight, or slump. Mostly they didn't turn up. *The Night of the Hunter* was released in the summer of 1955 to reviews that ranged from the (mostly) baffled to (occasionally) hostile. Nobody knew what to make of it, and they weren't helped by United Artists' marketing campaign, which sold the movie as an out-and-out thriller with the poster tagline: *The wedding night, the anticipation, the kiss, the knife BUT ABOVE ALL THE SUSPENSE!*

The received wisdom is that Laughton was so wounded by the film's reception he forswore directing for the rest of his life: the critics stood guilty of killing one of cinema's great, unrealised talents. It might not be the whole story. Perhaps, deep down, Laughton thought something his natural

modesty would never allow him to say: *The Night of the Hunter* was an almost perfect film and that he had achieved everything he had set out to. Like Welles after *Citizen Kane* (1941), to direct anything else was to risk not living up to its promise.

Whatever the reason, Laughton soon abandoned plans to shoot an adaptation of Norman Mailer's war novel *The Naked and the Dead*, returning to his life of live book readings and teaching, and making the occasional film appearances. He died in 1962, aged 63.

But in succeeding decades, *The Night of the Hunter's* reputation began to grow. It became a cult movie with the advent of VHS in the Seventies and Eighties, and by the Nineties it was an acknowledged masterpiece. Its influence can be seen in the work of contemporary directors, from Terrence Malick to the Coen brothers and Martin Scorsese. Even Spike Lee paid homage to Laughton in *Do the Right Thing* (1989), with Mookie wearing 'Love' and 'Hate' knuckle rings and quoting from the film.

Part fairy tale, part horror movie, part thriller, Charles Laughton's *The Night of the Hunter* is unique. It's a timeless achievement that ranks among the handful of Hollywood films that can genuinely be called masterpieces.



Charles Laughton sharing his vision with Sally Jane Bruce