

The **FILMCLUB**® Guide to...

KIND HEARTS AND CORONETS(1949)



A hilarious study in the gentle art of MURDER

What's it about?

Possibly the blackest of the famous “Ealing comedies” that lit up British cinema in the 1940s and 50s, *Kind Hearts and Coronets* is still best known for the astonishing lead performances – eight in total – of one of its stars, Alec Guinness. Equally funny is Dennis Price in the role of Louis Mazzini, a disowned member of the wealthy D'Ascoyne dynasty who embarks on a series of murders to secure the family fortune and dukedom. Guinness plays every one of Louis' ill-fated relatives, subtly altering his performance and appearance for each role. The result is a masterclass in great acting - and a darkly hilarious movie to boot.

Who made it?

British writer and director Robert Hamer began his career as an editor. He quickly moved up the ranks when he joined Ealing Studios in 1940 – although his darker dramatic vision is often seen as out of step with Ealing's usually warm-spirited comedies.

Veteran English actor Sir Alec Guinness was not only much loved as a star of Ealing comedies. An Oscar-winning character actor, he played roles as diverse as Fagin in David Lean's acclaimed *Oliver Twist* (1949) and Obi-Wan Kenobi in the original *Star Wars* Trilogy.

Born into a privileged military family, Cambridge-educated actor Dennis Price began his career on the stage. He made his film breakthrough in Powell and Pressburger's *A Canterbury Tale*, although he's best known for *Kind Hearts and Coronets*.

The production

Originally, Alec Guinness was only meant to play four members of the D'Ascoyne family - it was Guinness' own idea that he should play all eight. With no CGI wizardry to rely on, this called for an elaborate trick shot when filming the funeral scene in which six of them appear together. The camera was kept in exactly the same position for two days, while six different parts of the film frame were exposed individually to capture Guinness in each position.

Backstory

After World War II, London production company Ealing Studios did a good job of cheering up the nation by churning out a hilarious series of comedies. Today, “Ealing comedy” is often used as a byword for the best in British humour. But Ealing's only period comedy, *Kind Hearts and Coronets* doesn't exactly fit the mould. Darkly funny, cynical and subversive, it stands out from the typical Ealing comedies like *Whisky Galore!* and *Passport to Pimlico*, which present a good-natured, quaint picture of post-war British society.

The reviews

“A brilliantly witty assault on social deference, snobbery and the class system [...] The most perfectly cut gem in the Ealing crown.”

The Observer

“The most sophisticated and blackest of the Ealing comedies...British filmmaking at its best and most memorable.”

Channel 4 Film

“Brilliantly cynical.”

Time Out

Look out for

Alec Guinness' star turn in no less than eight roles is often seen as the film's highpoint – and its comic masterstroke was to set Guinness against the dry, understated performance of Dennis Price as the murderous would-be duke.

Just over halfway through the film, Louis begins clocking up a serious body count. In the space of five minutes, his pricelessly cool narration deals briskly with three more “minor obstacles”, as he puts it. Featuring death by archery, drowning and exploding caviar, these scenes cram into a few moments more visual comedy, witty wordplay and ingenious irony than most movies manage in their entire running time.

What happened next?

Despite being big a success, *Kind Hearts and Coronets* was the only comedy Robert Hamer made for Ealing. The film is still much better known than its director, and Hamer said it overshadowed his career: “It's flattering to make a picture which becomes a classic within ten years,” he once said. “It's not so flattering, however, when people get the impression it's the only picture you've ever made.”

Talking points

Which is Alec Guinness's best performance?

Is this film quiet or loud? Why?

Can you imagine the film without Louis' voiceover? How would it be different?

Review starter

Movies don't make serial killers like they used to...

A very weird story, but a very funny one...

I've never seen an “Ealing comedy” before, but this isn't what I had in mind...

What we think

Featuring more funny performances than you can count, *Kind Hearts and Coronets* more than deserves its reputation as possibly Britain's best ever black comedy.