



For British cinema, the 1980's was a decade of downsizing, retrenchment and upheaval. The UK box office fell from 101 million admissions in 1980 to an all-time low of 54 million in 1984. The impact of video and television was having an effect with the entertainment industry. In film production the standout production companies of the era - Goldcrest, Handmade, Palace, and Working Title - generally operated on a much smaller scale than their predecessors.

However, the greater synergy between large and small screen also saw Channel Four, which debuted in November 1982, rapidly becoming a major player in British cinema. Many small independent production companies were the beneficiaries of this. Amber Films, Ceddo and Sankofa provided welcome evidence that locally focused issue-based films and Black filmmaking in Britain was flourishing. Films such as the experimental film essay 'Handsworth Songs' made by the groundbreaking Black Audio Film Collective showed a willingness to deal with issues that the main British production companies shied away from.

The decade's saw three British Best Picture Academy Award winners. Richard Attenborough's epic 1982 biopic 'Gandhi' (1982) and Bernardo Bertolucci's 1987 British co-production 'The Last Emperor' may have heralded a resurgence of British film making excellence. However, it was the first winner in 1981 'Chariots of Fire' that began the decade in triumphant patriotic fashion.

The film was directed by debut filmmaker Hugh Hudson, and written by Collin Well and, who had cut his teeth writing for British television on 'Armchair Theatre' and 'Play for Today'. This British historical drama film was based on the true story of two British athletes competing at the 1924 Paris Olympics.

Producer and creator David Puttnam said that, films should be used to show what's best in society, or what can be so, given the exceptional man or woman with vision and will-power." The film sets Harold Abrahams, a Jewish Englishman who runs to overcome prejudice (played by Ben Cross) against a devout Scottish Christian Eric Liddell (played by Ian Charleson) who runs for the glory of God! Both men overcoming great odds to run and triumph through self-sacrifice and moral courage.

It is a film about British class distinctions in the years after World War I, years in which the establishment was trying to piece itself back together after the carnage in France.

‘The cinematography pays huge attention to the precise detail of a human face during stress, pain, defeat and ultimately the joy in victory.

The title sequence is perhaps one of the most recognizable instances of slow motion in all of cinema, showing a parade of young men jogging through sand and surf, celebrating youth and athleticism; the sequence also acts as a mirror to the realities of class and privilege in 1920s Britain.

Unabashedly and patriotically British, Williams Blake’s ‘Jerusalem’, which compares England before the Industrial Revolution to biblical Jerusalem, a poetic metaphor for heaven features strongly. This stirring material, used to lift the spirits of people during the dark days of the First World War, then adopted by the women’s suffrage movement, seems apt for portraying the courage and fortitude of the athletes. It is central to the film as the words are both adapted into the hymn, which we hear at the end of the movie, also providing the film’s title from the line, "Bring me my Chariot of fire!"

The film won four Academy Awards for: Writing, Costume Design, Original Score and Best Picture for producer David Puttnam prompting writer David Welland to announce that “The British Are Coming!”

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