

Ustinov's Film *Billy Budd*, A Study in the Process of Adaptation: Novel, to Play, to Film

The adaptation of literary forms into film presents varied problems to those involved in the film production, particularly the screen writer and director.

The problem of the adapter of fiction to the screen is more difficult by far than that of the translator of a novel or a play from one language to another. For one thing the rhetoric of the two art forms is fundamentally different: the arrangement of words in sequence is the business of the novelist, but the maker of the film deals in the arrangement of images.¹

Each literary form lends its different problems to the adapter. Short stories adapted to film allow for more creativity regarding expansion of story line than novels. Novels, in being adapted, can possibly fall into two patterns: one, they are sometimes so overabundant with episodic materials that they create too stringent a structure for the adapter, who sometimes feels obliged to follow the story line so sequentially and exactly that he creates a dull film of a novel which was moving or exciting. A case in point here might be John Huston's adaptation of the Melville classic, *Moby Dick* (1956).

Andrew Sarris has noted that this film marked a decline in Huston as a filmmaker.² Perhaps it is the flatness of Gregory Peck's Ahab which is to blame. It has been cited as major miscasting in the film. But in viewing it again, one feels that it is rather the attempt on Huston's part to incorporate too much of Melville's prose into the story line and a failure to let the camera speak for itself and suggest the nuances of the novel's style.

In speaking of the problem of adapting *Moby Dick* and other literary works, in general, Huston tells us that "I don't seek to interpret, to put my own stamp on the material. I try to be as faithful to the original material as I can . . . In fact, the fascination I feel for the original makes me want to make it into a film."³ It is this faithfulness that can lead to cinematic dullness since word is not picture, and in film, verbal implication does not usually lead the viewer to proper inferences.

¹Martin C. Battestin, "Osborne's *Tom Jones*: Adapting a Classic," in *Man and the Movies*, ed. W. R. Robinson (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967), p. 36.

²Andrew Sarris, *The American Cinema* (New York: Dutton, 1968), p. 157.

³Quoted from Gideon Bachmann's interview with John Huston, *Film Quarterly* (Fall 1965), rpt. in *Interviews with Film Directors*, ed., Andrew Sarris, p. 256.

The two forms (literature and film) are both similar, however, in that they may both be used for narrative purposes — for telling, or showing, a story — and they may adopt similar techniques of expression. They may be similar, but never identical.⁴

The second pattern into which a novel adaptation may fall is one in which the adapter is faced with a perplexing task of taking a complex work and filtering out the elements and attitudes which seem most visual. I can think of two cases in point here; one, a failure — Mike Nichols' film of the brilliant Joseph Heller novel, *Catch 22*; the other, a success, although not in the total critical sense — Joseph Strick's adaptation of Joyce's *Ulysses*.

In Heller's novel, there is a satiric laughter and sardonic wit which comes readily to the reader; it is not forced. We feel for his characters as they are caught in the insanity of the military lifestyle and life in general. Nichols loses this in the film, rendering only a few brief moments, marked by some good performances by Martin Balsam, Orson Welles and Alan Arkin. In the film *Catch 22*, we are rendered no totality of effect — nothing really builds in our minds. Even the grief, which we should feel for the human condition, and the turmoil trapping its main character, Yossarian, are missing.

Joseph Strick has, however, rendered a somewhat successful adaptation of a more difficult work in his film version of Joyce's *Ulysses*. Faced with a controversial and monumental work of art, vastly complex in its intricacies, Strick has captured the essence of the characters and the basic flavor of Joyce's work. Certainly, he hasn't given us the total work, but he has captured some of the lyrical quality of the Joycean language and rather carefully linked it with images which evoke the feelings to be rendered, thereby creating a parallel between book and film relying heavily on analogy.

To judge whether or not a film is a successful adaptation of a novel is to evaluate the skill of its makers in striking analogous attitudes and in finding analogous rhetorical techniques.⁵

It is on the basis of this idea of analogy that I should like to examine what Peter Ustinov regards as his finest work on film, *Billy Budd* (1962).⁶ *Billy Budd* is a film which must be looked upon as Ustinov's most ambitious film project. He not only produced and directed the film, but also wrote the screenplay with Robert Rossen and chose to cast himself in one of the most pivotal roles of the story, Captain Edward Fairfax Vere, a choice dictated by budget rather than art.

I didn't want to play him at all. I don't think I'm straight enough, but it was the only way I could get another name in there without it costing very much. I would like to have seen a much more English type do it — in my cocked hat I look rather like a Russian china mantelpiece decoration.⁷

Many critics also agree with Ustinov's analysis of his ability to fit the role of Vere. Pauline Kael sees his "... warm, humane, sensual face" as turning Melville's Vere into a "... cliché of the man who wants to do the right thing, the liberal."⁸ Donald Zee, reviewing the film for the London *Daily Mirror*, was not as kind as Miss Kael in his comments. He epitomizes Ustinov's role as a

⁴Battestin, p. 36.

⁵Battestin, p. 37.

⁶Tony Thomas, *Ustinov in Focus*, (London: A. Zwemmer, 1971), p. 144.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 146.

⁸Pauline Kael, *I Lost It at the Movies* (New York: Bantam, 1966), p. 212.

"... chubby faced comic trying to get out ... a bulging cross between Robert Morley and Ghenghis Khan."⁹

However, with the exception of Ustinov's portrayal of Vere, little negative criticism was directed at the film. Yet for all its scope, both intellectual and adventurous, *Billy Budd* "... never made the waves it should have."¹⁰ It followed, too closely, two other nautical films: the remake of *Mutiny on the Bounty* and another British produced film, *HMS Defiant*, subsequently retitled, *Damn The Defiant*. The latter film deals with the same time period and action as *Billy Budd* — the late eighteenth century and war against the French on the sea, with the possibility of mutiny.

Regarding the analogous approach to *Billy Budd*, one must realize that the analogy is threefold in nature: first, Melville's novel, published in 1924, some thirty-four years after it had been written; then the dramatized version of the novel by Louis O. Coxe and Robert Chapman, originally produced under the title *Uniform of Flesh* in 1948 and subsequently, in 1951, performed on Broadway as *Billy Budd*; and finally, Ustinov's filmed version of the story in 1962. It might also be noted that the thematic elements of the work have been presented in Benjamin Britten's opera *Billy Budd* and, as recently as 1969, in an ill-fated Broadway musical *Billy Budd*, which tended to emphasize Billy as the rebellious spirit of youth being crushed by war — an attempt to capitalize on the Vietnam consciousness of the New York theatregoer with such songs as "We're Not the Ones to Start the War," which continues "... we're the ones who've got to fight it."

But the story of *Billy Budd*, as Ustinov saw it, asked "... questions which echo and re-echo in the conscience."¹¹ Briefly, it is a tale set aboard a British man o'war vessel during 1797. Since there is a shortage of men on board their vessels, the British have been impressing men from merchant ships. Herein, enter Billy Budd, a 'pressed seaman from the ship, *Rights of Man*; herein, also enter the allegory of good and evil which runs throughout the novel, play and film. Billy is the typical handsome sailor of the seagoing ballads. Because of his innocence and goodness, he is hated by Claggart, the tall, dark, demon-like Master-at-Arms aboard the warship. Billy cannot understand why Claggart should hate him. Claggart eventually creates a story of mutiny relating to Billy. He informs the captain of Billy's supposed mutinous plans and then is made to repeat the charges directly to Billy's face in Captain Vere's presence. Unable to speak because of a stammer brought on by nervousness in the face of evil, an evil which he cannot quite comprehend, Billy strikes out in a reflex-like fashion and delivers a fatal blow to Claggart. Billy is brought to trial, and because of the nature of the times and the Law of Mutiny Act, he must be condemned to hang. Billy is hanged, but his name lives on in legend among the sailors, at least in the conclusion of the novel.

As the adaptation of the story into film evolved, Ustinov was greatly aided by the 1948 Coxe and Chapman dramatization of the novel. Essentially the play recreated the tensions of the good-evil conflict within the tale while avoiding the intricacies of Melville's expository philosophy. Coxe and Chapman applied the art of the dramatist in striking analogous attitudes; it would now be up to Ustinov to provide the artistic touches of the filmmaker. Yet although the

⁹ Donald Zee, rev. of *Billy Budd*, *Daily Mirror*, 19 Sept. 1962.

¹⁰ Thomas, p. 143.

¹¹ *Billy Budd*, *The Sunday Times Supplement* (London), 11 February 1962. Hereafter cited in the text as *TLS*.

dialogue and play chronology solved some of Ustinov's problems regarding the novel, he feels that the film is far removed from the play (TLS).

Ustinov had been considering, for some time before *Billy Budd* came along, the possibility of making an historical film, but not necessarily a Hollywood spectacular.

It has always been a secret hope of mine to make an historical film in which the action seemed to be actually happening instead of giving the appearances of careful rehearsal and tortuous research. (TLS)

Billy Budd fit the idea perfectly. Set in 1797 during trying times for the British navy, it had as its background the difficulties of the mutinies at Nore and Spithead, which so plagued the authoritative structure of the navy.

To help structure some of this documentary element, Ustinov chose to do the film in black and white, thereby hoping to emphasize the plight of the men rather than the beauty of the sea. Black and white also added to the allegorical implications of good and evil which are carefully followed throughout the film: Claggart's demoniac darkness, lurking in shadows, dressed in black; Billy's innocence and charm dressed in lighter colors, his face usually well-lighted and open. During the production Ustinov would say, "I have put my trust in black and white which I see far more evocative than color of the mood of the men and subtleties of the sea" (TLS). Later, he would remark,

I felt that colour would clean everything, whereas black and white gives you a better feeling of texture of splintered wood and of rigging and a more stark feeling of sea and sky. I am very interested in that period of history and I want to treat the story as a kind of documentary.¹²

But the nature of documentary is quite defied by the formality of language in both the novel and play. To attempt to overcome this problem, Ustinov chose to film the story aboard a ship at sea, hoping to "counteract the formality of the language used" (TLS), and to stress the universality of Melville's theme.

I felt that the story should be told against a very exact background, and as a ship is a ship is a ship, as Gertrude Stein might have said, the sea is the sea is the sea. The sea is an eternal element, it was making the same capricious gestures in 1797 as it is today, and this gave a sense of timelessness. Also an art form should be intensely national in order to be international, anything that aims at being international, never is.¹³

Pauline Kael, in writing her review of the film, would cite this cleanness and exactness, which is mentioned by Ustinov, as being one of the great assets of the film's structure. She sees Ustinov's direction as eliciting a "... cleanness of narrative mood" which coupling with Robert Krasker's "stylized controlled photography" conveys meanings unclogged by Melville's "metaphysical speculation and homo-erotic overtones."¹⁴

One might even expand the idea of "cleanness" into the casting of the story's pivotal role, Billy Budd. For this role, Ustinov chose an unknown, hoping that this quality would convey the essential naiveté necessary. He spotted his *unknown* in a play called *Why the Chicken* and saw there, in Terrance Stamp, a quality which "... succeeded in suggesting saintly innocence, without at the

¹² Thomas, p. 144.

¹³ Thomas, p. 145.

¹⁴ Kael, p. 211.

same time being sentimental or insipid."¹⁵ Stamp's open-faced portrayal of the role brought many accolades to the unknown twenty-two year old actor from London's East End. But more importantly, he brought, through Ustinov's direction, an additional quality to Billy. It was a quality which was absent from Melville's novel and even from Coxe and Chapman's play: it was a disarming charm and sense of humor.

Ustinov balances this charm and humor against the angelic and somewhat otherworldly qualities of Melville's Billy. Ustinov shows us a Billy who is human and seems to function more readily within the allegorical implications. These implications become more forceful as the film progresses, since by choosing an actor who does not epitomize the feminine, Ustinov has carefully omitted the homosexual implications suggested by Melville. Indeed the quality most conveyed by Stamp's portrayal of Billy is honesty. So much honesty that Cecil Wilson writing his review of the film in the London *Daily Mail* of September 18, 1962, sees Billy as "the honest type of young innocent who could tell at once that the Emperor wore no clothes and would see no harm in saying so . . ."

To supply the other half of the allegorical conflict — the evil to temper Billy's *good* or destroy it — Ustinov didn't have to look far for a choice. The so frequently underrated American actor Robert Ryan had long wanted to play the role of Claggart and contacted Ustinov as soon as he heard of the venture. Interestingly, the role presented to Ryan a type similar to him — the heavy; yet Claggart had substance, unlike so many of the previous stock-heavy roles played by Ryan. Ryan seemed to realize, under Ustinov's direction, that Claggart must function as man and symbol; he must present as much an enigma to the audience as to Billy; he must perplex Billy as much as Billy perplexes him. Ryan fit the role perfectly: his stature and features, and his early training in the classics at Dartmouth aided, no doubt, in handling the formal structure of the lines. This is particularly so in the scenes wherein he and Billy confront one another, scenes wherein Claggart cannot suppress evil.

Ryan's Claggart has the requisite Satanic dignity; he makes evil comprehensible. The evil he defines is the way the world works, but it is also the self-hatred that makes it necessary for him to destroy the image of goodness. In the film Claggart is drawn to Billy, but overcomes his momentary weakness . . .¹⁶

It is in this scene, which Pauline Kael refers to, that the art of cinema blends with the craft to work most readily for Ustinov. It is a scene which doesn't occur in the novel, and a scene which depends too strongly on speech in the play; but in the film Krasker's camera work and lighting effects, as well as the make-up job on Ryan's hair, epitomize the plight of Claggart and the inner-hate-evil which he cannot control. It is a simple scene involving the loneliness of command at sea and a meeting at night of the two forces of the film: Billy (good) and Claggart (evil). It is night and there is a strong moonlight reflecting off the water, catching Claggart in a contemplative mood topside. Enter Billy and the beginning of a confrontation which is mere friendliness on Billy's part but hatred, both of self and innocence, on Claggart's. Claggart's clothes add to his darkness, the black uniform and hat of the Master-at-Arms; Billy's white shirt and light pants stress his innocence. Billy comments on the calmness and peacefulness of the sea, but is quickly rebuked by Claggart who sees calm above as a mere deceit; below the calmness there is death, he tells

¹⁵ Francis Wyndham, "Stamp Out the Ego!" *Sunday Times Magazine* (London), 19 November 1967.

¹⁶ Thomas, p. 143.

Billy. As the dialogue continues in medium close-ups, Krasker's camera catches the light as it reflects upon Claggart's face. The light shines upward; the camera is at a low angle as if it were the source of light. The reflected light glimmers on the darkened, world-weary face of Claggart. There, the close-up camera work captures the duality of Claggart as Ustinov sees it: the man who somehow, at only a few times, wants to reach out to touch the other men emotionally in sign of love; the tortured disciplinarian, hating self; then the devil incarnate seeing the world as he is made — evil. Ryan delivers his lines; they lose their formal sense and become natural as a medium close-up shot reveals the shadows on his face and the tinges of grey which mark his temples, creating a near horn-like effect curiously resembling Satan.

Billy's friendliness is rejected as a guise, a false charm to get favors from Claggart. Claggart calls Billy a "fool" who will in turn learn to fear him "like the rest."^{*} But as Ryan delivers the lines, one almost senses a tenderness coupled with regret for that which he cannot bring himself to have — love. It is immediately after Billy leaves in this scene that Claggart orders his "stooge" Squeak to deliberately mess up Billy's gear and put him on report. We have now the emerging deliberateness of Claggart's evil, but it doesn't appear until we see the conflict within him in the film. In the play it is evidenced in the very first scene as he sends Jackson, a sick man, to man the mainsail yardarm, knowing full well that it will lead to Jackson's death.

The drama of the scene just described, the nuances of character do not exist in Melville's novel. Melville's expository passages emphasize characterization as opposed to the plot element or drama regarding Claggart's nature. Melville simply digresses on Claggart's envy regarding Billy.

If askance he eyed the good looks, cheery health and frank enjoyment of young life in Billy Budd, it was because these went along with a nature that as Claggart magnetically felt, had in its simplicity never willed malice or experienced the reactionary bite of that serpent. To him, the spirit lodged within Billy, and looked out from his welkin eyes as from windows, that ineffability it was which made the dimple in his dyed cheek, supplied his joint, and dancing in his yellow curls made him preeminently the Handsome Sailor. One person excepted the master-at-arms was perhaps the only man in the ship intellectually capable of adequately appreciating the moral phenomenon presented in Billy Budd. And the insight but intensified his passion, which assuming various secret forms within him, at times assumed that of cynic disdain — disdain of innocence — to be nothing more than innocent! Yet in an aesthetic way he saw the charm of it, the courageous free-and-easy temper of it, and fain would have shared it; but he despaired of it.¹⁷

Faced with this self-realization, Melville's Claggart could not control the elemental evil himself, but he could hide it. Claggart's problem as Melville presents it is that he could apprehend the good but could not have it himself, thus

... what recourse is left [to Claggart's nature] ... but to recoil upon itself and like the scorpion for which the Creator alone is responsible, act out to the end the part allotted to it.¹⁸

Hence in Melville's Claggart, there is little of the equivocal regarding his basic nature.

Claggart's character in the film is quite closely related to Coxe and Chapman's dramatic concept of him. Ustinov retains some of the duality of the man, aiming not to have the evil of the allegory overtake the total character

* Please note that all quotations from the film are taken from the soundtrack.

¹⁷ "Billy Budd" in *Six Great Modern Short Novels* (New York: Dell, 1966), p. 98.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

and thereby have him become mere personification. To show Claggart as a human being trapped by his position or something greater than himself (reflecting the original title of the play version — *Uniform of Flesh*), Ustinov keeps in his film the dramatic scenes between Claggart and individuals, such as the night meeting previously cited between Billy and him. In addition to this scene in which guises are momentarily dropped, there is another of similar nature with Dansker, an older sailor on the ship.

The Dansker is a character who is described by Claggart as one who has "drifted too long with the tide." He is an aging seaman who takes to Billy's disarming charm as most of the other men do. Dansker is used as the objective observer, who has observed too long and failed to act. He sees the flaws of both Billy and Claggart — they are both half men: one sees only evil, the other only good. Dansker has scenes with each of the two. He eventually realizes that his failure to act is, in part, a cause of the eventual outcome of the tale.

Melvin Douglas, playing his first film role in a decade, gave Dansker the perfect "middle man" quality. Douglas shows us his age and fear which create uncertainties for him. He chooses to keep outside, refusing, as he puts it, to stand between sky and water. Ustinov frequently associates Billy with the sky and its openness; there are many shots of Billy dancing among the ropes and sails, stark against the background of the sky. Claggart alludes to himself in his imagery of the sea's deceitfulness. But, getting back to the meetings between Dansker and Claggart, we realize again a reiteration of the element of the human condition in which Claggart finds himself. Dansker accurately observes that Claggart's "fine contempt for human love is nothing but regret." In response Claggart perhaps best summarizes his plight in one line, "... when this arm moves out in gesture of love, it mocks me with a blow." And again in the film as well as the play, we see a man who is evil, but human; a figure more to be feared than Melville's Claggart.

Interestingly, Benjamin Britten's opera *Billy Budd* handles Claggart's character in the same fashion as Ustinov's concept in the film. As a matter of fact it is interesting to conjecture just how much Britten's concept of Claggart, as rendered through the libretto written by E. M. Forster and Eric Crozier, affected Ustinov's conception of the role. Britten's Claggart is a human seen trapped by the evil flaw within him, a flaw which controls him, one which he cannot control. After being moved by Billy's innocence, Claggart proclaims the following in the opera; it is a striking similarity.

... would that I never encountered you! Would that I lived in my own world always, in that depravity to which I was born. There I found peace of a sort, there I established an order such as reigns in Hell.¹⁹

Claggart's world finds harmony in evil, a pattern. It cannot have equivocal areas. It cannot accept goodness since it sees behind goodness and love a threat to evil.

Claggart: Having seen you, what choice remains to me? None, none! I am doomed to annihilate you, I am vowed to your destruction ... First I will trouble your happiness. I will mutilate and silence the body where you dwell ... No, you cannot escape! With hate and envy I am stronger than love!²⁰

¹⁹E. M. Forster and Eric Crozier, *Billy Budd* (a libretto), (London: Boosey and Hawkes, Ltd., 1951), p. 22.

²⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 32-33.

This is the nature of the Claggart which Billy must face as he is impressed from the merchant ship *The Rights of Man* to do service in His Majesty's navy. Ustinov adeptly shows us a Billy who is taken from a ship whereon there was respect and human dignity — a brotherhood — to a ship on which the Captain "... will be obeyed" without question as Vere asserts in the opening scene of the film. The loose moving shots of the camera as it characterizes the merchant ship are paralleled in cross-cutting by the tight medium close-up shots of life on the warship, *Avenger*, where Ustinov shows us a Captain whose orders are unquestioned and one who follows a rigid chain of command. Thus in a few brief shots we have the distinctions drawn between the civilian rights and liberties and the military duties. To reinforce the idea of distinction, Ustinov has Billy receive advice from the Captain of the merchant ship who warns him that on a warship, "... it's not like here."

And indeed it is not, as he quickly discovers. He confronts Claggart immediately after being sworn into the service and is questioned regarding his position on the merchant vessel:

Billy: I took turns at doing everything.

Claggart: You'll have a station here.

Ustinov then immediately establishes the severity of discipline aboard a warship by having Billy, as well as the rest of the crew, witness a flogging. Here, we see the sternness, fear, anxiety, hatred, and disgust on the faces of the men and officers alike. The camera moves in close-up shots from Billy to the face of the flogging victim, back to Billy, who shows disbelief. It then moves onto the face of the Dansker, who shows a seeming indifference, and then to a close-up shot of Claggart who is probably the only man on the ship to have actually been able to "appreciate" the need for this punishment.

The close-up shots of this sequence are broken only momentarily by Ustinov. The pattern is interspersed with a medium long shot angling down on Claggart and the man being flogged. Then we see the sadistic smile on the Master-at-Arms face as the flogging progresses. The sound of leather striking skin dominates the scene. It is a repulsive sound to most, even the Captain. Again, after a few more close up reactions on the part of the officers and crew, Ustinov intersperses another medium long shot, quite symbolic in its intent. In the frame we see Billy looking away from the flogging victim out to sea where, in the background of the same framed shot, he spots his former ship: it is the other world of the sea that no longer belongs to Billy as he turns to face the sadistic satisfaction on Claggart's face.

In the film, it is immediately after the flogging scene that we first notice Billy's fateful stammer which will, in part, lead to his undoing. It occurs as he is confronted by Claggart concerning the flogging. In the play, the stammer is discovered during an argument with Jenkins who calls Billy a "bastard" because of the questions concerning his birth and parentage. Ustinov, however, chose to ignore that scene to introduce the stammer and, also, to ignore the scene of the death of Jackson which occurs in the opening of the play. He chose rather to stress the conflict of will between Claggart who enjoys overseeing the flogging and Billy who will again stammer as he tells the men, "It's wrong to flog a man. (Stammer) It's 'gainst his being a man."

The discipline scenes are used by Ustinov to introduce Billy to what Vere calls the "bustling world" of the Navy in the Coxe and Chapman play version. But rather than show this "bustling" characteristic, Ustinov emphasizes the discontent and cruelty which abound. There is a claustrophobic feeling below

deck. The tight camera shots, close-ups and medium close-ups, the severe angles of the camera positions (sometimes shooting straight down upon the men) emphasize this building claustrophobia. And it is in this atmosphere that Ustinov has Jenkins "baptize" Billy "... in the ways of our world." There is then a fight between the two.

The fight, between the new mate and the self-appointed leader of the men, is for Billy's "own-good," as Jenkins puts it. It differs from the play in this respect. There Billy is just another challenge to Jenkins' leadership among the men. The Jenkins of the film grows as a character; he is not merely a bully-figure as in parts of the play. It is during this fight that Ustinov exerts great control from the directorial point of view. There is no wild, free swinging on the part of the participants; there is no chair-throwing or barrel-throwing. The cutting is sparse. The emphasis rests in the challenge between two men who probably have inner respect for each other. Perhaps with ironic intention, most of the fight consists of a bone-crunching hug which each man exercises upon the other. Billy finally strikes Jenkins down and quickly desires to shake his hand and "be friends."

It is at this moment that Claggart enters and with foreboding announces in a tight close-up shot that Billy had better save his strength for "the fighting to come, Boy." It is through close-up shots such as this and extremely severe angle shots on Claggart that Ustinov achieves some of the terror in his characterization which is absent from the play.

Let us look at one scene as an example. In the play, there is a scene in which Claggart enters as Billy carelessly knocks a bowl of soup from Jenkins' hand. Claggart compliments Billy here on his handsomeness and then orders Jenkins to clean up the mess and strikes him with his rattan for not doing so quickly.

In the film Jenkins has taken ill, he is not eating. The men are gathered tightly together on a bench as they eat from their soup bowls. Jenkins is sitting on the floor next to the men, his back resting against a beam. The camera frames the scene as just stated; then we see a pair of legs move across the frame from left to right, from Jenkins towards the men. The low position of the camera captures Jenkins and the hands of the men as they hold their bowls. It moves to disclose the hand alongside these legs — it is holding a rattan. It is Claggart, announced now by his voice and symbol of authority-turned-evil, the rattan. He knocks the bowl of soup from Billy's hand and orders Jenkins to clean it. The camera stays very low; we do not see Claggart's face, only his backside, legs and the rattan, posed to the side in front of Jenkins. Billy offers to clean the mess; there is a moment of tension as the rattan reaches out to Billy and gently prods him back to the bench. Then we see a sick Jenkins on his hands and knees beginning to clean up the mess. The rattan is raised quickly again and Claggart deliberately smacks down another bowl from a mate's hand. The men begin to growl; the camera tilts upward at a severe angle peering into Claggart's face as he taunts the men, "Here I am unarmed. Now's the time. To make it easier, I'll turn my back on you."

There is a pause. No one acts. Then, "You lack fibre, men." At this point Claggart lashes a now crouching Jenkins across the mouth with his rattan, drawing blood and also a threat on his own life.

None of this tension comes across in the play or the novel. It is the tension of camera position and cutting which works on us; the claustrophobic human pot boiling away, the breaking point being approached.

But in spite of his severity and tyranny, Claggart is still Vere's force for order in both the play and film. In the play he is poetically the "gun, gallows and gaol" behind the peacemaker. Ustinov's Vere sees him simply as the "... best Master-at-Arms I've ever sailed with." He is a force for order which Ustinov's Vere "must have." Why, must have? Perhaps because this Vere might be a bit too starchy as his nickname suggests. Realize that one of the first times we see him, he is the epitome of the gentleman intellect at sea, wearing glasses topside and reading from a rather handsomely bound volume. He is a man of the mind, not of the blood. He has difficulty watching a flogging which he presumably approved after Claggart; he is even the recipient of a waving gesture from Billy instead of the customary military salute.

Indeed Ustinov takes us through almost half of the film, almost an hour, before we see Vere establish himself in any way authoritatively. The man who in the opening shots states that he "will be obeyed," isn't given an opportunity to assert himself again until a near mutiny occurs following the dramatic death of Jenkins, who has been sent, even though sick, to man the mainsail yardarm by Claggart. In this scene we follow Jenkins' climb slowly and deliberately; the camera shoots down upon him, emphasizing the height and his struggle to survive the climb. Ustinov occasionally cuts to the faces of the men on the other yardarms and lines. We see their anguish and concern for his plight in close-up shots. Then as Jenkins reaches the top, Billy spots an enemy vessel in the distance. The men are called to their battle stations; and in a quick series of shots, we see the enemy vessel at a distance on the sea, the men of the *Avenger* manning stations, Vere getting ready to command. We almost forget the sick Jenkins and his personal struggle, but then the ship picks up speed and the sails pick up wind as the pursuit begins. Ustinov shows us Jenkins' face contorted with pain and fear. He must fight two forces to survive: the buffeting winds and his own weakened condition.

Billy now acts. He leaves his position to save Jenkins and also to fulfill the necessary duty which Jenkins cannot perform. The drama heightens here as Billy grasps onto the falling mate who can think now only of warning Billy: "For God's sakes, Billy, look to yourself."

The framed shot is filled with Billy's horror as Jenkins slips from his hand and screams as he falls to his death. The clichéd shot of the hands slipping from one another is avoided here; the camera stays on Billy's face, then follows the fall briefly but returns in a tight close-up shot to Billy's stammering face as he incoherently clutches the yardarm.

Yet again enter Vere's authority and understanding of the men — "Commence firing!" is his order; but it is fruitless, the enemy ship is too far in the distance. The firing rather serves to lessen the tension on the ship. Once the enemy ship is lost, however, the tension reaches its breaking point as Claggart has provoked the men to mutiny because of his role in Jenkins' death. The men surround him. Then Vere enters the scene. The voice of the Captain rings with authority; it is no longer soft and fatherly. The men are "no longer civilians but sailors." They have two duties: to fight and to obey. Immediately we are back to Billy's introduction to the navy — discipline and order. The men are a crew that will be moulded into a weapon. They obey Vere.

What Ustinov has done to this dramatic sequence is to have fused several scenes from the play in order to build tension. Jenkins' character, for instance, is composed of two of the play's characters: Jackson, who actually gets sick and falls from the yardarm to his death, and Jenkins who doesn't die in the

play. The death from the yardarm fall occurs in the first fifteen minutes of the play; the French vessel's approach occurs at the conclusion of the first act; the near mutiny occurs immediately following Jackson's death in the play.

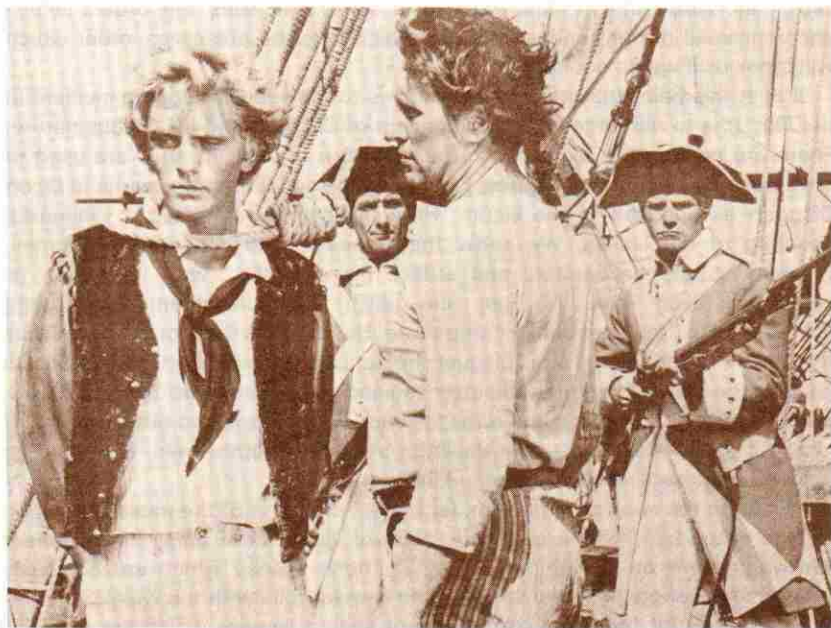
Ustinov seems to desire to effect units of tension or conflict within the film. Some of these units are longer than others; this one is the longest. It concludes with a conflict within the major conflict: Billy contradicts Claggart concerning Jenkins' sickness. Ustinov frames the sequence quite deliberately almost foreshadowing Vere's later role of mediator. During the confrontation, Claggart stands on one side of Vere and Billy on the other. Man is literally torn between good and evil.

From this sequence on, the tension of the film mounts quickly. Budd is given a new position as Captain of the Foretop. Claggart objects to the promotion. Claggart asks that the leader of the near mutiny, Kincaid, be punished. Vere at first hesitates, but then orders ten lashes; Claggart objects at this token punishment feeling that at least a hundred should be given. Then Ustinov chooses to introduce a major theme from the play — law versus justice.

To add to the power of this sequence, Ustinov changes the roles of the characters who hold the discussion in the play from those of Vere and his first officer Seymour to those of Vere and Claggart. Vere is told by Claggart that "we must serve the law, sir." This Vere offers somewhat fatherly advice to Claggart whom he sees as bending strong leadership qualities to "a sorry purpose." Here Ustinov eliminates some lengthy speeches from the play and shortens others as the two characters discuss the "patterns which bind our lives," as Vere puts it. This, now, is a Vere who sees the orders which encompass all of our actions — order which must be preserved, order which will break us if we do not keep it.

It is at this point that the scene dissolves to the second flogging incident in the film. It is to reinforce Ustinov's concept of Claggart and his callous nature. There are no flogging incidents in the play. But in the film, they are used to advantage by Ustinov both times. Each time, the concentration seems to be on Claggart as opposed to the victim. Here the camera emphasizes Claggart's counting of the lashes. We know that Kincaid is to be struck ten times. Claggart counts deliberately and strikes his own leg with his rattan to emphasize each lash. We see him relish the punishment. He counts deliberately to "ten" but doesn't stop there. He mouths the word "eleven" but there is no further lash. To his disgust the punishment has been concluded. On his face the camera captures the utter sadistic disappointment. There is then a medium shot of Claggart as he turns his back on the crew and other officers to look out at his element — the deceitful sea. But another man, Kincaid, has been brought back into the pattern of life in the Navy.

While on the subject of pattern, let me say that one of the most interesting effects in the film, from a cinematic point of view, is the sense of movement always present on the ship — even in those scenes which are obviously interior stage shots in sound studios. The camera rolls with the waves; there is a strong attempt to introduce movement even in scenes which are intended to be static dialogues. Besides the various camera angles and shots, Ustinov tries to have ropes, sails, hair, or shadows cast by the ropes, create a sense of movement. In the next scene, for instance, Billy and Claggart are together for the first time alone, and Ustinov uses light and shadow to create the feeling of movement on the sea. The men talk of being lonesome. It is nighttime, and the



Top: Billy Budd on trial. Bottom: Billy Budd about to be hanged.

light strikes Billy's face almost flush, emphasizing his youthfulness and naiveté. But the lighting shines upward on Claggart as it reflects off the water, effecting an eerie, satanic glow and creating shadows as he talks of "curbing one's tongue," to Billy. But as Billy's charm begins to affect Claggart and he tells the Master-at-Arms, "I think sometimes you hate yourself," the light on Claggart is more complimentary; he becomes more humane, he actually seems lonely. But as soon as he sees Billy's good grace as a false charm, the lighting shifts again and casts a satanic glow.

Interestingly, it is here that Squeak, Claggart's stooge, arrives and asks Claggart, "Which of us is Satan?" It is a line and scene which does not appear in either the play or novel; but here it adds greatly to the growing personification of evil which is John Claggart — who wants to hear that Billy "hates him" in order to lend meaning to his own life and to destroy the essence of that innocence embodied in Billy.

It is in the destruction of Billy — accomplished so readily in the film — that Ustinov's direction excels. Claggart accuses Billy of mutinous behavior and is made to repeat the charges to Budd's face before Captain Vere in Vere's quarters. The confrontation is claustrophobic for Billy. There is no escape from the deliberateness of Claggart's evil. Emotions take over. The calmness and control of both Vere and Claggart give way under Ustinov's vision of the scene. Vere, here, seems almost embarrassed by the preposterous nature of Claggart's accusations concerning Billy. Camera movements are minimized in the beginning of the scene, but they build to the expected climax in this clash between ultimate good and evil. In a sequence lasting only twenty seconds, and covering only five shots, the fateful climax is reached:

1. Medium close-up: Billy's contorted face as he stammers in anguish, unable to answer Claggart's accusations with words.
2. Medium shot: All three characters are seen. Vere's back is to Billy and Claggart, but he faces the camera. Vere shouts to Claggart; at that precise moment Billy's arm moves out in a reflex fashion and strikes Claggart across the temple.
3. A medium shot looking up at a severe angle towards the falling Claggart. The shot captures the suddenness of the fall and also the shock on the faces of Billy and Vere. As Claggart falls, Billy's face is revealed.
4. There is a cut to a medium close-up shot of the side of Claggart's head as he strikes against a beam at the conclusion of the fall.
5. Finally, a close-up shot of Claggart's face. He is dying, but there is a sadistic smile upon his lips. He realizes that he has forced Billy to act — to break the codes and patterns which bind us. The smile then fades to a death pose.

This entire sequence takes twenty seconds, five of which are used to stress the sadistic smile on Claggart's face as he dies. The smile occurs nowhere in the play. There are no stage directions calling for it; there is no dialogue incidental to it. It is a deft visual touch on Ustinov's part, showing us a smile of victory on Claggart's face and a death which seals Billy's fate under the *Articles of War*. The action is quick and fatal for Claggart and Billy as well, since he has broken with the Pattern as Vere sees it. He has, however instinctively, gone beyond the barriers and orders which control our lives.

It is this idea of "order" and pattern which seems to dominate Ustinov's conception of the story. It creates a unity in the film beginning with the concept of "order" on a Navy ship and ending with "order" relating to Billy's

subsequent death by hanging — a death resulting from the thinking expressed in this line spoken by Vere: "We do not deal with Justice, but the Law."

And the law of the military is not only severe but also expedient. Ustinov moves us from the death of Claggart to the trial of Billy, to the hanging in less than twelve hours aboard the ship. And it is Billy's death that shows us most evidently the role of pattern and "order."

A tension mounts as Billy is to be hanged. The men are growling, anticipating the unknown. They know nothing of what we have seen. They question the whereabouts of both Billy and Claggart. Then Budd is brought from below deck to topside. He looks at each officer; it is a look which sears their consciences. He smiles at Vere. A noose swings like a pendulum across the framed shot as Billy walks toward it. As the order and reason for Billy's death are read, the men react; they storm the deck where the officers are; they break the pattern to which they are accustomed! But only momentarily, since they are shouted and threatened back into their orderly stance of "Attention." They accept the code.

In Ustinov's conception of the play's conclusion, that is the story's conclusion, he seems to blame the men's inability to rise above such orders, in order to create change, as being part of the cause of Billy's death. Then to suggest this even further, he changes the mechanics concerning the method of Billy's death by hanging. Instead of having Billy throw himself from the yardarm with the noose around his neck as in the play, Ustinov has the men actually participate in the hanging. Billy places the noose around his neck; the rope is thrown over a low beam; and four men — led by Squeak — run with the rope, jerking the body from the platform and killing Budd. The men, not *Law* alone, have become entwined in the death. To add to the impact of the scene, the sound track is shrill, noticeable again perhaps for only the second time in the story. The first time it attracts attention is during the first enforcement of "order" on the ship — the flogging witnessed by Billy. The sounds then were those of leather striking skin.

But before concluding his conception of *Billy Budd*, Ustinov again reinforces the ideas of pattern and order binding our lives. He has the men begin to mutiny after Billy's death. They are almost fired upon by the officers. But they are only reminded of the harsh reality of their situation as sailors as they are fired upon by an enemy vessel coming out from behind a cove near their position. There is a pause; the French ship continues to fire, striking the *Avenger*. Then the men begin to transfer their vengeance from the officers to the enemy as the battle continues and they fall into their respective battle stations — order restored.

But that which is most curious about the film's conception is its closing narration which is accompanied by a framed shot of the two vessels moving away from one another:

But if the sacrifice of Billy Budd has served to make man more conscious of justice, then he will not have died in vain. Men are perishable things, but justice will live as long as the human soul, and the law as long as the human mind.

If we accept the patterns of Ustinov's film, we must accept not this conclusion in narrative form, but rather a line spoken in the play: "So the world goes, not wanting justice but order."

Joseph C. Friel



Billy and Claggart.