

Berkeley Square

Fox Film Corporation, 1933

Frank Lloyd, Director

John L. Balderston and Sonya Levien, Screenplay

For inclusion in second expanded edition of *Supernatural Romance in Film*, by Richard Striner

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This film is a seminal document for Supernatural Romance. It is a screen version of a play that was written by John L. Balderston, who authored the screenplay for *The Mummy*. Balderston's play was first performed in 1925 and then revived in 1929.

The film opens with a glimpse of a stagecoach rattling along an English road in the eighteenth century. In the coach is one Peter Standish (played by Leslie Howard), an American who has come to visit England to see some relatives in 1784.

Then the scene shifts to London in the 1930s. A descendant of Peter Standish (also played by Howard) is living in the house of his ancestors on Berkeley Square. He is engaged to be married but he keeps procrastinating, to the consternation of his fiancée. Something odd has been happening to him since he moved into the old family home, which still contains most of its eighteenth-century furnishings. He

is becoming obsessed with the life of his ancestor and namesake. The two men were look-alikes: an old painting on the wall reveals this. He becomes a shut-in, poring over surviving letters and records, including his namesake's voluminous diary, which he reads by candle-light.

He confides to a friend that a weird inspiration has occurred to him: if he could somehow change places with his ancestor, he could pass for the old Peter Standish, since he knows the man inside and out. But there is more: he has the overpowering conviction that this *will* happen — and soon. He will walk back into his home and be . . . in the Berkeley Square of 1784. Most uncanny of all, he relates that a philosophic (or religious) revelation has been given to him:

Suppose you are in a boat, sailing down a winding stream. You watch the banks as they pass you. You went by a grove of maple trees, upstream. But you can't see them now, so you saw them in the *past*, didn't you? You're watching a field of clover now, it's before your eyes, at this moment, in the *present*! But you don't know yet what's around the bend in the stream ahead of you, there may be wonderful things, but you can't see them until you get around the bend, in the *future*, can you? . . . Now remember, you're in the boat. But I'm up in the sky above you, in a plane. I'm looking down on it all, I can see *all at once* the trees you saw upstream, the field of clover that you see now, and what's waiting for you, around the bend ahead! All at once! So the past, present and future of the man in the boat are all one, to the man in the plane. Doesn't that show how all Time must really be one? Real Time with a capital T is nothing but an idea in the mind of God.

He is convinced that the past is still back there, *alive*, and it will always be back there, eternally.

Just after this conversation, Peter is returning to his home in a drenching storm when he hears, amid the hubbub of modern London, the sound of horses' hooves. He walks up the steps to his house, and he opens the door.

He finds himself in eighteenth-century attire. The miracle has happened.

But the experience goes terribly wrong. Peter commits all sorts of faux-pas that begin to give him away: his expressions and his gestures and his habits are all "out of place," and his eighteenth-century relatives sense that something weird is occurring. The situation worsens as he meets some famous people, like Sir Joshua Reynolds, and he says a number of things (inadvertently, of course) that intimate a foreknowledge of events that have not yet transpired. By the time that the film's central crisis has developed, his relatives regard him as a diabolical changeling who has stolen away the soul of the real Peter Standish.

And he has also fallen deeply in love with a cousin named Helen Pettigrew (played by Heather Angel).

In the course of many plot complications, Helen gradually discerns the truth: Peter Standish is a man from the future. As she stares into his eyes, she can somehow read his pictorial thoughts: she sees visions of steam locomotives, airplanes, soldiers on the front during World War I, and skyscrapers. "There's never been a kiss

like this since the world began," says Peter as the two of them embrace.

Peter notices an ancient and curious artifact that he recognizes from the furnishings that were still within the house in his own day and age: a small sculpture in the form of an Egyptian ankh (or "crux ansata"). Helen tells him that her father had found this object on an expedition in Egypt. This symbol, which Peter knows somehow to denote "the eternal," now manifests itself as the charm that brought about the miracle.

Nonetheless, the miracle ends. A storm begins to blow outside. Peter hears the sound of motors and he knows that the far-off London of the 1930s is seconds away. He tells Helen he will never marry. She consoles him:

Love will give me strength. Don't be too sad about a girl who's been dead so long. As I grow old, your youth will seem to me eternal youth, for you will come, young as I see you now, to my grave in St. Mark's Churchyard. To you, that will be tomorrow. And yet, 'twill be generations after I am dead. I'll ask for a stone with the letters cut deep, so they won't wear away

As the film concludes, Peter sits within the house after visiting the grave of Helen. Her epitaph: "Here lies, in the confident hope of the blessed resurrection, Helen Pettigrew . . . who departed this life June the fifteenth, 1787, aged twenty-three years." He knows at this point that the two of them will meet again . . . in God's time.

Analysis

Berkeley Square is one of three plays from the 1920s that played a key role in the development of Supernatural Romance as a cinematic genre. Together with Alberto Cassella's *La Morte in Vacanza* (1923) and Sutton Vane's *Outward Bound* (1924), *Berkeley Square* framed the issues of love, death, and the afterlife in a manner that led not only to the screen genre but also to the production of additional plays in the 1930s and '40s that would build the tradition, plays such as Paul Osborn's *On Borrowed Time* (1938), Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* (1938), and Lynn Root's *Cabin in the Sky* (1940).

Berkeley Square, in particular, would be influential because of its plot template — essentially the template that would be used for *Somewhere in Time* (1980) — and the historical locus of its time-travel imagery (the eighteenth century in Britain), which was possibly a factor in the genesis of Alan Jay Lerner's *Brigadoon*.

The correspondences between the plot trajectories of *Somewhere in Time* and *Berkeley Square* are particularly striking. In both cases the protagonist is wafted into the past, where he meets the great love of his life, and then loses that love when he is suddenly wrenched back into the future. In both cases, the romantic consolation is (or will be) found in the afterlife. In both cases, a symbolic plot device both symbolizes "the eternal" and serves as a physical talisman that

effectuates the dark magic: the ancient Egyptian ankh in *Berkeley Square* corresponds to a mysterious watch in *Somewhere in Time*.

In *Brigadoon*, as in *Berkeley Square*, the protagonist delays getting married because of a mystical sense that tells him something else is in store. Then he finds his way into an eighteenth-century British (in this case Scottish) environment, where he meets the great love of his life, but then he loses her (at least for a time), when he returns to his own milieu.

Berkeley Square is built around the great philosophic enigma of time. Just before he is transported to the London of 1784, Peter Standish soliloquizes on the notion — the epiphany — that has been dawning on him: time is like a stream. As we float down the stream we are in “the present,” the stream we are leaving behind us is “the past”, and the overhead view of the scene that one could glimpse from an airplane is “God’s time.” This is an apt distillation of a view that can be traced in the western tradition all the way to St. Augustine.

Berkeley Square was roughly contemporaneous with the appearance (in German) of Martin Heidegger’s philosophic classic *Sein und Zeit* (*Being and Time*), which was published in 1927. In this difficult and paradoxical work, the philosopher struggles to define the nature of “being” itself, and his exploration flows inexorably toward the nature (and mystery) of time.

Heidegger wrote about the "ordinary understanding" of time, which consists of "a flowing stream of 'nows.'"¹ Heidegger called this experience the phenomenon of "within-timeness." He acknowledged its genuineness, within limits, as an ontological truth. But he also argued that this "ordinary" experience of time is derivative from a larger and more mysterious "primordial temporality."

This temporality, he theorized, is more malleable than our conventional experience of time permits us to understand clearly. But its nature may be grasped through paradox. "Temporality temporalizes," he wrote, "and indeed it temporalizes possible ways of itself."² Past, present, and future constitute modal "ecstases," or outward projections, of temporality, which can manifest itself in different "horizons." Consider the following gnomic formulation of Heidegger: "The character of 'having been' arises from the future, and in such a way that the future which 'has been' (or better, which 'is in the process of having been') releases from itself the Present."³

In the final pages of *Sein und Zeit*, the author asked himself this question: "Why cannot time be reversed? Especially if one looks exclusively at the stream of 'nows,' it is incomprehensible in itself why this sequence should not present itself in the reverse direction." After all, he reasoned, our everyday experience of "within-timeness"

¹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (*Sein und Zeit*, 1927), John MacQuarrie and Edward Robinson, trans. (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), 474.

² Ibid., 377.

³ Ibid., 374.

can never be "the sole horizon within which time is to be Interpreted [translators' capitalization]." ⁴

As Heidegger neared the completion of his volume, the time problem loomed ever larger to him as the key to the mystery of being. "Does time itself manifest itself as the horizon of Being," he asked in the final sentence of the book. ⁵

But *Sein und Zeit* is a truncated work — an uncompleted study — for its author never crossed the next horizon. He had planned another section of the book that would develop the relationship between Being and primordial time. Yet he had reached the outer limit of his own conceptual powers. So he simply . . . stopped.

Production and Critical Reception

John Balderston based the play *Berkeley Square* upon an unfinished novel by Henry James: *The Sense of the Past*, which was published posthumously in 1917. Balderston's play followed James's plotline closely.

The play was initially performed, to mixed reviews, in 1925, when the playwright, who was also a journalist, was busy covering the excavation of Tutankhamen's tomb. A few years later, the play was

⁴ Ibid., 478.

⁵ Ibid., 488.

revived in both London and New York by Leslie Howard, who both co-produced it and starred in its leading role.

Howard recalled in his memoirs (written in the third person) that the play *Berkeley Square* would "change [his] career . . . pronouncedly" when Alexander Woolcott called his attention to it in 1927.⁶

The producer Jed Harris owned the rights. Howard, who was also busily producing plays at the time, talked his partner Gilbert Miller into purchasing the rights because the play was "nagging at his mind." Howard "managed, while he was at Harris's office, to get his hands on a copy of *Berkeley Square*. He read it and found that the play was burning holes in his brain. He cabled Miller about it — and, to his complete surprise, Gilbert replied: 'Dear Partner, have bought *Berkeley Square*. Good luck — but don't blame me.'"

Howard produced the play in London, with himself in the role of Peter Standish. The London production, which opened on March 6, 1929, did reasonably well (it got mixed reviews), but when Howard brought the play to Broadway, where it opened on November 4, 1929, it ran for 229 performances. Critic Heywood Broun wrote that "*Berkeley Square* is easily the finest play now to be seen in New York . . . and, among other things, the play contains the finest acting performance of the season, which is given by Leslie Howard."⁷ Richard Watts, Jr. of the *Herald-Tribune* wrote that "amid all the justified enthusiasm for the

⁶ Leslie Howard, *Trival Fond Records*, Ronald Howard, ed. (London: William Kimber, 1982), 107-108.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 109.

adult intellectual qualities and the fascinating metaphysical conception of time that distinguish *Berkeley Square* and make it the most important play of the season, there has been too little said for the work's enormously moving emotional values."⁸ And the *London Times'* reviewer wrote that "there is magic in this play, enough to set it apart from all the common traffic of the theatre, and to send dreams scudding in the wake of dreams. Therefore, first of all, let us welcome and rejoice in it, for magic is very rare."⁹

The 1933 film version of the play was directed by Frank Lloyd, who had won acclaim for his *Cavalcade*. Producer Jesse Lasky made the obvious decision to recruit Leslie Howard to reprise the role of Peter Standish. Ernest Palmer was the cinematographer and the music for the film was composed by Louis de Francesco.

The film, which was released on September 13, 1933, was a critical success. Mordaunt Hall of the *New York Times* wrote that "in the matter of poetic charm, nothing quite like it has emerged from Hollywood. It is an example of delicacy and restraint, a picture filled with gentle humor and appealing pathos. It is in a class by itself. . . . Mr. Howard revels in the role. He has done excellent work in other films, but it is doubtful whether he has ever given so impressive and imaginative a performance."¹⁰

⁸ "Berkeley Square, Publicity Through Your Local Papers," appendix to John L. Balderston, *Berkeley Square: A Play in Three Acts* (New York: Samuel French, Inc., 1931, 124-125.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 125.

¹⁰ Mordaunt Hall, "Leslie Howard and Heather Angel in the Pictorial Version of 'Berkeley Square,'" *New York Times*, September 14, 1933.

Howard was nominated for the Academy Award as Best Actor for his work in *Berkeley Square*. On December 4, 1934, a radio version of the play and film was performed by Howard and Helen Chandler for *Lux Radio Theater*.