

A man out of time

Retro speaks to the son of the much-loved character actor Lionel Jeffries to discover why directing was a passion he didn't get the chance to fully explore

During the recent media blitz for *The Railway Children Return*, its original star Jenny Agutter and director Morgan Matthews wasted little time in bigging up the 1970 original and its sadly deceased writer-director, Lionel Jeffries. Proof, if ever needed, that the first *Railway Children* motion picture still casts a significant spell, 52 years after it was made.

What's remarkable looking at that movie now is that it was actually Jeffries' very first film as director and yet it has the assuredness of being made by a well-practised veteran. Though it's not as if Lionel Jeffries was a stranger to film sets. At that point, it had been 20 years since his first movie role (as an uncredited RADA student in Alfred Hitchcock's *Stage Fright*, 1950). By the time of *The Railway Children* he was one of our most recognised and cherished actors, both in dramatic roles including *First Men in the Moon* (1964), *The Trials of Oscar Wilde* (1960), *The Quatermass Xperiment* (1955) and comic ones in *The*



Lionel Jeffries in *The Wrong Arm of the Law* with Peter Sellers and Tutte Lemkow (above) and *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* (below).

Wrong Arm of the Law (1963), *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* (1968) and *The Spy with a Cold Nose* (1966). Not every thespian sidesteps into a prosperous directing career, but for Lionel Charles Jeffries it was as if he'd been prepping every day of his life for this gilded opportunity.

Jeffries was 44 when he helmed his first feature but was already famous for playing old men on screen. In *Chitty Chitty Bang*, at just 42, he was Grandpa Potts, the father of Dick Van Dyke's character Caractacus, though in reality, Jeffries was six months younger than his hot-stepping co-star. In 1963's *The Crimson Blade* he played June Thorburn's father, despite being only five years her senior.

Maybe it was his premature baldness (he'd blamed the humidity in Burma, where he was stationed during the war, for his untimely hair loss), or maybe it was the rather constipated, somewhat exasperated ➤



authority characters he'd been typecast as since he was a young man. Though only in his late-30s in the Sixties, he always seemed like a man out of time. Perhaps that stern authoritarianism that he channelled so effortlessly came from his Roman Catholic faith or his own brutal upbringing. "His father was very violent," Jeffries' son Ty, tells **Retro**, "and it left my own father with issues."

FRIENDS IN HIGH PLACES

Though Ty's relationship with Lionel was, in his words, "difficult", he has fond memories of growing up amid a blizzard of famous faces who would descend upon the Jeffries home. "I remember coming home and Lulu would be sitting on the sofa, and Diana Dors, Albert Finney, Elton John, Dick Emery and Morecambe and Wise would all come round... Most of Dad's friends were in the business – Bryan Forbes and Nanette Newman, John and Mary Mills... In fact, Johnny and Mary were more like my grandparents than my actual grandparents."

It was Jeffries' friendship with Bryan Forbes, who first directed the actor in 1955's *The Colditz Story*, that led to his directing *The Railway Children*. Having been impressed by E. Nesbit's 1906 novel, Jeffries adapted it into a screenplay. Taking it to Forbes, then head of production at Elstree Studios, the actor was asked who he envisioned as director. "I know it's a crazy idea and not on," Jeffries ventured, "but I've always secretly harboured a longing to direct it myself."

The finished film was a financial and critical smash, with Forbes praising its "great style and warmth", and led to another family-friendly film, *The Amazing Mr Blunden* (1972), a supernatural fantasy based on Antonia Barber's 1969 novel *The Ghosts*. Although less commercially successful



than *The Railway Children*, this beguiling and lyrical movie is now considered a cult classic.

"I think Dad preferred writing and directing," Ty tells us. "I don't think he liked acting, he would often say that to me."

Baxter! (1973), Jeffries' third released movie about a teenage boy with a speech defect, was his only feature where he worked from another person's screenplay. His final two films, however, would prove less creatively satisfying.

"It sort of went downhill after that," Ty says. *The Water Babies* (1978) was an ambitious mix of live action and animation, but cost-cutting on the cartoon side led to it looking pretty tawdry in comparison to similar fare from across the pond. "They chose cheap Polish animators and the animation always held it back because it didn't look great compared to the live-action stuff. Then it went spiralling down even more with *Wombling Free* (1978) which was a disaster. In the end, the producers took it out of his hands. He was absolutely gutted by that," Ty adds.

In one of British cinema's greatest losses, Jeffries never directed again after this bruising double-whammy.



Top to bottom: Lionel in *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*, with Bernard Cribbins in *The Railway Children*, and in *Cream in My Coffee*. David Tomlinson in *Wombling Free* (below).



"I remember my mother saying to me, after he did *The Railway Children*, because of its success, he didn't really get any acting jobs for 10 years."

THE JOY OF PAINTING

Much of Jeffries' work in the Eighties was on the small screen, a medium he never grew to love. A standout role, however, was as an old man revisiting the scene of his and his wife's first getaway in Dennis Potter's *Cream in My Coffee* (1980). There followed reliably scene-stealing guest spots in such series as *Minder*, and *Casualty*. His last credit was in 2001 in the sci-fi drama *Lexx*.

"I think he just got fed up with everything," Ty says. "He'd be reading scripts, but he just lost interest."

Instead, in his final years, Jeffries spent much of his time painting. "He was a wonderful painter – still life, portraits, landscapes," Ty recalls. "I think they call it British whimsy in style. I personally think he would have been a very much happier man if he'd been a painter."

Jeffries developed vascular dementia in the 2000s and was cared for by his wife Eileen, until he was moved to a nursing home in Dorset. "It was a very nice care home," smiles Ty. "I remember him saying, 'This hotel must be costing a fortune!'"

Lionel Jeffries passed away on February 19, 2010 at the age of 83. To some, he will forever be the loopy Grandpa Potts in *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* or the maniacal prison officer 'Sour' Crout in *Two-Way Stretch* (1960), but he was also the man responsible for two of the most adored children's films of all time. As creative legacies go, that's a pretty proud one to have.

■ Ty Jeffries is a composer, lyricist and entertainer. For more, go to www.tyjeffries.com.



Mark Gatiss on Jeffries

Lionel Jeffries has shadowed Mark Gatiss' career for over 20 years now. *The Railway Children* is referenced in *The League of Gentlemen's Christmas special* from 2000, while the actor-writer-director remade Jeffries' second film, *The Amazing Mr Blunden*, for Sky last year. He also essayed Jeffries' role of Professor Joseph Cavor in a self-penned 2010 version of 1964's *The First Men in The Moon* for BBC Four.

YOU'RE CLEARLY A FAN OF LIONEL JEFFRIES. DID YOU EVER MEET HIM?

I didn't, no. I did try to get him to do the voice of the Grand Lunar in *The First Men in The Moon*, and I made enquiries, but it wasn't possible because of his dementia. He died soon after and the film is dedicated to him.

HOW DO YOU VIEW JEFFRIES AS A DIRECTOR?

There's a quote he used about *The Amazing Mr Blunden*, which is that he was trying to achieve an enchanted stillness. But it's there in *The Railway Children* and *Baxter!* too. It's really a particular kind of magic. I think *Blunden* and *The Railway Children* are kind of companion pieces, there's something timeless and magic and charming about them. It's a sort of adult's view of childhood which is not cynical and not mawkish, which is very rare.

WHAT DO YOU THINK OF HIS OTHER FILMS?

Baxter!'s a very grown-up picture, I remember being baffled by it. *Wombling Free* I saw recently and it's compromised. I mean, it's not the TV series, but there is something very grim and Seventies about it. With *The Water Babies*, I think the stuff outside of the animation is lovely, and it's sort of like having a missing bit between *The Railway Children* and *Blunden*, which sadly never becomes the third classic.