Directed by Charles Crichton and John Cleese (uncredited)  
Story by John Cleese and Charles Crichton  
Produced by Michael Shamberg  
Original Music by John Du Prez  
Cinematography by Alan Hume  
Film Editing by John Jympson

John Cleese...Archie Leach  
Jamie Lee Curtis...Wanda Gershwitz  
Kevin Kline...Otto  
Michael Palin...Ken Pile  
Maria Aitken...Wendy  
Tom Georgeson...Georges Thomason  
Patricia Hayes...Mrs. Coady  
Geoffrey Palmer...Judge  
Cynthia Cleese...Portia


British director, producer, and editor, was born in Wallasey, Cheshire. On leaving Oundle School he tried his hand at gold prospecting in Canada but at the insistence of his parents returned home and completed his education, studying history at New College, Oxford University. It was while he was at Oxford that he became seriously interested in the cinema. When Leontine Sagan and Zoltan Corda visited the university to film sequences for their Men of Tomorrow, he approached them for a job, and in 1931 he joined London Film Productions as an assistant in the cutting rooms. By 1935 he had progressed to film editor, in which capacity he worked on such well-known London Film Productions movies as Sanders of the River, Things to Come, Elephant Boy, Prison Without Bars, and The Thief of Bagdad.

In 1940 Crichton moved to Michael Balcon's Easling Studios as an editor and the following year he directed his first film, a documentary short called Young Veterans, produced by Alberto Cavalcanti. According to an Ealing press release, "his promotion to the sphere of directing was helped by one thing and one thing only. He became one of the best editors in the British film industry." Crichton’s first feature film was For Those in Peril (1944), a drama about the wartime Air-Sea Rescue service starring David Farrar and Ralph Michael. There is a strong documentary element in this "absolutely orthodox" movie, and there was a good deal of praise
for the opening montage of boats, gulls, and roofscapes in the early morning, before the patrols set out. *Painted Boats* (1945), about the life of English canal workers, is even closer to documentary, and has a voice-over commentary by Louis MacNeice. In the same year Crichton directed one of the five episodes comprising *Dead of Night*, an anthology of ghost stories involving Ealing Studios’ finest talents. It is significant that Crichton was assigned to direct a humorous piece—a “Golfing Story” featuring Basil Radford and Nauntion Wayne.

Although during his long sojourn at Ealing Crichton’s work was to be divided fairly equally between light comedy and drama, his greatest successes were in the former mode. And it was a comedy that in 1947 established Crichton as a director of exceptional promise. *Hue and Cry*, the first of the postwar cycle of Ealing comedies, was written by T.E.B. Clarke and involves the detection and apprehension, by a gang of cockney kids, of fur thieves who send coded messages to one another through a boys’ magazine. The film is essentially an amiable fantasy but, as Crichton explained, “we had to emphasize the absurdity of our story through the realism with which we stated it, to enrich our fantasy by the conviction of its telling.”

*Hue and Cry* demonstrates Crichton’s talent for extracting first-rate performances from actors, especially child actors like Harry Fowler, who plays the fifteen-year-old sleuth Joe. Alstair Sim contributes a marvelously baroque and eccentric performance as a writer of boys’ stories, and the cast also includes such Ealing stalwarts as Jack Warner, Valerie White, and Jack Lambert. Crichton showed a natural talent for location work, especially in the climactic chase in which three hundred boys scramble over the blitzed ruins of London in hot pursuit of the villains.

“The director, Charles Crichton, has given proof of great talent,” wrote one reviewer, and another in the London *Times* thought that the director had given his simple story “all the painstaking and lively detail that a good adventure story should have. Scene after scene is brilliantly composed, with the dialogue always giving bite to what is merely conventional in the situation.” Richard Winnington welcomed the film as “one of the most refreshing, blood-tingling and disarming pictures of its kind that the British, or in fact any filmmakers, have produced so far—*Emil and the Detectives* and *Nous Les Gosses* not excepted.” It was an instant hit, though it was to be some time before the Ealing team realized that they had invented a new comedy genre.

Crichton followed *Hue and Cry* with *Against the Wind* and *Another Shore*, both released in 1948. The former stars Robert Beatty, Jack Warner, and Simone Signoret in a wartime drama about Allied saboteurs in occupied Belgium. Beatty plays the lead in *Another Shore* also, somewhat miscast as an Irishman who dreams of adventure in the South Seas but is sidetracked into marriage (to Moira Lister) and a steady job. Neither film made much impact, not did *Train of Events* (1949), which in separate episodes (directed by Sidney Cole, Basil Dearden, and Crichton) explores the lives of four victims of a train crash. *Dance Hall* (1950) also tells several stories but this times weaves them into a single narrative about London factory girls, their soul-destroying jobs, and their pursuit of something more exciting at the local “Palais de Danse.” It is a solid piece of work, interesting as a more or less serious study of working-class life (still rare in British cinema) and with an excellent cast including, among others, Natasha Parry, Jane Hylton, Diana Dors, Petula Clark, Donald Houston, Kat Kendall, and Harry Fowler.

In his study of Ealing studios, Charles Barr points out that the essential element in an Ealing comedy is fantasy. “Given the ‘fantasy’ premise, the story proceeds in a naturalistic style, in real or at least realistic settings…within this framework, Ealing can play out at leisure the daydream of a benevolent community and can partly evade, partly confront in a more manageable form, those awkward ‘postwar’ issues, social and personal, with which it has hitherto been somewhat glumly trying to deal.” Barr locates “the mainstream of Ealing production after the war” in the work of the scriptwriter T.E.B. Clarke and of the directors Basil Dearden and Charles Crichton. The latter’s second film with Clarke was *The Lavender Hill Mob* (1951), in which a meek Bank of England clerk sets out to steal a million pounds in gold bullion from his employers by casting it into souvenir models of the Eiffel Tower which can then be “exported” out of the country. Alec Guinness gives a brilliantly observed performance as the genteel criminal, while the excellent camerawork is by Crichton’s usual cinematographer, Douglas Slocombe.

The film was received as warmly as *Hue and Cry* had been four years earlier and according to the *Times* critic showed the same “great skill in the handling of the crowd scenes and in the exploitation of character. …There is also a great fertility of invention in minor details and in the incidents of the chase which such a film as this demands and which is handled by Mr. Crichton with all the skill he has shown is his earlier films.” The traveling matte was used to great effect in the “riotous, rapid sequences” in which Guinness and his accomplice (Stanley Holloway) chase down the Eiffel Tower. *The Lavender Hill Mob* won an Oscar for the best screenplay of 1951, and the best scenario award at the Venice Film Festival.

*Hunted* (1952), in which a runaway boy joins forces with a fugitive murderer (Dirk Bogard) was made for GFD/Independent Artists and was followed by another Crichton-Clarke comedy, *The Titfield Thunderbolt* (1953). This, Ealing’s first comedy in Technicolor, starred Stanley Holloway, George Relph, Nauntion Wayne, John Gregson, and Hugh Griffith in a story about the inhabitants of a small country town and their campaign to save a railroad branch line from closure through the machinations of an evil bus company and heartless bureaucrats. It is an archetypal Ealing comedy theme, but there were signs that the genre was losing its freshness and declining into self-conscious quaintness and
a sentimental and conservative celebration of tradition for its own sake. As Charles Barr points out, the sense of community involvement, so important in the earlier Ealing comedies like *Hue and Cry* and *Passport to Pimlico,* is here entirely spurious: “There is no grasp of a living community in the film, or of the relevance of the train to people’s daily needs. It’ the hobby of a few eccentric amateurs.” And there were other complaints. One critic wrote that “somebody must give back to director Charles Crichton that sense of comic timing which *Hue and Cry* and *The Lavender Hill Mob* showed him to possess.…. Mr. Crichton has allowed too many incidents to continue on the screen longer than we are quite prepared to laugh at them.” And C.A. Lejeune agreed that the movie “might have done with crisper cutting and “more direct direction.”

The *Love Lottery* (1954), a feeble comedy starring David Niven as a film star offered as a prize in a lottery, was followed the same year by the most successful of Crichton’s serious movies, *The Divided Heart.* It is about a Yugoslav woman (Yvonne Mitchell)—a survivor of Auschwitz who had been separated from her baby—and of her struggle ten years later to win her child back from the loving German couple who had subsequently adopted him. The theme was topical in that postwar Europe still contained many such displaced children, and the story (by Jack Wittingham and Richard Hughes) was based on a case heard before the United States Control Commission in Germany two years earlier.

A reviewer in the *Daily Sketch* decided that “a story unexampled in its human heartbreaking quality has been screened with dignity and art…. But above all this is a directors’ picture, and Charles Crichton’s greatest success is his handling of ten-year-old Michael Ray,” who played the wretched child. C.A. Lejeune also thought that “Charles Crichton’s direction is good direction in that it guides but never checks good players in the course they are naturally inclined to take.” *The Divided Heart* won the British Academy award for the best performance by a British actress in 1954 (Yvonne Mitchell) and that for the best performance by a foreign actress (Cornell Borchers, who played the German mother). The film also received the United Nations award as the best film of 1954 and the Golden Laurel at the Edinburgh Festival.

Crichton made only one more film for Ealing, a flying drama called *The Man in the Sky* (Decision Against Time in the U.S.), released in 1957. *Floods of Fear* (Rank 1958) was followed by *Law and Disorder* (British Lion, 1958), a T.E.B. Clarke comedy begun by Henry Cornelius and completed by Crichton. Two more comedies followed—*The Battle of the Sexes* (1959), based on the James Thurber story “The Catbird Seat” and starring Peter Sellers, and *The Boy Who Stole a Million* (1961), for which Crichton was also co-author—both made for Bryanston Films.

In 1961 Crichton went to the United States to direct what was to have been his first Hollywood picture, *The Birdman of Alcatraz.* It is hard to imagine why he was ever considered for such an assignment, and in fact he left the production soon after shooting had begun, the film being completed by John Frankenheimer. Some fourteen years later Crichton told an interviewer what had happened: “Had I known that Burt Lancaster was to be de facto producer,” he said, “I do not think I would have accepted that assignment as he had a reputation for quarreling with better directors than I. But Harold Hecht, the credited producer, had assured me that there would be no interference from Lancaster. This did not prove to be the case.”


Charles Crichton is an untemperamental and self-effacing craftsman—an immensely skillful interpreter of scripts rather than an original creator. According to *Film Dope,* “the sad thing for Crichton was that following the golden days at Ealing he available scripts got steadily more puerile and more vulgar and as a result—though one can only conjecture on what might have happened if *Birdman* had gone well—his decline was slow but inexorable. The more interesting of Crichton’s later films, like the comedies *Law and Disorder* and *The Battle of the Sexes* which (from memory) were funny enough to look really good in today’s barren comedy climate, only underline the shameful waste of his skills.”

Philip Kemp (FilmReference.com)

The demise of Ealing Studios seemed to cast a blight on the careers of those who worked there. Within ten years of the final Ealing release virtually all the studio’s leading directors—Mackendrick, Hamer, Harry Watt, Charles Frend—had shot their last film; only Basil Dearden was still active. And until the late 1980s the career of Charles Crichton appeared to have followed the same dispiriting pattern. His triumphant comeback at the age of seventy-eight, with
the huge international success of *A Fish Called Wanda*, was as
heartening as it was wholly unexpected.

*Wanda* kicks off with a jewel heist sequence notable for
the wit and precision of its editing. Like several of his Ealing
colleagues, Crichton started out in the cutting room, working for
Korda on *Things to Come* and *The Thief of Bagdad*, and was said to
be one of the finest editors in the British film industry. (Among his
uncredited achievements is the rescue of Mackendrick's Whisky
Galore, which he recut after it had been botched by its original
erator.) A sense of pace and timing, the skilled editor's stock-in-
trade, distinguishes all his best work. Comedy has always been seen
as Crichton's forte. His reputation, prior to *Wanda*, rested on the
three comedies he directed at Ealing to scripts by T. E. B. Clarke:
*Hue and Cry*, *The Lavender Hill Mob*, and *The Titfield
Thunderbolt*. If all three seem to belong more to the writer's oeuvre
than to the director's, this may be because Crichton has always been
dependent in his comedies on the quality of the script. *The
Lavender Hill Mob*, perhaps the archetypal comedy of the Ealing
mainstream, gains enormously from Crichton's supple comic
timing; but given stodgy material, as in *The Love Lottery* or *Another
Shore*, his lightness of touch deserts him. Even *Titfield*, with Clarke
writing some way below his best, feels sluggish and under-directed
beside its two predecessors.

Though the serious side of Crichton's output, the dramas
and thrillers, has attracted little attention, he often seems here less at
the mercy of his script, able to make something personal even of
flawed material. His one non-comedy with Clarke, the Resistance
drama *Against the Wind*, has a downbeat realism and a refusal of
easy heroics that recalls Throrld Dickinson's *Next of Kin* (and
probably ensured its failure at the post-war box-office). *Hunted*, a
killer-on-the-thrun thriller, builds up a complex tension as well as
offering Dirk Bogarde a rare intelligent role amid the dross of his
early career. Crichton's cool, unemphatic handling of the central
conflict in *The Divided Heart* deftly avoids emotional overkill—
though nothing, perhaps, could have prevented the film's final slide
into sententiousness.

After Ealing, projects attuned to his talents became
increasingly rare. Given the darker aspects of his work, black
comedy was clearly well within his range, and *The Battle of the
Sexes*, with Peter Sellers as the Scots clerk trying to bump off
efficiency expert Constance Cummings, would have been ideal—
were it not for a script that junked the quiet impl
abilty of the original (Thurber's caustic tour-de-force *The Catbird Seat*)
for cautious whimsy and a vapid happy ending. After a couple of
interestingly off-beat thrillers—*The Third Secret* and *He Who
Rides a Tiger*—both marred by clumsy writing and uncertainty of
tone, Crichton cut his losses and retreated into television. From
there, directing corporate videos must have seemed like a further
downhill step. But the company involved was John Cleese's Video
Arts, and it was Cleese's enthusiastic backing—and his status as a
bankable star—that enabled Crichton, after more than twenty years,
to return to the cinema. *A Fish Called Wanda*, with its four ill-
assorted crooks, its central portrait of respectability undermined
by larcenous urges, and its running theme of internecine treachery,
crosses *The Lavender Hill Mob* with *The Ladykillers*—and adds a
degree of sex and violence that would certainly have alarmed
Michael Balcon. But had Ealing comedy survived Balcon's death
and lived on into the late 1980s, *Wanda* is most likely what it would
have looked like—and its bite and vitality only inspire regret for the
films left unmade during Crichton's years in the wilderness.

### Death

In 1989, a Danish audiologist, Ole Bentzen, died laughing while
watching *A Fish Called Wanda*. His heart was estimated to have
beaten at between 250 and 500 beats per minute, before he
succumbed to cardiac arrest. (Wikipedia)

#### John Cleese: “Ode to Sean Hannity”

- Aping urbanity
- Oozing with vanity
- Plump as a manatee
- Faking humanity
- Journalistic calamity
- Intellectual inanity
- Fox Noise insanity
- You’re a profanity
- Hannity

#### Monty Python (Wikipedia)

Monty Python (sometimes known as The Pythons) were a British
comedy group that created the influential Monty Python's Flying
Circus, a British television comedy sketch show that first aired on
the BBC on 5 October 1969. Forty-five episodes were made over
four series. The Python phenomenon developed from the television
series into something larger in scope and impact, spawning touring
stage shows, films, numerous albums, several books and a stage
musical as well as launching the members to individual stardom.

The group's influence on comedy has been compared to The
Beatles' influence on music.

The television series, broadcast by the BBC from 1969 to
1974, was conceived, written and performed by Graham Chapman,
John Cleese, Terry Gilliam, Eric Idle, Terry Jones, and Michael
Palin. Loosely structured as a sketch show but with an innovative
stream-of-consciousness approach (aided by Gilliam's animation), it
pushed the boundaries of what was acceptable in style and content.

A self-contained comedy team responsible for both writing
and performing their work, they changed the way performers
terained audiences. The Pythons' creative control allowed them
to experiment with form and content, discarding rules of television
comedy. Their influence on British comedy has been apparent for
years, while in North America it has coloured the work of cult
performers from the early editions of Saturday Night Live through
to more recent absurdist trends in television comedy. "Pythonesque"
has entered the English lexicon as a result.

In a 2005 UK poll to find The Comedian's Comedian, three
of the six Pythons members were voted by fellow comedians and
comedy insiders to be among the top 50 greatest comedians ever:
Cleese at #2, Idle at #21, and Palin at #30.
COMING UP IN THE FALL 2010 BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS

November 23 Joel & Ethan Coen *The Big Lebowski* 1998
November 30 Chan-wook Park *Oldboy* 2003
December 7 Deepa Mehta *Water* 2005

PRELIMINARY SPRING 2011 SCHEDULE, BFS XXII:

January 18 Fritz Lang, *Metropolis*, 1927
January 25 Lloyd Bacon, *42nd Street* 1933
February 1 Ernst Lubitsch, *Ninotchka* 1939
February 8 Luchino Visconti *Ossessione* 1942
February 15 Robert Bresson, *Journal d’un curé de campagne* 1950
February 22 Martin Ritt, *The Spy Who Came In From the Cold* 1965
March 1 Nicholas Roeg, *Walkabout* 1971
March 8 Clint Eastwood, *The Outlaw Josey Wales* 1976
March 29 Bernard Tavernier, *Coup du torchon* 1981
April 5 Werner Herzog, *Fitzcarraldo* 1982
April 12 Stephen Frears *The Grifters* 1991
April 19 Jafar Panahi, *The Circle* 2000
April 26 Ridley Scott, *Blade Runner* 1982

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