THE WORLDS OF HARRY SALTZMAN

BY LEN DEIGHTON

Harry Saltzman, who died last month, was a rare producer, equally at home with James Bond and Tony Richardson

"Just when *Sight and Sound* have decided I'm a hero," said Harry Saltzman reflectively. "After this [film] they'll make me into some kind of monster."

Harry Saltzman told me this at our first meeting. I'd driven out to the studios to have lunch with him. *Dr No* (the first of the Saltzman-Broccoli Bond films) had just started its run in London's West End. During our lunch one of Harry's men came to the table. He waited without speaking. Eventually Harry turned to him and said: "How's it going?"

"They're laughing," said the man impassively.

Harry frowned. "Are they laughing at Bond or laughing with him?"

"I think they're laughing with us," said the man.

"It'll be all right," said Harry, and the man departed.

Harry had every reason to be concerned about an audience laughing at James Bond. Ian Fleming, Bond's creator, had just chosen my first book, *The Ipcress File*, as his 'Book of the Year', but had added the caveat: "But I don't think thrillers should be funny." Poor Ian, whatever would he have thought about a series of Bond films that, ever more outrageous in plot and situation, ended up as light comedies for family entertainment?

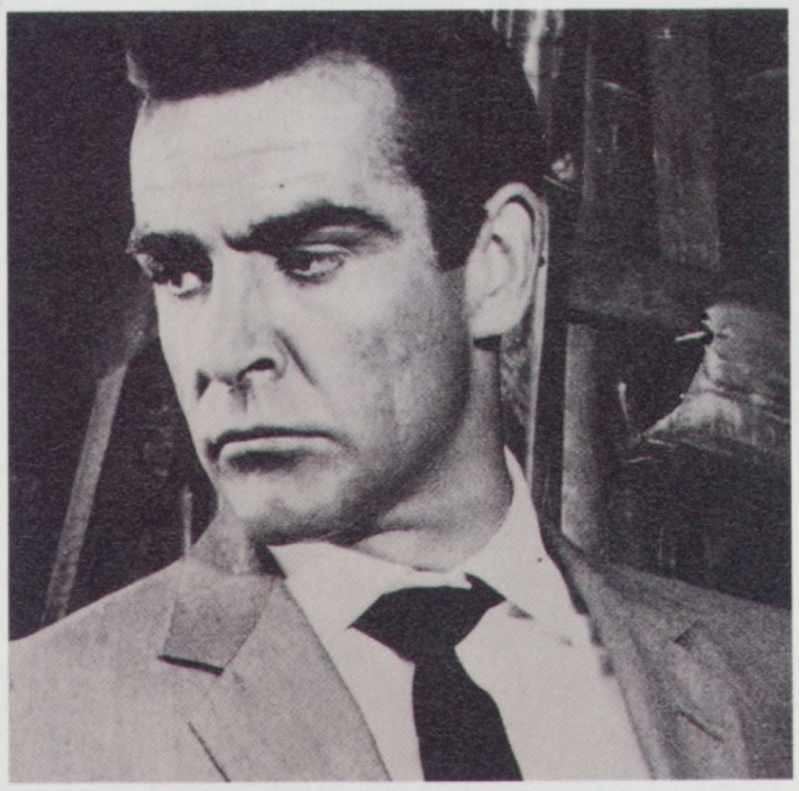
I had never glimpsed a film producer before that lunch in the dining room at Pinewood, but my first impression of Harry Saltzman did not disappoint. Beautifully dressed, as always, here was the sort of chubby, cigar-smoking figure that Central Casting chose as a 'Hollywood film producer' in the old black and white movies with which I'd grown up. Saying goodbye as I climbed into my dented Volkswagen Beetle, I remember Harry in his flawless vicuna coat, with short wavy grey hair, a tiny ever-ready smile and large sad eyes. He looked like a teddy bear: the very chic, expensive ones that grubby children are never permitted to cuddle. Harry's elevation to 'hero' was his due as a partner (with dramatist John Osborne and director Tony Richardson) in Woodfall Films. Woodfall was best known for filming popular novels with working-class anti-heroes and kitchen-sink stage plays, many of which had filled the prestigious Royal Court Theatre. *Look Back in Anger* (1959), *The Entertainer* (1960), *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960) and *A Taste of Honey* (1961) were all Woodfall productions.

At that lunch Harry told me that in order to be in favour with "the *Sight and Sound* crowd", it was essential that everything you did lost money. Harry was not given to making prophecies (apart from the usual optimistic show-business hype), but he had already prepared himself for the fact that Eon Films (the Saltzman-Broccoli partnership which secured options on most of the Bond film rights) was not going to qualify him for that sort of popularity.

In fact, Harry was far from the archetypal Hollywood producer of today. He was a happily married, well-read Canadian of wide interests; cosmopolitan in a way that North Americans seldom become. Most meetings ended up with all concerned sitting round a table and eating the dishes Harry decided they should eat. In French and Italian restaurants, he would wave the menu away and simply tell the waiter what he wanted to eat and how he liked it cooked. I tried this imperious technique with varying results, but for Harry it always worked perfectly. He liked food so much that he eventually bought a London restaurant. I found him generous in every way, and quick with little asides which were often funny and sometimes cruel. He laughed readily, but the only time I saw him roll around in merriment was while listening to someone recounting the serious misfortunes that had befallen some rival producer. He spoke excellent French and I saw him looking equally at home in Paris, Istanbul and London. He was a compulsive spender. At airports he would impulsively buy all manner of goods – from kitsch to works of art – and then hand the packages to whichever member of his entourage was nearest. "Always keep at least one person between you and Harry," an art director warned me too late when I was burdened with a prayer rug at Athens airport.

The full story of the formation of the Saltzman and Broccoli partnership, and its labyrinth dealings with the many owners of the James Bond film rights, has never been told. Like so many Hollywood stories, the true facts of Harry's life are more surprising and entertaining than anything a writer of fiction could contrive. I dearly wish John Osborne would make Harry the subject of a non-fiction book, for he knows where the bodies are buried and has the wily and resourceful talent needed to disinter them. Also, I believe that, like me, he has an enduring affection for Harry.

In assessing the talents of Saltzman and Broccoli one must remember that spy stories were neither fashionable nor particularly popular in those early days of the 60s. The description 'spy films' conjured up smoky 'European' black and whites high on characterisation, atmosphere and dialogue and low on optical definition and plot. Graham Greene, Eric Ambler, Somerset Maugham, Carol Reed, Orson Welles, Fritz Lang and Alfred Hitchcock had all left their mark on this type of film. A buff of that period asked to name some classic spy films might have listed: *I Was a Spy* (1933), *The*



A Saltzman discovery: Sean Connery as James Bond

BFI STILLS, POSTERS AND DESIGNS (2) / KOBAL (1)

Kitchen-sink hero: Michael Caine as the working-class Harry Palmer in the Harry Saltzman-produced 'The Ipcress File'

Secret Agent (1936); *The Lady Vanishes* (1938); *Night Train to Munich* (1940); *Foreign Correspondent* (1940); *Journey into Fear* (1942); *Ministry of Fear* (1944); *The Mask of Dimitrios* (1944) and *Berlin Express* (1948). All are still worth seeking out.

Saltzman and Broccoli had no intention of making the Fleming stories into such arty films. The American audience sets less store by characterisation, atmosphere and dialogue than do Europeans. Americans on the whole prefer well-shaped stories with simple plots and hard conclusions. Films that are destined to be international successes need spirited action rather than the baffling wit and subtleties of well-written dialogue (which is often poorly dubbed or inaccurately subtitled).

In all these respects, the Saltzman and Broccoli epics scored. Fleming's spy stories, having already moved well away from Greene, Maugham and Ambler, were well suited to become glossy, large-scale boys' adventures. Sean Connery demonstrated electronic gadgets and futuristic vehicles to a newly affluent public dazzled by an avalanche of similar wonder toys that were arriving every week from Japanese factories.

Harry intended that my book *The Ipcress File*, with its working-class, bespectacled hero, would become a kitchen-sink spy film. But finding Michael Caine (a perfect Harry Palmer) took time, and with Bond-mania increasing with every Connery film, he found this resolve difficult to maintain. So *The Ipcress File*, planned as an all-location production bringing a new sort of gritty realism to the spy movie, went into the studio. In Pinewood they shot a flashy James Bond-style sequence based on an article about brain-washing Harry had seen in *Life* magazine. I heard later that he had tried to insert the same sequence into his current Bond film, but had been strenuously opposed.

When I bought the film rights of *Oh! What a Lovely War* (writing a script without owning the rights seemed somewhat risky), I went along to see Harry in his South Audley Street office to seek his blessing for my project. We sat and drank coffee together and he talked to me about the dangers and pitfalls, the treachery and delusion of the film world as if I was his son. As I got to my feet to leave, he added a final warning: "Make sure you don't buy yourself a packet of litigation, Len." A little chuckle. "There are cheaper ways of getting into court." He might well have noted his own advice, for he was to have more than his fair share of purchased litigation. But being Harry, he never complained and stoically kept his sense of humour throughout many misfortunes.

I saw Harry several times after that. I visited him in the tiny circular rooftop office when he was running the H. M. Tennent theatre empire. I saw him in his dimly lit apartment off Victoria Street when he was experimenting with lenses that enlarge television screens.

I always felt obliged to him for putting my writing career into a high gear at that time when writers most need a boost: the very beginning. He always kept his word to me, even at times when he would have benefited from forgetting. He was always enthusiastic and encouraging, even when being a little less encouraging might have enabled him to drive a better bargain. I liked him very much indeed, and I always enjoyed his company. Many people felt equally warmly towards him. But Harry seemed to find it difficult to believe that he was popular. I suppose that was why he had those sad eyes. Oh, I almost forgot: did the "*Sight and Sound* crowd" make him into a monster? You tell me.

Harry Saltzman: born Sherbrook, Canada 27 October 1915; died Paris, 28 September 1994