

ROALD DAHL ON FILM

YOU ONLY LIVE TWICE

UK/1967/117mins/adv12A

Dir: Lewis Gilbert

With: Sean Connery, Akiko Wakabayashi,
Mie Hama

Waylay any passer-by in the street and ask them to respond to the phrase 'Bond villain', and you'll likely receive a mixture of replies: Oddjob's hat; Jaws' steel gnashers; Scaramanga's nipple; Blofeld's pussy. There's every chance, though, that the first three words you'll hear from most will be "hollowed-out volcano".

With the Carry Ons, Hammer horror, and the Beatles all hitting box-office peaks, the mid 1960s for once saw something of a boom in commercial British film fortunes. Of course there are always doom merchants hovering, and doubtless those craving 'art', respectability, significance from cinema were up in arms about the success of our low-class franchises. So the international attention and global influence grabbed by Cubby Broccoli's 'James Bond' productions can't have met with joy in certain quarters. Eager paying punters the world over couldn't wait for the next instalment, and in 1966 with the World Cup safely in the bag and 'Sunny Afternoon' jauntily spinning on everybody's turntable, YOU ONLY LIVE TWICE was already underway.

The pressure was on. This was to be the most ambitious, vast Bond to date, with a Far Eastern location, beyond-ginormous Ken Adam sets, and a plan to go out of this world. And it was already booked into U.K. cinemas for June 13th 1967. Adding to the expanding list of problems (time-consuming aerial exploratory 'recces' seeking non-existent Japanese coastal castles, inability of cast members to speak English, Jan Werich being fired after five days as an ineffectual Blofeld and the major production heads avoiding death when after hastily changing flight plans, their originally scheduled plane crashed 25 minutes after take off), regular scriptwriter Richard Maibaum was unavailable for the first time. Harold Jack Bloom was called in as replacement, but his screenplay was rejected and Broccoli turned to Roald Dahl.

At this point Dahl was already a noted ace in the field of short fiction, and had seen many of his tales adapted for the small screen, but he had little experience as a movie scriptwriter. Dahl had penned THE BELLS OF HELL GO TING-A-LING-A-LING for director David Miller, but



CHAPTER



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uncustomary out-of-season snowfall in Switzerland caused that movie, about an air raid on the Zeppelin dirigible factory at Friedrichshafen, to be abandoned.

Roald, coincidentally a friend of Bond's creator Ian Fleming, delivered a completed script to Broccoli's satisfaction. It's difficult to judge the precise influence Roald Dahl may have exerted over the finished *YOU ONLY LIVE TWICE*. Take the villain's volcanic lair, for instance - production designer Ken Adam claims that he and Cubby hit upon the idea during their abortive three-week helicopter location scout, after failing to find a suitable castle from which Blofeld could operate but then experiencing a 'lightbulb' moment as their intrepid pilot flew over a cratered mountainous region. So it seems likely that Adam suggested that the hero's nemesis should plot his evil schemes from within an extinct hollow rock formation, with Roald as the recipient of and respondent of this demand. Or how about the famous scene where a car is lifted hundreds of feet into the air by a huge magnet suspended beneath a pursuing chopper? Cubby's wife Dana claimed that she devised that one. Not to mention the spectacular airborne autogyro gadget, seemingly included after its inventor Wing Commander Ken Wallis had been spotted piloting the contraption on television.

Dahl gets somewhat short shrift during the *YOU ONLY LIVE TWICE* Blu-ray release - namechecked just twice, in passing, on the commentary, and rather glossed over in the remainder of the disc. This seems an unbalanced representation of his contribution, however. Maibaum's Bonds had attempted to follow Fleming's plotlines where possible, so Dahl's was the first screenplay to dare to throw out much of the original author's work. Additionally, only certain key characters were retained and many new ones added. Also making his Bond debut, director Lewis Gilbert (*ALFIE*, *EDUCATING RITA*) had requested that the occasional risqué cheekiness of the dialogue be extended this time around, and that the opening pre-credits sequence ought to offer something different - Dahl seems to have taken him at his word. He shockingly kills off Sean Connery before the titles, later sees the revived spy married in a multi-racial coupling, and even turns him Asian before the close! With the real-life American/Russian space race hotting up, and - perhaps more pertinently - with Stanley Kubrick forging ahead on his film *2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY* at MGM over at Borehamwood, Dahl takes the action into outer space (he'd realised James had done everything possible on land, sea, and air by now and so sought new opportunities, though Bond wouldn't exit the Earth's atmosphere himself until 1979's ill-fated *MOONRAKER*). Other innovations include the inclusion of ninja/martial arts scenes, something exotically alien to western audiences at the time; and surely the sinister side of Dahl himself was responsible for creating the deadly piranha pool that flows ominously through Blofeld's office, and the chilling scene where poison is dripped down a thread in an assassination attempt on a sleeping Bond?

It's perhaps a shame that Ken Adam couldn't locate a suitable citadel - Fleming's novel has the chief villain tucked away in such a fortress, the grounds of which are rife with toxic and lethal plant-life: near-perfect territory for Dahl to conjure up mischief and doom. But perhaps the experience on this assignment offers parallels with his other works - the dinner-jacketed, martini-sipping refinement of Fleming and/or Maibaum's characters equates neatly to Dahl's own literary environment of bored playboys and mink-clad minxes causing mild havoc. As for the extravagances of Blofeld in *YOU ONLY LIVE TWICE*, why, you could almost substitute Willy Wonka for Donald Pleasance and barely notice any difference...



Darrell Buxton, cult movie historian, freelance lecturer, and editor of the books 'The Shrieking Sixties: British Horror Films 1960-1969', 'Dead or Alive: British Horror Films 1980-1989'