

Chapter 5

An Impossible Task?

Scripting *The Chilian Club*

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Introduction

This chapter will explore the multifarious drafting and redrafting of scripts and full screenplays for a film based on George Shipway's controversial political satire *The Chilian Club* (1971), the story of a quartet of elderly assassins – former army officers – who believe they are saving their country from Communist subversion. Although *The Chilian Club* was never produced, ten complete adaptations were written involving four different hands – writer-directors Peter Collinson and Mike Hodges, Benny Green, the well-known radio scriptwriter and broadcaster, and Michael Klinger who was to have been the film's producer – over a six-year period (1972–7). As discussions of screenwriting often emphasize (Rilla 1973: 12–16; Cook and Spicer 2008: 213–16; Maras 2009: 11–15), it is important to establish what is understood to be the object of study. Thus, although there will be a detailed examination of the scripts themselves and the aesthetic difficulties of realizing Shipway's novel, the chapter will also pay close attention to the fluctuating nature of the collaborations involved and contextual factors that shaped them. This was a period of exceptional volatility and uncertainty in the British film industry, and Klinger, as an independent producer, faced extreme difficulties that had a direct bearing on his attempts to film *The Chilian Club*.



Figure 5.1 The strapline for *Klinger News* with a typical headline; courtesy of Tony Klinger

My analysis of the deeper forces at work in attempting to realize *The Chilian Club* will be based on hitherto unused material in the University of the West of England's Michael Klinger Papers that shed light on the convoluted relationships between screenwriters, distributors, potential investors, public bodies and large corporations, all pivoting round the figure of Michael Klinger as the producer. This material has been supplemented by articles in the trade press and a detailed interview with Klinger's son Tony, who worked as an assistant to his father from 1972 onwards and was thus intimately involved in the project himself.

George Shipway's *The Chilian Club*

Shipway's novel forms part of a minor subgenre in British fiction, the assassination thriller. Its most influential forerunners include J. M. Barrie's *Better Dead* (1896), Edgar Wallace's *The Four Just Men* (1905) and its sequels, G. K. Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday* (1908) and Jack London's *The Assassination Bureau, Ltd.*, begun in 1910, but completed by Robert L. Fish in 1963 and filmed in 1969. Wallace's novel, filmed in 1921 and 1939 and broadcast as a television series in 1959, was the closest prototype, depicting an international quartet of assassins dedicated to punishing wrongdoers who are beyond the law. The four just men are not animated by partisan political motives but fighting for justice, acting to prevent what they perceive as a threat to the moral health of society.

Shipway's novel is unmistakably right-wing, the product of his classically English upper-middle-class education, attending Clifton College and Sandhurst before serving in the Indian Imperial Cavalry from 1928 to 1947. On retirement from the army, Shipway became a teacher at a boys' school in Berkshire and gradually established a reputation as a writer of action-packed historical novels, including *Imperial Governor* (1968) and *Knight in Anarchy* (1969) (Fisk 2003: 4–5). As a political satire, *The Chilian Club* was a departure that Shipway subtitled 'A Diversion', but it has an important historical dimension, beginning with a lengthy prologue detailing the bloody farce of the battle of Chilianwala in India (1849) in which the 6th Hussars, a cavalry regiment commanded by Viscount Cardross, disgraced itself. In the aftermath, Cardross converted his London house into a club as a refuge for his blackballed officers who had been ostracized by polite society as the 'Chilianwala cravens'. Over time, the Chilian (a contracted form of Chilianwala) Club became

a haven for elderly men who found shelter there from the disconcerting ferment of a modern, alien world; men with the outlook and manners of a vanished age, moulded by the confines of their caste, disciplined by a lifetime's service, arrogant, intolerant – and often ruthless.

(Shipway 1971: 10)

This is Shipway's great theme, men at odds with the modern world, adrift in a present-day England that has become paralysed by strikes and left-wing political activism resulting in race riots, food rationing, transport chaos and

rampant inflation. The four Club members who decide to ‘rescue’ their country from becoming a communist state and a ‘Russian satellite’ (ibid., 23) – General Sir Henry Mornay, Lieutenant-Colonel Hugo Mayne-Amaury, Brigadier Charles Cotterell and Major Jimmy Curtis – use information gleaned from Mornay’s nephew, Group Captain Geoffrey Emtage now in Intelligence, to execute a series of assassinations of both hard and soft left leaders. Courtesy of Sergeant-Major Spragge, the eavesdropping batman at their Club, the quartet recruit a younger man, Captain Nicolas Audenard, a mercenary killer and fellow anti-communist, to dispose of three communist student union agitators. There is an extended subplot involving Mayne-Amaury’s niece Sally and her student lover. In a surreal denouement, the co-conspirators forestall the attempt of the Prime Minister – recognizably Harold Wilson – to sell a new super-weapon, ENEMA (the Electronic Neutralization of Earth’s Magnetic Attraction), to the Russians. However, they cannot prevent Stonehenge, the target chosen to prove ENEMA’s power to his paymasters, being sent into orbit. Blithely unaware that their actions throughout have been manipulated by Emtage and his controller, Sir Nigel Penworth, to dispose of ‘undesirable elements’, the three remaining ‘crusaders’ – having blundered, Curtis kills himself rather than jeopardize the others – discuss plans for further assassinations.

Shipway maintains a light tone by emphasizing that the assassins succeed as much through lucky blunders as daring and military precision and he intersperses the plotting and killings with comic scenes in the Edwardian elegance of Mrs Arbuthnot’s superior brothel in Half Moon Street, where the vivacious Coralie Cordell plies her trade. However, the overtly farcical elements never obscure Shipway’s underlying purpose to delineate the frustrations and blighted hopes of a particular class and generation emasculated by the loss of empire: ‘old men nurtured in the disciplines and traditions of a vanished age. They were young when England ruled the world; their manhood saw her empire shredded, her glory tarnished’ (ibid., 207). The most powerful moments in the novel tap into this emotional core, as in Mornay’s diatribe to the others about the meaninglessness of their existence (ibid., 61) and in the flashbacks during individual assassinations when each of the four recollect the blunders that tarnished their Second World War service, the particular ghosts they are trying to exorcize.

The Chilian Club was successful: published in America (as *The Yellow Room*, an allusion to the windowless chamber in the Club where the four men meet) and reissued as a Granada paperback in 1972. It tapped into a deep stratum of right-wing thinking in post-war British culture that harboured genuine cold war fears of increasing Soviet power and influence and the need for extraordinary measures to combat this (see Hewison 1988; Shaw 2001) that was most popularly displayed in Ian Fleming’s James Bond novels and some of the earlier film adaptations (see Bennett and Woollacott 1987). The currency of its central ideas can be indicated by Chapman Pincher’s article ‘The Secret Vigilantes’ in the *Daily Express* (1 Feb. 1974), which stated that a secret group has been set up ‘to combat the Reds’ who had been infiltrating unions, workplaces and universities. There were also

strong rumours of a right-wing *coup d'état* against Wilson in 1974 in which the Intelligence services were involved.¹ However, *The Chilian Club's* politics were highly controversial: lauded by reviewers in the Conservative press but vilified by those of a left-liberal persuasion.

Genesis of the first screenplay: Peter Collinson, August 1972

Even before its republication in paperback, the rights to Shipway's novel had been bought, for £7,750, on 31 May 1971 by Tigon Films.² Tigon was part of a group of companies controlled by Laurie Marsh, a shrewd and opportunistic businessman who had made his millions in property as managing director of Star Holdings before moving into the film industry in the late 1960s (Hamilton 2005: 49, 124). Peter Collinson was contracted by Tigon (for £5,000) to direct and also to write the first screenplay.³ The production was advertised in *Today's Cinema* on 8 October 1971. Collinson retains the novel's central structure of a succession of assassinations, but, either through inexperience – although an established director, this was his first screenplay – or to keep within Tigon's modest projected budget of £150,000 (ibid., 294), Collinson excises entirely the novel's historical prologue that actually explains the origins and significance of the Chilian Club. Collinson substitutes a title sequence depicting a strike-bound, paralyzed London through a montage of black and white photographs 'showing dole queues and the broken faces that go with being out of work ... Student sit-ins, empty railways, strikes, empty docks, empty roads, race riots.' Also cut, almost entirely, are the scenes in the bordello that provided Shipway with a rich source of comedy. Collinson is more even-handed politically: one of the victims is right-wing; another a progressive free-thinker rather than communist sympathizer. He retains the surreal/sci-fi denouement on Salisbury Plain, but the three remaining protagonists are killed along with the Prime Minister. The script ends on a sardonic note, Audenard commenting that 'old soldiers never die – they only float away ...', an indication that Collinson rather lacked a real feeling for the material, an understanding of the potential of the central characters as engagingly misguided protagonists.

However, by the time Collinson's script had been completed in August 1972, Marsh had severed his ties with Tigon and had asked Michael Klingler to produce.⁴ Klingler, who had given Collinson his first break as a director with the low-budget absurdist thriller *The Penthouse* (1967), was rapidly establishing himself as the most important independent producer in Britain (see Spicer 2010). Although a Jewish socialist whose ideological perspective and values were antithetical to Shipway's, Klingler adored the anarchic idea that formed the basis of *The Chilian Club* and recognized its potential as an Ealingesque comedy whose politics could be recast (Klinger 2009). His extensive comments on Collinson's script show Klingler's frustration with its aesthetic limitations, especially the ponderous literalism with which expository openings to numerous scenes are lifted wholesale from the

novel, and its lack of pace and action. Even more significantly, Klinger judged that Collinson had failed to reproduce Shipway's adroit mixing of comedy – in several places he wrote 'lighter' in the margins – with a depth of characterization that invites audience involvement.⁵ In particular, he wanted the novel's historical opening to be retained, Mrs Arbuthnot and Coralie firmly established as important characters and the killings to be more imaginatively handled. Overall, Klinger was convinced that Collinson's script could not be the basis for a film version and argued for a major rewrite.⁶

The second script: Benny Green, November 1972

As often during this period, Klinger turned to his friend Benny Green, a jazz saxophonist who had transmuted into a broadcaster and prolific writer, especially of radio documentary scripts, and who was renowned for his wit and erudition as film critic for *Punch* and literary critic for *The Spectator* (Gammond 2004). The pair had met while both were members of the West Central Jewish Lads Club, enjoying 'its beguiling amalgam of English manners and immigrant anarchism' (Green 2000: 112). As noted, it was the anarchic element of Shipway's novel that fundamentally attracted Klinger, and Green was similarly attuned to that mode as a connoisseur of English eccentricities and humour – he later wrote a perceptive biography of P. G. Wodehouse (1981). Although Green worked on his own at this point, he was entirely conversant with Klinger's reservations about Collinson's version and rewrote the script accordingly.

Green's script not only reinstates the novel's historical prologue but also enlarges it by offering a conspectus of British military glories shown on a map before alighting on the Chilianwalla disaster. A series of vignettes follows, charting the disgraced officers' social exclusion and the establishment of the Club. By setting the story slightly in the future (the country is in the sixth year of strikes), Green is able to accentuate the current chaos where there is fighting, rioting and looting on the streets, and exaggerate the comedy – as in Mornay's Rolls being drawn by horses as he makes his way to the Club. Green also extends the political even-handedness present in Collinson's script by making the third victim overtly fascist (Walter Shorthouse, Chairman of the National British Committee) and having the Prime Minister sell out to an international consortium rather than the Russians. All the assassinations are funnier and more inventive, notably those of Sidney Rinker the union leader and Abdul Sharif the head of the Black Power movement. For both Green and Klinger, these figures are legitimate targets because they are anti-democratic rather than because they are left-wing (Klinger 2009). Green makes the Half Moon Street bordello central to the plot, and introduces Vandenkatz, an American ambassador, who assails Mayne-Amaury's niece Sally, mistaking her for one of the prostitutes. At this point the script turns into something of a sex romp as she rushes around semi-naked before being rescued by Audenard. Mrs Arbuthnot is now in league with Emtage and Penworth and the emphasis on the

quartet's manipulation becomes more overt. Shipway's denouement on Salisbury Plain is retained, but the ending is much more upbeat with all four protagonists surviving, toasting the empty coffin of the Prime Minister (who has been sent into orbit rather than Stonehenge) as it passes the Club in an ironic state funeral.

Klinger clearly thought Green's script a major improvement aesthetically on Collinson's, finding it more crisply focused on the central characters, swift-moving and funnier, but he expressed a number of reservations.⁷ Some of these were items of detail. For instance, Klinger noted that Shorthouse's death – blown up as he kicks a ball to start a football match – was not original as it had been used before in *The Green Man*.⁸ He thought Shipway's device of a super weapon 'needs changing for something else more believable'. However, he was more exercised by the overall tone. Klinger judged the sex scenes possibly overdone, that Sally's character had been coarsened, and that some of the comic scenes were 'over the top ... it's almost Monty Python'. He argued that the comedy 'should be blacker' because 'there are more serious overtones such as famine etc. which could be touched upon to give credibility to our anti-heroes'; he wanted an additional counter-argument against the murders, thus lending greater weight to their decision to proceed. Above all, Klinger felt that Shipway's slow-building understanding of the men's desperation and the poignancy of the mournful future that faces them had been lost in Green's adaptation and urged that the flashbacks to war be retained to give the characters greater depth. Klinger concluded his comments by insisting: 'it must be emphasized that these people aren't fanatic Right wingers or Socialists or Liberals but as De Gaulle once said are above politics'.⁹ This comment may offer a central clue as to Klinger's interest in Shipway's novel: that he identified with aspects of the protagonists' rage and frustration with British society as a fellow outsider and the need for drastic action.

Some of Klinger's reservations about the revised script were echoed by Marsh: 'I feel that the first 30 pages have taken the view which is too extreme as to the extent of the effect on the country to an almost farcical level i.e. a strike for 3 yrs. and de-valuation down to approx. 1/50th of value is so far-fetched that it would be unbelievable'; he urged Klinger to make the story more credible.¹⁰ However, although Marsh stated that he was 'personally very keen' to have *The Chilean Club* made and wants to be 'more involved than usual' in its production, he was in the process of withdrawing, like so many others, from participating in film production (Hamilton 2005: 232; see also Higson 1994: 219–21). For his part, Klinger had become increasingly exasperated by Marsh's reluctance to pay the negotiated fees.¹¹ Convinced of the film's potential, Klinger went his own way, eventually purchasing the rights from Marsh.¹² Klinger took the unusual step of co-writing a third script (December 1972) with Green that incorporated most of the changes he had suggested, in particular extending and deepening the characterization of the four protagonists. Shipway's ending was in fact retained but with the final moments focusing more emphatically on 'our old heroes' who are pleased to see 'everything moving again'.

This shift from entrepreneur to active creative agent indicates the importance of the project for Klinger. However, the new script was something of a compromise – one that would haunt the entire project – between fidelity to Shipway’s conception (though with the politics changed) and a broader, more farcical comedy. James Mason, an obvious choice to play Mornay, succinctly summed up the problem when he wrote to Klinger expressing his dislike of the ‘irrelevant sex adventures’ because they undermined ‘the basic situation [that] is a very real one and could be dramatized in a very realistic manner which lends itself to plenty of grim humour’.¹³

Rejections of the Green–Klinger screenplay and an intermission

Mason echoed Klinger’s own misgivings, but Klinger was acutely aware of the problems of finding an audience for his film and was anxious to press ahead with a production. *The Chilean Club*’s projected budget was now around £400,000, significantly more than Marsh’s original figure, but in line with Klinger’s ambitions as a producer and his conviction that the film would only work with top-line British stars and an experienced director.¹⁴ However, having severed his ties with Marsh, Klinger had to obtain funding in what had become an exceptionally hostile environment; the one in which the medium-budgeted film that could be expected to make a modest profit in the domestic marketplace had almost vanished as British film production contracted and cinema-going declined (Wood 1983: 3–5). In addition to these general problems, Klinger faced specific difficulties with *The Chilean Club* because of its subject matter: too parochial and too political. John Heyman at World Film Services declined to become involved because: ‘I really do feel that this is too British for a territorial sales organisation, and I don’t think the script is as good as you seem to think it would be.’¹⁵ Danton Rissner, United Artists’ Vice President in charge of East Coast and European Productions, also rejected *The Chilean Club* because although he thought it was ‘an interesting idea and reminiscent of “Kind Hearts and Coronets”’,¹⁶ he judged Klinger’s intended film would not be ‘commercially viable outside of the United Kingdom. Since the market here in the U.K. and Commonwealth is so restricted, it’s a really tough job to recoup any film that costs more than £2–300,000.’¹⁷

Rissner’s comments underline the general difficulties British producers faced in a rapidly shrinking domestic market and thus the necessity to appeal to an international audience, but he also judged that it was *The Chilean Club*’s explicit politics rather than its Britishness that constituted the major obstacle:

I also wonder whether in fact one can poke fun or dissipate [sic] national institutions – i.e. Black Power figures, Union leaders etc., without making the movie less than a quasi-political film. By dealing with a country in the throes of economic disaster, it may turn the movie around from an

overtly comic milieu to one that purports to be making a comment on the political climate of today. If anything, 'Coronets' dealt with a more passive structure – that of a man whose birthright was taken away from him, and who attempted to retain it by way of a series of murders ... which I believe is much more simplistic and does not take on the afore-mentioned political and nationalistic movements.¹⁸

Rissner and Klinger were on first-name terms and it is clear that he would like to support the project, but he would also have been mindful that United Artists had backed Klinger's previous black comedy, *Pulp* (1972), whose financial returns had been relatively poor, hence the need to be cautious about a property that did not fit existing marketing categories and whose politics, especially the animus against Black Power leaders, might create significant problems for American audiences. Although Rissner would have been well aware of the potential of Ealingesque comedies which had succeeded in America despite their Britishness (see Street 2002: 154–7), this was outweighed by *The Chilian Club*'s problematic politics.

Turning to indigenous sources that might be expected to support a resonantly British film, Klinger fared no better; in fact their attitude was noticeably cooler. In May 1973, F. S. Poole, managing director of the largest British production company, Rank, judging *The Chilian Club* inferior to *The League of Gentlemen*,¹⁹ wrote to Klinger saying that he could not commit the company to a project 'in which you were asking for complete participation'.²⁰ Eighteen months later, in December



Figure 5.2 Michael Klinger in his pomp: on the set of *Gold* (1974); courtesy of Tony Klinger

1974, Sir John Terry, chairman of the National Film Finance Corporation, wrote stating that this government body was not prepared to finance either the film or its pre-production and expressed reservations about the script.²¹

During this period Klinger had become preoccupied with three demanding and complex international productions, *Rachel's Man* (1974), *Gold* (1974) and *Shout at the Devil* (1976). A further eighteen months elapsed, by which time post-production had been completed on *Shout*, before Klinger was ready to resume serious work on *The Chilean Club*. Klinger now judged that it would be a suitable project for Mike Hodges. Klinger had given Hodges his first opportunity to direct a feature film (*Get Carter*, 1971) and had supported him as *Pulp*'s writer-director, which, despite its poor performance at the box office, Klinger felt had almost worked brilliantly, a strong indication that he could make a success of *The Chilean Club*. Klinger was also conscious that Hodges had had a rough ride with his American films and was anxious to give him an opportunity to re-establish his career in Britain (Klinger 2009). Hodges was hired by Klinger's company Metropic and by October 1976 had completed his draft script.²²

The Mike Hodges's scripts

Although Hodges was a friend, he considered himself an *auteur*, and, dedicating his script to 'Billy Wilder and Alfred Hitchcock', was prepared not only to ignore the existing script but to be much more free-ranging in his approach to Shipway's original. Hodges noted on the title-page of his draft that it is 'loosely based on a book of the same name'. Although Hodges' erudite script is more literary – making reference to Gilbert and Sullivan, Kipling and Somerset Maugham – he appears to have had little interest in the men's cause or their motivations, reconstructing *The Chilean Club* as a lightweight farce with an underlying theme of violence and sexual deviance. London is depicted as being in complete confusion and chaos: looting and street robberies are commonplace and police battle routinely with gunmen. The historical element is given parenthetically by a guide explaining the origins of the Club to a group of Japanese tourists being flour-bombed by Spragge from an upstairs window of the Club. The main characters become broad caricatures: Curtis is stone deaf and cannot get batteries for his hearing-aid during the privations, Mayne-Amaury has an eye-patch and is a closet homosexual known as Gladys, while their victims are a motley collection of disparate figures some of whom, including Curtis's turf accountant, are killed because they are personally inconvenient, not linked to any cause. The deaths, which are often bizarre, include several that are a case of mistaken identity, including the Bishop of Camberwell, killed in Arbuthnot's brothel. However, the conspirators reflect that, because he was a fetishist who wore women's underwear, his killing is excusable, even justifiable. Hodges, aware of the film's topicality, makes several of the victims readily identifiable with their real-life counterparts, including Taffy Williams, an obvious caricature of Clive Jenkins, the leader of the Association of

Scientific, Technical and Managerial Staffs. There is a protracted joke about the hordes of ‘commie’ waiters interviewed by the police as suspects in the American Ambassador’s death whose broken English creates endless confusion, and rather coarse incidental humour including Emtage’s wife deserting him for a fishmonger: ‘I think it was the smell that attracted her.’ In keeping with the absurdist nature of Hodges’s approach, the ending is bathetic: Mornay dies of a heart attack as Emtage breaks the news to him that the Prime Minister is their next target.

At Klinger’s instruction, Hodges prepared a second draft, completed by 10 December 1976, but the only major change was the ending in which the old soldiers capture the Prime Minister and place him in Madame Tussaud’s. However, Hodges’s broad-brush absurdist treatment was at odds with Klinger’s fundamental conception of *The Chilean Club* and Klinger sent a very extensive set of notes on the second draft.²³ In reply, Hodges made a number of minor alterations and expressed his satisfaction with the revisions: ‘For myself, I now find the script concise, fast, zany and exactly the right length for a farce. Hopefully it is also funny!’²⁴ Klinger was far from satisfied with Hodges’s ‘zany’ version and again intervened directly in the actual scripting. The new screenplay (the sixth overall), co-written by Hodges and Klinger, opens with a voiceover that recounts the Club’s history, makes the central characters more rounded and believable and establishes that they have a recognizable cause; Hodges’s grosser jokes are eliminated.

The return of Benny Green

Klinger remained deeply dissatisfied with the co-written script and turned again to Benny Green. Unsurprisingly, the joint Hodges–Klinger–Green script (version seven) shifts back decisively to Green’s earlier conception. The historical prologue shown in animated sequences is reinstated, the central characters given more credibility and the deaths became an amalgam of those in Green’s earlier version and some of Hodges’s inventions, but with a far greater stress on the old soldiers’ even-handedness in their choice of victim because of their ‘sense of fair play’. Their victims, in their various ways, all deserve to die. However, Hodges’s stress on lubricity and a variety of sexual practices is retained. It is now the homosexual Dapier Bennett-Hamilton who is fomenting trouble at the universities and although the ENEMA device is reintroduced, Owen Morgan, the corrupt and venal Prime Minister, collapses and dies after a sex orgy at Mrs Arbuthnot’s. Klinger no doubt judged that this was a shift attuned to the sensibility of the times: the plethora of sex romps that dominated the British box office with Klinger’s own ‘Confessions Of ...’ series (1974–8) a highly successful example. Even respected established filmmakers, such as the Boulting Brothers (with *Soft Beds, Hard Battles* in 1974), had gone down this route. Green’s earlier upbeat ending is restored. Two more versions of this triple-authored script were produced. The first tightened the focus on the central action and made the narrative thread clearer. The second

strengthened the descriptions of the protagonists and specifically set the action in 1987, 'ten years hence'.

However, the 'collaboration' on these changes appears to have been between Green and Klinger, with Hodges, preoccupied by trying desperately to sustain his directing career in America, increasingly sidelined. Eventually, there was an acrimonious parting of the ways. While Hodges maintained that he had 'written numerous drafts for a pittance', Klinger responded that it was Hodges who had chosen 'to totally discard the previous scripts and write your own version', had only fitted rewriting in when other tasks permitted and that the overruns had become insupportable: 'a few days had become months'. The upshot was that Klinger had had to 'discard virtually your entire script because it was clearly designed for your own highly personal style of direction'.²⁵ Klinger's frustration is understandable, but Hodges was a known quantity who had gone his own way on *Pulp* and was therefore someone who would be expected to write something idiosyncratic. It was more that, in this instance, Klinger felt that Hodges was not *simpatico* with what he perceived to be the merit of the original and the strengths of Green's existing script.

Anticipating Hodges's departure, Klinger had already employed an American 'fixer', Lester Goldsmith, to compare the scripts. Goldsmith reported back that,

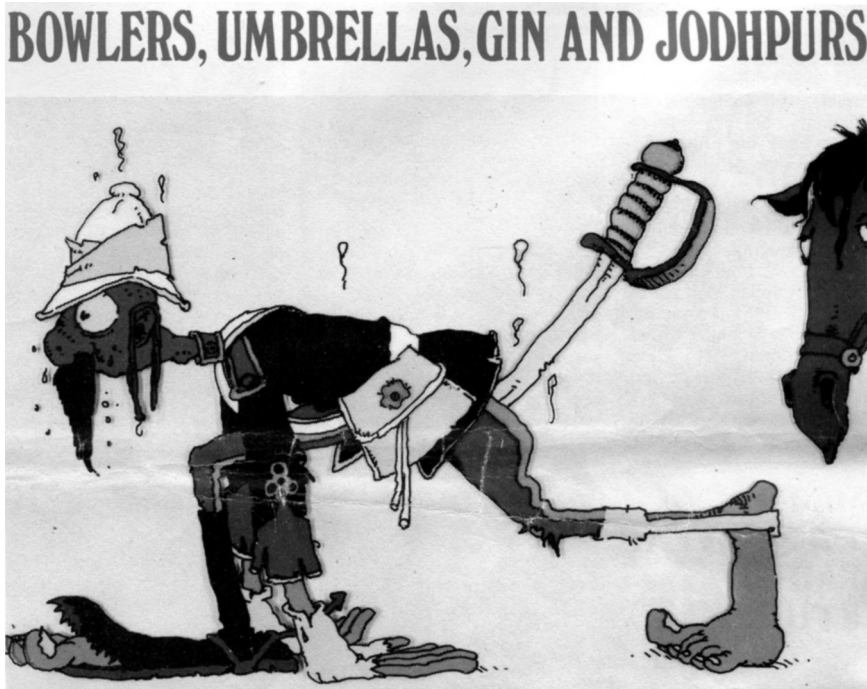


Figure 5.3 A still from the animated titles that had been produced for *The Chilian Club*; courtesy of Tony Klinger

as it now stood, the elements directly attributable to Hodges were sixteen pages 'and a few odd lines' and that these '16 pages comprise only four original scenes and contain no structural contribution'.²⁶ A tenth script, dated 14 March 1977, was therefore prepared with credits for Green and Klinger only. This script, written very rapidly in a few weeks, reintroduced many of Green's jokes as well as strengthening the characterization. Although the final script closely resembled the version that Green had prepared two years earlier, it had become more of a sex comedy, retaining Hodges's emphasis on a plurality of sexual practices and his ending in which the PM collapses during a sex orgy at the brothel after the assassins have bungled several attempts on his life.

The deal that never was: Rank and the NFFC

Despite the departure of Hodges, Klinger was determined to press on because *The Chilean Club* was the most advanced project in a four-picture deal that Klinger – now recognized as the leading British independent producer on the strength of his international success with *Gold* and *Shout at the Devil* – believed he had negotiated with the Rank Organization in August 1976.²⁷ In a major shift from its earlier position, the NFFC had also now committed itself to providing 25 per cent of the finances, around £300,000, on the understanding that Rank was contributing £400,000.²⁸ Klinger received warm encouragement from John Trevelyan, the former Secretary of the British Board of Film Censors (he retired in 1971), who admired Klinger as 'one of the few people who can keep cinema alive'. Trevelyan opined that the 'subject is now even more topical' than it was when the novel was first published, 'what with troubles at Leylands and Fords and elsewhere', and looked forward to a film with an all-star cast 'of older actors': Ralph Richardson, John Gielgud, Laurence Olivier, Alec Guinness and Trevor Howard. However, he urged Klinger to avoid any extreme right-wing stance as this 'would be liable to produce antagonism'.²⁹ After receiving the draft screenplay on 15 April, Trevelyan wrote again to congratulate Klinger on 'getting over the political problems' by accentuating the farcical elements, adding, 'this could be a great film'.³⁰

Klinger had tried to recruit Richard Lester as a possible director but he was already committed on other films.³¹ Klinger had written earlier to Terry that he was in 'active negotiations' with Guinness, Howard, David Niven and Kenneth More.³² Although Peter Sellers had expressed an interest in appearing as all the victims but could not commit himself to the project at that point, Klinger pressed ahead, anxious to cement the Rank deal.³³ Film Finances Ltd had already written a completion guarantee, for £1,250,000 on 22 December 1976 with filming scheduled to begin on 18 April 1977.³⁴ An upbeat edition of *Klinger News* (undated but probably March 1977) announced *The Chilean Club* as one of five projects 'in advanced pre-production stages', named Rex Harrison, David Hemmings, Lionel Jeffries, James Mason, More and Peter Ustinov as slated to appear in this 'hilarious and highly pertinent black comedy', as well as 'the lovely

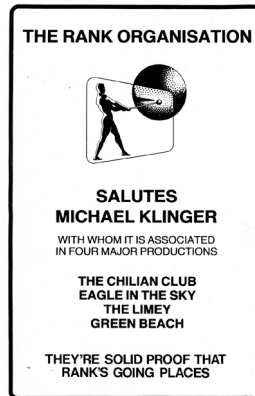


Figure 5.4 Rank's advert in *Klinger News* (courtesy of Tony Klinger)

Gayle Hunnicut', presumably to play Coralie, and identified Peter Collinson as the director. Collinson is quoted as being enthusiastic about a film depicting 'the British at their best, doing something for themselves ... not a serious movie at all. It's like a cartoon ... [the old boys] try to kill the Prime Minister eight times, but he finally dies in a brothel doing his duty for Britain!'³⁵

However, the anticipated funding from Rank did not materialize. Klinger wrote to the then head of Leisure Services at Rank, Edmond Chilton, urging him to confirm its financial commitment and emphasizing that *The Chilian Club* was 'designed to be – and will be – an entirely international comedy in the style of, and hopefully the success pattern of, "PINK PANTHER"', an indication that Klinger was now convinced that the film's success depended on its casting and in accentuating the non-political elements.³⁶ However, no such undertaking was forthcoming from Rank. At the same time, Terry wrote to Klinger introducing a new condition for the NFFC loan: that an American or 'other international distribution deal' had to be negotiated beforehand. Arguing that the film's budget had tripled since the NFFC first became linked to the project, Terry added that his Board 'did not accept your view that the film would command a wide international market'.³⁷ Klinger, stunned and outraged by this complete change of tack, and the imposition of a requirement that was at variance with the NFFC's standard practice, wrote back stating that the NFFC had been fully aware of the revised budget figure when it had committed itself to quarter-financing the film in January and that there had been no mention of a pre-sales condition at that point. Klinger observed witheringly that it would have been unnecessary for him to approach the NFFC if he had secured international funding, and protested that the NFFC was 'totally ignoring the fact that I am the only United Kingdom based producer with his own, well established, worldwide selling organisation ... You pay lip service to the financing of British films from British sources until it comes to it'.³⁸ Klinger understood only too well that the NFFC's requirement almost completely undermined his bargaining strategy with potential foreign financiers.

Klinger had good reason to be bitter as he had never succeeded in raising any production finance in Britain and because neither Rank's nor the NFFC's attitude can be explained by purely economic logic, although both may have been ultimately unconvinced that the film would succeed internationally. What had caused this major shift in attitude in the space of six months? According to Klinger's son, Sir John Davis, Rank's chairman, was having a purge of senior staff, including Chilton, and was not prepared to honour any agreements that had made, thereby undermining his executives' position and divesting them of power (Klinger 2009). Davis had used this tactic before in order to impose his authority (see Spicer 2006: 138–9). It was also part of Davis's longer term strategy to withdraw Rank entirely from active film production. Without Rank's commitment, the NFFC would have felt exposed financially and the agreement would have further added to the increasing pressure the Corporation was under during this period (see Porter 1979: 222–3, 266; Smith 2008: 70). Terry's imposition of a pre-production distribution agreement reads as the action of someone looking for a way out of a commitment that had become onerous and potentially embarrassing, both financially and politically. Klinger, as a working-class Jewish socialist, was never a figure who found favour with the British establishment (Klinger 2009).

Klinger continued his denunciation of the NFFC in the pages of *Screen International*, which reported his trip to the United States to obtain American finance.³⁹ These efforts proved abortive. John D. Eberts, representing the Canadian Oppenheimer Group, was typical in rejecting *The Chilian Club* because 'I have been unable to elicit any interest in this project from my institutional sources. I think most people feel the subject is too parochial or too "British"'.⁴⁰ In Britain, Michael Deeley, the Managing Director of EMI, rejected Klinger's film because 'I don't believe the political background of 1987 that the script prophesies and thus cannot accept the essential justification within the script of the activities of the Club members'.⁴¹ Klinger's health had been permanently damaged by a heart attack suffered on location in Africa making *Shout at the Devil* and he no longer had the same energy and drive to sustain projects. The subsequent rejections of *The Chilian Club* – by Rank (again, 28 February 1978); the Film Finances Group Limited (17 April 1978); Sandy Lieberson at Twentieth Century-Fox (21 February 1979); Verity Lambert at Euston Films (8 June 1979); and Linda Morrow, Program Development Manager for MGM TV (13 June 1979) – were cursory.⁴²

Klinger made one final effort to mount the production in the early 1980s, paying Rory MacLean to revise the script.⁴³ Klinger started negotiations, in July 1980, for Benny Hill to play the eight assassinated characters, with filming to begin in March 1981.⁴⁴ Dick Brand at MGM expressed his enthusiasm for using Hill, but nothing came of this.⁴⁵ After further rejections by Rediffusion (7 July 1982); Jeremy Isaacs for Channel 4 (12 July 1982); Sandy Lieberson now at Goldcrest (22 June 1984); and by Handmade Films (12 December 1985), the attempt to film *The Chilian Club* finally ended.⁴⁶

Conclusion

The Chilian Club's right-wing politics and its mode of black comedy presented significant problems for Klinger's attempts to produce a film version and this is reflected in the numerous rewritings. They reflect a fundamental uncertainty as to whether the satirical or farcical elements should be accentuated and how much sex and nudity should be presented. Klinger remained dissatisfied with all of the scripts, unconvinced that any of the various collaborations had succeeded in balancing the anarchic comedy with a sense of the humanity of the central characters who were 'above politics' and their underlying frustrations with British society. Though he worked quite effectively with Green, Klinger lacked the defining input from a director at the scripting stage. This was not Collinson's strength and the anticipated collaboration with Hodges turned out to be a mistake, though not one that could have been predicted, given Hodges's obvious talents and the example of *Pulp*.

However, the aesthetic difficulties and the occasionally fraught nature of the various collaborations on the scripts do not explain the project's ultimate failure. Essentially *The Chilian Club* fell between several stools. It was not simply a low-budget sex comedy that could have recouped its money even in a reduced domestic market and by 1973 the medium-budget British film was no longer being produced. *The Chilian Club's* combination of a parochial Britishness, its overtly political subject matter and the age of its protagonists made it a problematic proposition for international investors who remained unconvinced of its appeal; it was neither a whimsical Ealing comedy nor *The Pink Panther*. However, even an understanding of these commercial factors does not completely explain Klinger's difficulties. In early 1977, when Klinger's own reputation had increased and *The Chilian Club* was actively in pre-production, Rank reneged on its agreement to invest in the film's production as did the NFFC through its imposition of a pre-sales agreement. This double blow, the result of internal corporation politics and Klinger's position as a Jewish outsider rather more than a sense of the film's commercial potential, effectively ended any real hopes of its production. Subsequently, with Klinger's career in decline, it was never seriously considered as a viable proposition in either North America or in Britain. Scripting a successful version of *The Chilian Club* had become an impossible task.

What I hope this detailed study of *The Chilian Club* has shown is the central importance of scrutinizing the industrial, commercial and cultural context in analysing a screenplay. In this instance and, I submit, in any other, one cannot understand either the nature of the detailed changes that were made or the reasons why the film could not be made simply through an examination of the various drafts. The detailed correspondence referred to shows how significantly the scripting process was affected by aesthetic differences among the collaborators, by the attitudes of potential investors, by structural changes in the British film industry and by the career trajectory of Klinger himself. Any serious study of

screenwriting, I suggest, must take full cognizance of these contexts if it is to produce a satisfactory account of the processes involved.

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Notes

- 1 See *The Plot Against Harold Wilson*, BBC2, 16 March 2006.
- 2 Information contained in a letter from Richard Odgers representing Spokesmen lawyers to Michael Klinger, 27 Aug. 1975; Michael Klinger Papers, University of the West of England (MKP).
- 3 Information contained in a letter from Raffles Edelman, solicitor, to Klinger, 13 March 1973; MKP.
- 4 Letter from Marsh to Klinger, 29 Aug. 1972. Klinger's fee was £10,000; MKP.
- 5 Marginalia on Collinson's script and accompanying notes; MKP.
- 6 Letter from Klinger to Kamal Pasha at the Laurie Marsh Group, 23 Oct. 1972. Klinger requested £1,500 for the new script.
- 7 Five pages of comments are attached to Green's script, dated Nov. 1972; MKP.
- 8 *The Green Man* is an amiable Launder and Gilliat farce released in 1955 starring Alastair Sim as a professional assassin foiled by an innocuous vacuum cleaner salesman (George Cole).
- 9 Accompanying notes to Green's script, Nov. 1972; MKP.
- 10 Letter to Klinger, 6 Dec. 1972; MKP.
- 11 Letter from Klinger to Marsh, 1 Jan. 1973; MKP.
- 12 *The Chilian Club* Schedule, dated 31 March 1973; MKP.
- 13 Letter to Klinger, 3 Jan. 1973; MKP.
- 14 See Klinger's letter to Marsh, 1 Dec. 1972; MKP.
- 15 Letter to Klinger, 27 Feb. 1973; MKP.
- 16 *Kind Hearts and Coronets* had been released by Ealing Studios in 1949, directed by Robert Hamer. It was based on Roy Horniman's 1907 novel *Israel Rank: The Autobiography of a Criminal*. It experienced considerable problems with American censors – see Street (2002: 134–5).
- 17 Letter to Klinger, 22 May 1973; MKP.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 *The League of Gentlemen* (1960), directed by Basil Dearden, with a screenplay by Bryan Forbes, was based on John Bolan's 1958 black comedy about a group of disaffected war veterans with criminal pasts who are manipulated by Colonel Hyde (Jack Hawkins) into committing a series of robberies that will restore meaning to their lives.
- 20 Letter to Klinger, 24 May 1973; MKP.
- 21 Letter to Klinger, 4 Dec. 1974. The film had also been rejected by Warner Bros., 12 March 1974, without reasons being given; MKP.
- 22 Contract agreement dated 18 June 1976. Hodges' agreed fee was £3,000; MKP.
- 23 Letter to Mike Hodges, 18 Jan. 1977; MKP.
- 24 Letter to Klinger, 24 Jan. 1977; MKP.
- 25 Letter of Hodges to Klinger, 9 March 1977; letter of Klinger to Hodges, 14 March 1977; MKP.
- 26 Letter from Goldsmith to Klinger, 9 March 1977 with comparison attached; MKP.

- 27 See the letter from F. S. Poole to Klinger, 19 Aug. 1976; MKP.
 28 Letter from Terry to Klinger, 12 Jan. 1977; MKP.
 29 Letter to Klinger, 31 March 1977; MKP.
 30 Letter to Klinger, 24 April 1977; MKP.
 31 Letter from Klinger to Lester, 16 March 1973; MKP. Tony Klinger, interview, Dec. 2009.
 32 Letter from Klinger, 21 Feb. 1977; More's agents, Denis Van Thal, had already written to Klinger on 19 Nov. expressing his keen interest in playing Mayne-Amaury; MKP.
 33 Handwritten note to Klinger, 31 Jan. 1977; MKP.
 34 The budget was finalised on 9 March 1977 at £1,241,467; MKP.
 35 *Klinger News*, pp. 1 and 3; MKP. There are also copies in the British Film Institute Library.
 36 Letter to Chilton, 10 March 1977; MKP.
 37 Letter to Klinger, 21 March 1977; MKP.
 38 Letter to Terry, 15 April 1977; MKP.
 39 'Klinger flies out to save film', *Screen International* 81/2 (April 1977): 1.
 40 Letter to Klinger, 25 April 1977; MGM had already rejected *The Chilian Club* on 28 July 1976 because it was 'too British in tone for our production schedule'; MKP.
 41 Letter to Klinger, 14 Nov. 1977; MKP.
 42 Letters in MKP.
 43 Letters from Klinger to MacLean, 27 Sept. 1985 and 17 April 1986; MKP. There is no MacLean screenplay in the Klinger Papers; perhaps it was not completed.
 44 Letter to Hill's agent, Robert E. Stone, 29 July 1980; MKP.
 45 Letter to Klinger, 21 July 1980; MKP.
 46 Letters in MKP.

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