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Fallen on hard times: Despite a declining rep, a near-classic gets an overdue revival

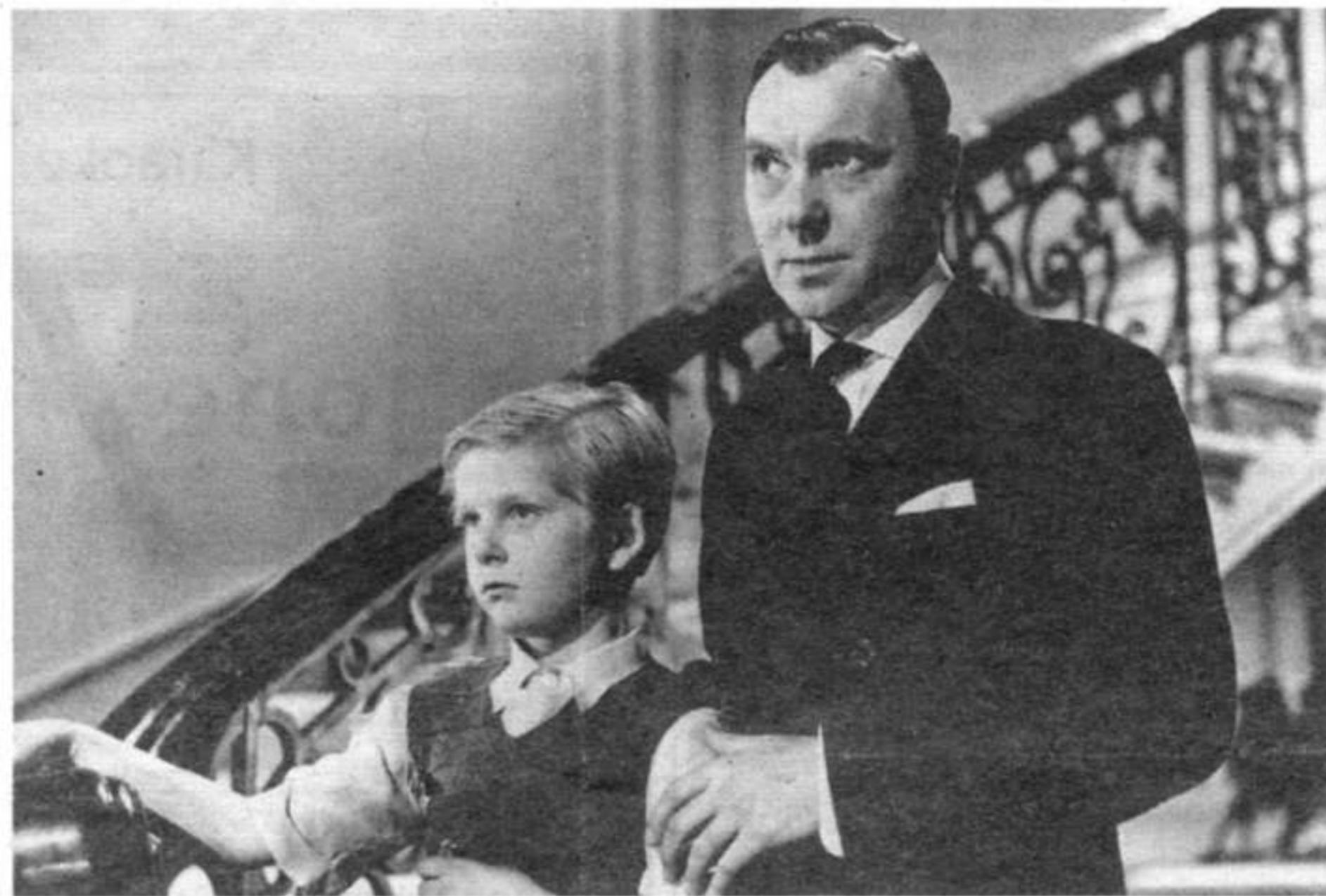
The Fallen Idol, Carol Reed's long-unavailable, near classic 1948 thriller, opens with a close-up of an eight-year-old boy staring straight into the camera. The lonely son of the French ambassador to Great Britain, young master Phil (Bobby Henrey) has been left home alone for a most troubling weekend. The demise of Phil's pet snake Mac-

Gregor is only the first traumatic incident. Carol Reed's critical reputation has long been in eclipse but the British director was regarded as something like a young Hitchcock when *The Fallen Idol* was originally released here. (*The New York Times* called the movie "a major delight of the season"—as could be said of its current revival. Reed himself was named the year's best director by the New York Film Critics Circle.) *The Fallen Idol* demonstrates the assimilation of various Hitchcock suspense effects; indeed, shown in extreme long shot, the mysterious interaction that Phil witnesses early on between the embassy butler Baines (Ralph Richardson) and a winsome secretary, Julie (Michèle Morgan), anticipates the strategies of *Rear Window*.

But Reed is less ruthless than Hitchcock in directing the viewer. Thanks in part to Graham Greene's script, however, he does create an atmosphere of free-floating, audience-implicating guilt. The movie's adultery-driven plot and bleak moral dilemma are derived from Greene, who adapted his own story "The Basement Room" for the screen. *The Fallen Idol* has been overshadowed by the noir comedy, giddy style, and Cold War thematics of Reed and Greene's subsequent sensation *The Third Man*, but (in similarly dealing with the nature of betrayal) *The Fallen Idol* is actually a superior psychological drama.

IDOL WORSHIP

BY J. HOBERMAN



Rialto Pictures

Phil's adventures in the embassy of cold, ossified feelings and necessary untruths make for a disturbing evocation of the child's perspective on the adult world—if not the primal scene itself. Speaking of which: Back in the late '40s, Hollywood's puritanical Breen office demanded several cuts in the movie, concerning the nature of Baines's intimate relations with Julie and

Stares and stairs: Henrey and Richardson

Phil's comic, police station encounter with a cockney tart. (These have been restored by the movie's new distributor, Rialto.)

Although given considerably more depth, Phil is almost as scary as the voyeuristic kid who haunts Harry Lime's apartment house in *The Third Man*. Bobby Henrey's

THE FALLEN IDOL
Directed by Carol Reed
Rialto, February 10 through 23
Film Forum

performance had to be constructed—Reed evidently learned to imitate the boy so that the boy could imitate him, which may account for Henrey's uncanny watchfulness. Grown-up shenanigans are his concern. MacGregor aside, Baines is Phil's greatest friend—albeit unhappily married to the embassy housekeeper and resident witch (Sonia Dresdel). As the eponymous idol, Richardson is quietly splendid. His buttoned-up butler is an amiable fabulist, roguish yet decent, understated but passionate. The yearning with which he regards the radiant Morgan fuels the movie.

Phil spies on Baines and Julie (how could he not?) and is unavoidably implicated in their affair (as are we). Midway through, the wronged wife sets a trap that enables Reed to toss off some sensational set pieces—a wildly expressionist game of hide-and-seek involving Phil, Julie, and

Reed creates an atmosphere of free-floating, audience-implicating guilt.

Baines; the moment where Mrs. Baines materializes at Phil's bedside as if out of a bad dream; and the shock that sends the terrified boy running out alone into the empty Belgravian night, scampering over the rain-slicked cobblestones in his pajamas, straight into the arms of the law. The rest of *The Fallen Idol* belongs to the police—or rather to Phil's notion of them.

Phil is an innocent monster in his inability to intellectually comprehend the adult world—and yet, like Baines (and Mrs. Baines), he's in obvious pain. Altering Greene's original ending, *The Fallen Idol* has that rare denouement that can be considered neither happy nor unhappy. How to put this diplomatically? Life is a tragic farce. Phil is left babbling and begging, stanching his wounds on a necessary tissue of lies. The cops leave and . . . Mother's home!