

# Murder on the Orient Express (1974 film)

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*Murder on the Orient Express* is a 1974 British mystery film directed by Sidney Lumet, starring Albert Finney as Hercule Poirot, and based on the 1934 novel *Murder on the Orient Express* by Agatha Christie.

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## Overview

The film (and book) features the Belgian detective Hercule Poirot. Albert Finney stars as Poirot, who is asked by his friend Bianchi (Martin Balsam), a train company director, to investigate the murder of an American business tycoon, Mr. Ratchett (Richard Widmark), aboard the Orient Express train with an all-star cast of suspects, including Lauren Bacall, Ingrid Bergman (delivering an Oscar-winning performance), Sean Connery, John Gielgud, Vanessa Redgrave, Michael York and Anthony Perkins. The screenplay was penned by Paul Dehn and an uncredited Anthony Shaffer.

The film's tagline was: "The greatest cast of suspicious characters ever involved in murder."

Richard Rodney Bennett's memorable *Orient Express* theme has been reworked into an orchestral suite and performed and recorded several times. It was performed on the original soundtrack album by the Orchestra of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden under Marcus Dods. The piano soloist was the composer himself.

## Plot

### *Murder on the Orient Express*



Theatrical release poster by Richard Amsel

<b>Directed by</b>	Sidney Lumet
<b>Produced by</b>	John Brabourne Richard B. Goodwin
<b>Screenplay by</b>	Paul Dehn <b>Uncredited:</b> Anthony Shaffer
<b>Based on</b>	novel <i>Murder on the Orient Express</i> by Agatha Christie
<b>Starring</b>	Albert Finney
<b>Music by</b>	Richard Rodney Bennett
<b>Cinematography</b>	Geoffrey Unsworth
<b>Editing by</b>	Anne V. Coates
<b>Studio</b>	EMI Films
<b>Distributed by</b>	Anglo-EMI Film Distributors (UK) Paramount Pictures (USA)
<b>Release date(s)</b>	24 November 1974
<b>Running time</b>	128 min.
<b>Country</b>	United Kingdom
<b>Language</b>	English
<b>Budget</b>	\$1.4 million

## Clues

Dr. Constantine's examination reveals that Ratchett was stabbed 12 times. Some wounds were slight, but at least three of them could have resulted in death. The stopped watch in the victim's pocket, as well as Poirot's reconstructed timeline of passenger activities the night before, indicate that Ratchett was murdered at about 1:15 a.m. The train had stopped, surrounded by fresh snow, before that time. There are no tracks in the snow and the doors to the other cars were locked, so the murderer is almost certainly still among the passengers in the coach.

Poirot discovers that Ratchett's real name was Cassetti, a gangster who five years before planned and carried out the kidnapping of Daisy Armstrong, infant daughter of a wealthy British Army Colonel who had settled in America with his American wife. The kidnappers demanded a ransom; but after it was delivered, instead of returning the girl, they murdered the child. Overcome with grief, the then-pregnant Mrs. Armstrong went into labor early and died while giving birth to a stillborn baby. A maidservant named Paulette, who was wrongly suspected of being involved in the kidnapping, committed suicide. Colonel Armstrong, consumed by these tragedies, later killed himself as well. Cassetti betrayed his partner, leaving him to be executed while he fled the country with the ransom, as he was only revealed to be the leader on the eve of the execution.

Poirot, Dr. Constantine and Bianchi summon the other passengers one by one and proceed to interrogate them.

(The fictitious Armstrong case was inspired by the real-life kidnapping of aviator Charles Lindbergh's child.)

## Suspects

The thirteen suspects are:

- Pierre-Paul Michel (Jean-Pierre Cassel), the French conductor of the sleeping car.
- Hector McQueen (Anthony Perkins), a tall, young American man, the victim's secretary and translator;
- Edward Henry Beddoes (Sir John Gielgud), the victim's English valet;
- Mrs. Harriet Belinda Hubbard (Lauren Bacall), an older, fussy, very talkative American pluri-widowed socialite;
- Greta Ohlsson (Ingrid Bergman), a middle-aged Swedish missionary returning to Europe on a fund-raising trip for her mission in Africa;
- Count Rudolf Andrenyi (Michael York), an aristocratic Hungarian diplomat;
- Countess Elena Andrenyi (Jacqueline Bisset), née Grünwald, his beautiful young wife;
- Princess Natalia Dragomiroff (Wendy Hiller), an elderly Russian royal;
- Hildegard Schmidt (Rachel Roberts), a middle-aged German woman, the Princess' personal maid;
- Colonel Arbuthnott (Sean Connery), a British officer in the British Indian Army returning to England on leave;
- Mary Debenham (Vanessa Redgrave), a young English woman, returning home to England after working as a teacher in Baghdad;
- Antonio (Gino) Foscarelli (Denis Quilley), an exuberant Italian American car salesman from Chicago;
- Cyrus B. "Dick" Hardman (Colin Blakely), a Pinkerton's detective masquerading as a talent agent.

## Motive

After concluding his enquiries on the suspects, Poirot gathers all of them in the dining room to present his solution to the crime. He has concluded into two possible scenarios of the murder. The first scenario, which he calls the simple solution, is based on several clues, planted by the suspects to imply that Ratchett's/Cassetti's murder was a result of a mafia feud, intending to throw off-track any investigations. Then Poirot analyzes his second solution, referring to it as a more complex one than the previous, according to which every passenger of the Calais coach, including the steward, Michel, were linked to the Armstrong

case, thus providing them with sufficient motives:

- McQueen was the son of the District Attorney who prosecuted the case and was very fond of Mrs. Armstrong;
- Beddoes was Colonel Armstrong's army batman and the family butler;
- Miss Debenham was Mrs Armstrong's secretary;
- Col. Arbuthnott was an army friend of Col. Armstrong;
- Princess Dragomiroff was Sonia Armstrong's godmother;
- Miss Schmidt was the Armstrongs' cook;
- Countess Andrenyi was Mrs Armstrong's sister;
- Count Andrenyi was Mrs Armstrong's brother in law;
- Miss Ohlsson was Daisy's nursemaid;
- Mrs Hubbard was Mrs Armstrong's mother;
- Foscarelli was the Armstrongs' chauffeur;
- Hardman was, at the time, a policeman who was in love with Paulette (Suzanne in the novel);
- Michel was Paulette's father.

Ratchett was sedated by Beddoes and McQueen. Each of the passengers then stabbed him in turn.

As soon as Poirot finishes his explanation, everyone in the car is dumbfounded. Poirot suggests that Bouc should choose which explanation they should present to the police: the simple or the complex one. Bianchi decides that this "simple" solution will be more than enough for the local police and that Ratchett deserved everything he got. A cover-up is therefore instigated. Poirot agrees with the decision, and he departs to conduct his report to the police, even though he admits he will struggle with his conscience. The train becomes free of the snow and starts on its way as everyone toasts one another.

## Cast

- Albert Finney ... Hercule Poirot
- Lauren Bacall ... Mrs. Harriet Belinda Hubbard
- Sean Connery ... Colonel Arbuthnott
- Ingrid Bergman ... Greta Ohlsson
- Michael York ... Count Rudolf Andrenyi
- Vanessa Redgrave ... Mary Debenham
- Jacqueline Bisset ... Countess Elena Andrenyi
- Richard Widmark ... Mr. Ratchett/Cassetti
- John Gielgud ... Edward Henry Masterman
- Anthony Perkins ... Hector McQueen
- Martin Balsam ... Bouci
- Rachel Roberts ... Hildegarde Schmidt
- Wendy Hiller ... Princess Dragomiroff
- Denis Quilley ... Antonio (Tony) Foscarelli
- Colin Blakely (as Colin Blankey) ... Cyrus B. "Dick" Hardman
- Jean-Pierre Cassel ... Pierre Michel
- George Coulouris ... Dr. Constantine

## Production and reception

Reportedly, every cast member eagerly accepted. Lumet went to Sean Connery first, citing that if you get the biggest star, the rest will come along.

Exterior shooting was mostly done in France in 1973, with a railroad workshop near Paris standing in for Istanbul station. The scenes of the train proceeding through central Europe were filmed in the Jura

mountains on the then recently closed railway line from Pontarlier to Gilley, with the scenes of the train getting stuck being filmed in a cutting near Montbenoît.<sup>[1]</sup> Coincidentally, this area (part of Yugoslavia in the story) is part of the micronation of Saugeais. There were concerns about a lack of snow in the weeks preceding the scheduled shooting of the snowbound train, and plans were made to truck in large quantities of snow at considerable expense. However, heavy snowfall the night before the shooting made the extra snow unnecessary—just as well, as the snow-laden backup trucks had themselves become stuck in the snow.<sup>[2]</sup>

## Christie's opinion

Agatha Christie had been quite displeased with some film adaptations of her works made in the 1960s, and accordingly was unwilling to sell any more film rights. When Nat Cohen, chairman of EMI Films, and producer John Brabourne attempted to get her approval for this film, they felt it necessary to have Lord Mountbatten of Burma (of the British Royal Family and also Brabourne's father-in-law) help them broach the subject.

In the end, according to Christie's husband Max Mallowan, "Agatha herself has always been allergic to the adaptation of her books by the cinema, but was persuaded to give a rather grudging appreciation to this one." Christie's biographer Gwen Robyns quoted her as saying, "It was well made except for one mistake. It was Albert Finney, as my detective Hercule Poirot. I wrote that he had the finest moustache in England—and he didn't in the film. I thought that a pity—why shouldn't he?"<sup>[3]</sup>

## Reception and reputation

The film was a success at the box office, given its tight budget of \$1.4 million,<sup>[4]</sup> earning over \$35.7 million in North America,<sup>[5][4]</sup> making it the 11th highest grossing film of 1974. The film received positive reviews upon release and holds a 100% "Fresh" rating on the website Rotten Tomatoes with an average rating of 7.4/10.<sup>[6]</sup>

Roger Ebert wrote that the film, "provides a good time, high style, a loving salute to an earlier period of filmmaking".<sup>[7]</sup> *The New York Times* gave the film 4 stars out of 5.<sup>[citation needed]</sup>

## Academy Awards and nominations

- Academy Award: Best Supporting Actress, Ingrid Bergman
- Academy Award Nomination: Best Actor in a Leading Role, Albert Finney
- Academy Award Nomination: Best Cinematography, Geoffrey Unsworth
- Academy Award Nomination: Best Costume Design, Tony Walton
- Academy Award Nomination: Best Music, Original Dramatic Score, Richard Rodney Bennett
- Academy Award Nomination: Best Writing, Screenplay Adapted from Other Material, Paul Dehn

## Other films

It was the first of a number of "all-star" adaptations of Agatha Christie novels in the 1970s and early 1980s. Similar films included *Death on the Nile*, *Evil Under the Sun*, and *Appointment with Death* featuring Hercule Poirot, as well as *The Mirror Crack'd* featuring amateur sleuth Miss Marple. Peter Ustinov portrayed the detective Poirot in these subsequent films.

## References

1. ↑ *Trains Oubliés Vol.2: Le PLM* by José Banaudo, p. 54 (French). Editions du Cabri, Menton, France
2. ↑ DVD documentary "Making Murder on the Orient Express: The Ride"

3. ^ *The Agatha Christie Companion: The Complete Guide to Agatha Christie's Life and Work*, by Dennis Sanders and Len Lovullo (1984), pgs. 438–441
4. ^ <sup>a</sup> <sup>b</sup> Alexander Walker, *National Heroes: British Cinema in the Seventies and Eighties*, Harrap, 1985 p. 130
5. ^ "Murder on the Orient Express, Box Office Information" (<http://www.the-numbers.com/movies/1974/0MOOE.php>). The Numbers. Retrieved 5 January 2012.
6. ^ Movie Reviews for *Murder on the Orient Express* ([http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/murder\\_on\\_the\\_orient\\_express/](http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/murder_on_the_orient_express/)). Rotten Tomatoes. Retrieved 23 September 2012.
7. ^ Roger Ebert reviews *Murder on the Orient Express* ([http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19740101/REVIEWS/401010318#watchit-frame-urlhttp://ebert.gowatchit.com/watchitwidget?origin\\_url=http%3A%2F%2Frogerebert.suntimes.com%2Fapps%2Fpbcs.dll%2Farticle%3FAID%3D%2F19740101%2FREVIEW%2F401010318](http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19740101/REVIEWS/401010318#watchit-frame-urlhttp://ebert.gowatchit.com/watchitwidget?origin_url=http%3A%2F%2Frogerebert.suntimes.com%2Fapps%2Fpbcs.dll%2Farticle%3FAID%3D%2F19740101%2FREVIEW%2F401010318)). Chicago Sun-Times. Retrieved 23 September 2012.

## External links

- *Murder on the Orient Express* (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt71877/>) at the Internet Movie Database
- *Murder on the Orient Express* (<http://www.allrovi.com/movies/movie/v33845>) at AllRovi
- *Murder on the Orient Express* (<http://tcmdb.com/title/title.jsp?stid=4721>) at the TCM Movie Database
- *Murder on the Orient Express* ([http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/murder\\_on\\_the\\_orient\\_express/](http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/murder_on_the_orient_express/)) at Rotten Tomatoes

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