

*Public schools (1)*

David Wood

FILMING "IF . . ."

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Fifty years ago, David Wood was a young actor in his second season in rep theatre; he auditioned for a role in a film with the working title "Crusaders", about a group of rebellious public schoolboys and, in his naivety, didn't realize that he was in the running for a major role. "I've split my trousers!" were his unpromising first words to the film's director, the "legendary" Lindsay Anderson. Yet Wood got that role, alongside Malcolm McDowell and Richard Warwick, in what was to become one of the cult movies of the period.

*Filming "If . . ."* modestly and concisely runs through it all, from a foreword by McDowell ("Of course, my memories are slightly different") to an insightful afterword by the film critic George Perry. Anderson inspired and fascinated Wood from the start. His way of directing a film seemed to consist of apothegms ("The more exotic the idea, the more matter of fact we play it") and cunning (a dummy script seemed to convince the headmaster of Cheltenham College, Anderson's alma mater where much of the shooting took place, that the film was harmless). Anderson set up a screening of his earlier film *This Sporting Life* for cast and crew after proclaiming that his films would never date "apart from the odd skirt length"; Wood took his point. There is little sense here of the less confident man behind the legend, but perhaps that is because Wood did not get to know Anderson as well as McDowell did. Wood has not forgotten that, unlike McDowell, when filming was over and the film a hit, he and Warwick were not invited to Cannes, where *If . . .* won the Palme d'Or.

Photographs of Wood's costume school tie, complete with stripes in the symbolically patriotic colours, and Anderson's parting gift – a copy of *The Hothouse Society* by Royston Lambert – enhance the nostalgic mood. In a letter written at the end of 1968, the director

praised the "sensitivity, truthfulness and discretion" of Wood's performance. Anderson's first assistant, meanwhile, thanked him for being co-operative on set, while foreseeing that McDowell would go far: a few prima donna tendencies signalled a star in the making. Wood is more generous about his fellow cinematic neophyte: "seeing the rushes made me immediately aware of his magnetism and magic". Fans will have heard some of Wood's stories before. They may enjoy his version all the same, which is very much the account of an actor who came from the world of the theatre and, by and large, went back to it.

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