

BAKER, Sir WILLIAM STANLEY (1928 - 1976), actor and producer

Name: William Stanley Baker
Date of birth: 1928
Date of death: 1976
Spouse: Ellen Baker (née Martin)
Child: Martin Baker
Child: Sally Baker
Child: Glyn Baker
Child: Adam Baker
Parent: John Henry Baker
Parent: Elizabeth Louisa Baker (née Locke)
Gender: Male
Occupation: actor and producer
Area of activity: Performing Arts
Author: Daryl Leeworthy

Stanley Baker was born on 28 February 1928 at 32 Albany Street in Ferndale in the Rhondda Fach, Glamorganshire, the youngest of three children of John Henry Baker (1896-1950), a haulier and engineman, and his wife Elizabeth Louisa (née Locke, 1896-1974). He grew up a self-declared 'wild child' who ducked school as often as he could. When Baker's father lost his leg in a mining accident underground, the young man resolved never to go into his 'idea of hell' (as he would later describe it) and sought any way he could to avoid the fate of the miner. Baker felt he had two options: boxing or acting.

His early talent was nurtured by Glynne Morse, one of Baker's teachers at Ferndale Secondary School. At the age of fourteen he was spotted by a talent scout working for Ealing Studios and brought onto the production of *Undercover* (1943), a wartime film about Yugoslav guerrillas. Six months later, Baker was given a role in Emylyn Williams's *The Druid's Rest*. First performed at St Martin's Theatre in London in 1944, the play was likewise notable as [Richard Burton's](#) stage debut. 'That gave me the real taste for the theatrical profession', Baker later recalled.

In the aftermath of *The Druid's Rest*, Baker joined Birmingham Repertory Theatre acting in plays such as *She Stoops To Conquer*, *The Seagull*, and *1066 And All That*. In 1946, he was called up for national service and spent two years in the Royal Army Service Corps. Demobilised in 1948, now aged twenty, Baker returned to London in search of acting work. For a time, he struggled. Then, in 1949, work picked up - Baker was cast in Terence Rattigan's play *Adventure Story* (1949), Derek Twist's comedy film *All Over Town* (1949), and in an uncredited role in the crime film *Obsession* (1949) directed by the American exile Edward Dmytryk. He also joined Middlesex Repertory Theatre. At the start of the 1950s, Baker combined film and theatre with television acting creating a portfolio of work which included the 1951 Festival of Britain tour of Christopher Fry's *A Sleep of Prisoners*. The production subsequently transferred to the United States. Whilst there, Baker read Nicholas Monserrat's 1951 novel *The Cruel Sea* and resolved to win the part of Lt. James Bennett in the forthcoming film adaptation directed by Charles Frend. The role proved to be Baker's breakout, winning him increasing prominence in the cinema and affording a chance to move from supporting roles to that of lead actor.

Baker's first lead role was as Tom Yately in Cy Endfield's 1957 classic, *Hell Drivers*, opposite Patrick McGoohan and William Hartnell. Endfield had previously cast Baker in his 1956 drama *Child in the House*. The pair struck up a close working relationship and went on to establish Diamond Films - the production company responsible for making *Zulu* in 1964. As an actor, Stanley Baker was known for his tough, rugged, masculine performances whether as a villain or as the anti-hero capable of eliciting the sympathies of the audience. There was even consideration that Baker take on the role of James Bond, although his friend Sean Connery was ultimately cast. Baker's appeal to audiences was especially apparent in *Zulu*, wherein he transformed the historically-complex character of Lt. John Chard into a memorably empathetic figure who commanded the screen. By the mid-1960s, Baker was at the height of his powers as an actor and starring in award-winning films such as the Harold Pinter-penned *Accident* (1967), which won the Grand Prix at the Cannes Film Festival. He was also making a name for himself as a producer, not least the iconic *The Italian Job* in 1969 - although he was not credited on that occasion.

For Welsh television audiences, Baker was a relatively infrequent presence until the last decade of his life. In 1965, he joined his friends the novelist Gwyn Thomas (1913-1981) and the actor Donald Houston (1923-1991) in Television Wales and the West's landmark documentary *Return to the Rhondda*. Baker reflected sensitively on his determination to escape the mines, the dilemma he faced between boxing and acting, and his admiration of men like Tommy Farr and [Jimmy Wilde](#) who had pursued the noble art so successfully. A decade later, Baker returned to television in his finest role for the small screen, as the patriarchal Gwilym in [Elaine Morgan's](#) adaptation of *How Green Was My Valley*. In what might otherwise have

been an unsympathetic role, with Gwilym shown to be out of step with the radicalism of his sons and the determination of his wife, Beth, played by Sian Phillips, Baker sparkled. His version of Gwilym Morgan has never been bettered. *How Green Was My Valley* was broadcast on BBC Two between 29 December 1975 and 2 February 1976, concluding a few weeks before Baker's forty eighth birthday and eleven days before he was diagnosed with lung cancer. His final screen appearance was in the comparatively obscure German-Italian television mini-series, *Orzowej*, which aired in 1977.

Baker married Ellen Martin, a fellow actor, whom he met at the London Apollo, in October 1950. Together they had four children: twins Martin (1953-) and Sally (1953-), Glyn (1957-), who went on to become an actor himself, and Adam (1961-). Behind the camera, Baker was known for his love of fast cars, his gambling addiction, his enthusiasm for alcohol and multi-day benders, and his lifelong smoking habit, aspects of his character which he willingly acknowledged in interviews with the press. They undoubtedly contributed to his cancer diagnosis and his death from pneumonia in Spain on 28 June 1976, at the comparatively young age of forty eight.

As a businessman, Baker served on the boards of several companies including as a founding director, together with [Richard Burton](#), of Harlech Television (HTV). He regularly attended HTV board meetings in the 1960s and 1970s, helping to shape the development of independent television in Wales. He was also noted for his socialist politics and became a close friend of the Labour Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, who nominated Baker for his knighthood in the resignation honours in 1976. For his part, Baker starred in Labour Party campaign broadcasts and was an implacable opponent of Welsh nationalism, which he thought 'foolish and misguided'.

Post-war Britain was not short of working-class Welsh actors who rose to the top of their profession, but in a crowded field Stanley Baker more than held his own. Together with his friends Donald and Glyn Houston, he established the Rhondda as a serious rival to Port Talbot as an actor's crucible, and he brought the humanity and politics of his native valley to the cinematic, theatrical, and televisual heights. In his own words, he was a 'gentle person' who eschewed violence - the opposite of so many of his most memorable characters on screen - a man who never forgot his working-class roots but who fulfilled the dreams and ambitions of so many from the Rhondda for fame and success. In this he was one of those American Welshmen, like [Richard Burton](#) and Gwyn Thomas, who embraced the frenetic opportunities of modernity without compromising their own sense of who they were and what their upbringing had instilled in them. 'Whenever I go there', Baker said of his childhood home in Ferndale, 'I look at the two down and three up and I think, that's me...that's what I am. All that has happened since is immensely important, but not as important as where I come from.'

Author

Daryl Leeworthy

Sources

Robert Shail, *Stanley Baker: A Life in Film* (Cardiff 2008)

Peter Stead, *Acting Wales: stars of Welsh stage and screen* (Cardiff 2002)

Further reading

Wikipedia Article: [Stanley Baker](#)

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