



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Distant Voices Still Lives

Terence Davies makes films in instalments. The 100-minute Trilogy – *Children, Madonna and Child, Death and Transfiguration* – which was begun in 1976 took eight years to complete. It won the 1984 BFI Award, and led to the BFI Production Department backing the development of Davies' first 35mm colour project, *Distant Voices*, a memoir of working-class life in Liverpool during and shortly after the Second World War. Where the Trilogy used autobiography as a springboard, *Distant Voices* effaced Davies himself to recall the experiences of his parents, sisters and brothers. (Davies was the youngest of ten children, seven of whom survived infancy; but in the film the family has been reduced to manageable dramatic proportions.) *Distant Voices* was to be stylised, jumping back and forth in time, and was to have an eclectic range of music. Moreover, as Davies said, content did not just dictate form, it dictated length too – and the length in this case was just 45 minutes.

Nonetheless, production went ahead, with Freda Dowie as Davies' cowed mother and Peter Postlethwaite as the near-psychotic father of whom Davies still speaks with undimmed hatred. The film ends with the father's death: the stomach cancer which killed him in his late forties may have been hastened, Davies suggests, by the bottle of disinfectant he drank in order to avoid army call-up; an act of characteristic perversity, since he had earlier volunteered for the navy. His chief problem in writing the screenplay, Davies adds, was that several remembered episodes – such as his mother, at the end of her tether, jumping from an upper window with a baby in her arms to be miraculously caught by a passing soldier – would have seemed too fantastic to be true.

Distant Voices was successfully previewed at the NFT in summer 1986, and a London art house offered to show it despite its uncommercial length. By now, however, thanks in part to the enthusiasm of Channel 4's Jeremy Isaacs, it had been decided to promote the film to feature length by adding a second part. The budget was £650,000, including £240,000 from Channel 4, over and above its standing subvention to BFI Production.

Thus it was that last autumn Davies was shooting *Still Lives*, a continuation of the impressionistic saga into the 50s with the family now dispersed and married. A shift in tone, Davies hopes, will make for an interesting juxtaposition. Part two is pitched towards humour, tinged with regret. 'What I couldn't understand as a child was why my sisters and brothers had to move away.' The producer is again Jenny Howarth, Davies' National Film School contemporary, and the same cast has been reassembled.

The four-week shoot was divided between Liverpool and London, where two houses within the crowd's roar of Arsenal football ground stood in for the Davies' terraced home. The main Merseyside location was a small pub in Everton, almost in the shadow of the tower block to which Davies' mother subsequently moved. This is the film's focal point, as amid orders for rum-and-pep and brown-over-bitter, the action shifts in a kaleidoscope of free association, and for several days lunchtime trade was suspended to allow the unit a free hand.

Jocelyn James, the art director, says that her jaw dropped at the pokiness of the pub's back parlour. 'Frankly, it would have been easier to do it in a studio, but Terry feels he needs the atmosphere for the actors. The decor we inherited was early 70s rather than 50s, but when we stripped away the surface, there was the original panelling underneath, and I brought in a large mirror to create a bit more space.' The film uses the 'bleach bypass' process to achieve what Davies calls a hand-tinted colour style, dispensing with primary colours other than the bright reds of the women's lipstick.

One sequence is set in one of the picture houses haunted by Davies in boyhood. The interior is represented by a nearby community theatre, but sadly the former cinema intended for the exterior was demolished a few months before shooting. A power station in Deptford was eventually located and decorated with 'Coming Shortly' adverts run up by a Merseyside company whose stock in trade they once were. To his dismay, Davies was denied the desired soundtrack excerpt from *Guys and Dolls*, and for a substitute he was pinning his hopes on obtaining, or somehow simulating, a burst of the *Love Is a Many Splendored Thing* theme tune. The soundtrack has posed further problems. The use of clips from radio shows like *Take It from Here* (of which, especially the vicissitudes of the immortal Glum family, Davies is happy to demonstrate seemingly total recall) involved obtaining waivers from every individual heard in them.

Before returning to the cramped snug, its claustrophobia heightened by clouds of perfumed 'smoke', Davies talks of the film being 'a homage to what Liverpool used to be before the planners vandalised it.' It might also function as something of a storehouse of vanishing Lancastrian vernacular. Will many spectators be acquainted with such usages as 'mither' and 'get a cob on', or with the picturesque injunction 'until next Preston Guild'? These approximately translate as pester, get annoyed, and until the moon turns blue.

Tim Pulleine, *Sight & Sound*, Winter 1987-88

Dogger, Tyne, Heligoland. Fisher, Forties, Bight. For anyone born before the age of universal television, this liturgy of mysterious places is an indelible memory. The radio shipping forecast, rendered with the unmodulated precision of a religious creed, was somehow required listening. You did not

talk over it, out of respect. It was a moment out of time. *Distant Voices Still Lives* begins with a radio shipping forecast, a voice out of nowhere as the camera holds and holds on a shot of a staircase. It is a breathtaking moment, paradoxically tense in its absolute stasis. And it encapsulates from the start what I take to be the central mood (it is scarcely a theme) of Terence Davies' extraordinary film: a sense of crystallised time, of memories in aspic.

They are family memories. And it will doubtless be said that, as in his trilogy of films which culminated in *Death and Transfiguration*, Davies is here again working out his relationship with his family. Clearly there is some truth in this, not least by the filmmaker's own admission and from biographical evidence. Davies was born in Liverpool in 1945, and evidently had the kind of childhood which leaves permanent scars. His new film is set in Liverpool in the 1940s and 50s, and centres on a family wounded by the malign presence of a brutish father. But this is only an autobiographical work in the sense that, say, *Sons and Lovers* is 'about' Lawrence's own family. It is a film rooted in personal memory, but transcending it. As in the doctrine of transubstantiation – and the family here is Catholic – the substance is mysteriously made something else. For one thing, the setting is deliberately denied a geographical specificity: the city of Liverpool is recognisable only from the characters' accents. As in a family photograph, exteriors are cropped out, rendered insignificant by the centrality of the subjects. The terraced houses and grim Victorian public buildings belong in a working-class area of a large city, but the film does not have a Liverpool accent. It is a work of intense interiority, unmediated by the particularity of place.

Distant Voices Still Lives is actually two films joined together, the second half shot two years after the first. The seams don't show, not least because the two lighting cameramen, William Diver and Patrick Duval, achieve an extraordinarily resonant matching of image to mood. The film's key device, however, is Davies' use of the music of the time. There are long moments of communion as the family and their friends sing in the pub, and other moments when the popular songs of the period add a primary colour to the darker tonal range of the images. The songs are also used transitionally, overlapping one fragmented memory and the next. There are too many songs perhaps, particularly in the several long scenes in the pub, though on the whole they are used aptly and precisely. But it is the precision of the images which haunts. Locked in their stillness is a potency of emotion which recalls Bresson, a director (and of course one whose films are steeped in Catholicism) whom it would be no surprise to learn that Terence Davies admires. The question now is whether this remarkable filmmaker can finally close the family album.

DISTANT VOICES STILL LIVES

Directed by: Terence Davies
©: Terence Davies
Production Company/Presented by:
British Film Institute Production Board
In association with: Channel Four, Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen
Presented in association with: Film Four International
Executive Producer: Colin MacCabe
Producer: Jennifer Howarth
Executive in Charge of Production: Jill Pack
Production Accountant: Sheryl Leonardo
Production Managers: Sarah Swords, Olivia Stewart
Production Assistants: Olivia Stewart, Lil Sterling
Runners: Ian Francis, George Barbero, Richard Bridgwood, Sholto Roeg, Tony McCaffrey
1st Assistant Director [1985]: Andy Powell
1st Assistant Directors [1987]: Andy Powell, Glynn Purcell
2nd Assistant Directors: Marc Munden, Mathew Evans
Continuity: Claire Hughes Smith, Melanie Matthews
Casting: Priscilla John
Screenplay: Terence Davies
Directors of Photography: William Diver, Patrick Duval
Stunt Photography: Arthur Wooster
Camera Operator: Harriet Cox
Focus Puller: Jeremy Read
Stunt Focus Puller: Martin Kenzie
Clapper Loaders: Maggie Gormley, Caren Moy
Stunt Clapper Loader: Nicholas Penn
Grips: Malcolm Huse, Kevin Fraser, Bill Venables, Nobby Roker
Electricians: Geoff Burlinson, Chris Polden, Gary Nagle, Tim Church
Stunt Electricians: Chris Polden, Gary Willis, Geoffrey Quick
Stills Photographer: Mike Abrahams
Special Effects: Richard Roberts
Editor: William Diver
Editing in collaboration with: Geraldine Creed, Toby Benton
Editing Assistant: Mick McCarthy
Art Director: Miki van Zwanenberg
With: Jocelyn James
Assistant Art Directors: Sheila Gillie, Mark Stevenson
Scenic Artists: Penny Fielding, Joy Fielding, Sarah Thwaites
Painter: Lynne Whiteread
Standby Props: Dave Allen, Pat Harkins
Construction: Acme Construction, Colin Rutter, Hank Schumacher
Constructivists: Susan McLenachan, Alastair Gow
Carpenters: Kevin Huse, Richard Ede
Costume Designer: Monica Howe
Hair and Make-up: Lesley Rouvray-Lawson, Aileen Seaton, Eric Scruby, Jan Archibald, Lesley Sanders, Gerry Jones, Elizabeth Moss
Stunt Make-up: Jenny Shircore
Titles: Plume Design
Film Laboratory: Metrocolor (London)
Lab Supervisors: Ron Barber, Clive Noakes
Harmonica: Tommy Reilly
Music Recording Engineers: Antony Howell, Mark Brown, Eric Tomlinson

Sound Recordists: Moya Burns, Colin Nicolson
Boom Operators: Christine Felce, Rupert Castle
Sound Mixers: Aad Wirtz, Ian Turner
Sound Re-recorded at: Cinelingular, Ladbroke Films
Dubbing Editor: Alex Mackie
Assistant Dubbing Editor: Andrew Melhuish
Camera Equipment: Cine-Europe Ltd, Griphouse, Cinefocus
Lighting Equipment: Film & TV Services
With Special Thanks to: Peter Sainsbury, Mamoun Hassan, McKee School, A.R.T. Casting, Gill Hallifax, Larry Sider, Max Marrable, Frank Reynolds, David Hill, David Gamble, BBC Sound Archive, British Library National Sound Archive, Denis Norden, Steve Race, Roy Hudd, Gillian Reynolds, Robert Lockhart, Pat Carus, Father Ashworth, Father Thompson
Stunt Co-ordinator: Alf Joint
Publicity: Liz Reddish

Cast

Freda Dowie (Mrs Davies, the mother)
Peter Postlethwaite (Tommy Davies, the father)
Angela Walsh (Eileen)
Dean Williams (Tony)
Lorraine Ashbourne (Maisie)
Sally Davies (Eileen as a child)
Nathan Walsh (Tony as a child)
Susan Flanagan (Maisie as a child)
Mickey Starke (Dave, Eileen’s husband)
Vincent Maguire (George, Maisie’s husband)
Antonia Mallen (Rose, Tony’s wife)
Debi Jones (Micky)
Chris Darwin (Red)
Marie Jelliman (Jingles)
Andrew Schofield (Les)
Anny Dyson (granny)
Jean Boht (Aunty Nell)
Alan Bird (baptismal priest)
Pauline Quirke (Doreen)
Matthew Long (Mr Spaul)

Frances Dell (Margie)
Carl Chase (Uncle Ted, Tommy’s brother)
Roy Ford (wedding priest)
Terry Melia, John Thomalla (military policemen)
John Carr (registrar)
John Michie (soldier)
Jeanette Moseley (barmaid)
Ina Clough (licensee)
Chris Benson, Judith Barker, Tom Williamson, Lorraine Michaels (Rose’s family)

UK/West Germany 1988©
84 mins

With a pre-recorded introduction by film critic Thirza Wakefield (Wed 7 Jul only)

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