



NFTS AT 50

Saint Maud

+ Q&A with director Rose Glass

To really tap into the deeper anxieties of modern life, an inward journey is needed, an introspective examination of what it means to be human, to be desperate, to be damaged and, in a brutally mundane way, to be lonely. Almost half the population of the UK experience feelings of loneliness a few times a month, according to a 2019 YouGov personality study. It's the deep-set, destructive condition of our times.

And this is the life of Maud, the character at the heart of the debut feature by director Rose Glass. *Saint Maud* follows the story of a burned-out, self-harming young palliative care nurse, played by Morfydd Clark. Maud is looking for purpose, forgiveness and someone to save in a bleak seaside town, loomed over by a large house on the hill in which Amanda, played by Jennifer Ehle, a middle-aged American dancer with great taste in art deco wallpaper, is dying of cancer.

Amanda is exotic and uninhibited and at the same time scared and bored, preparing herself for death. Maud is busy, diligent and deluded, driven by misplaced hope. Their relationship develops within the confines of two limited spaces – Amanda's grand house and Maud's imagination. Amanda's house is a surreal porthole into 1920s glamour, Maud's bedsit a black hole into her damaged mind and the salvation she's seeking through what seems like a recent but intense finding of God. This astute characterisation, and the confidence with which the pair are brought together then ripped apart with extreme consequences across a very simple three-act structure, point to why Glass is such a hotly tipped talent.

Saint Maud is a clear evolution from the short film that first piqued Film4's interest in Glass, her 2014 National Film and Television School graduation film *Room 55*. In a surreal hotel bubbling with repressed sexual desire that sits somewhere between the inn where the handcuffed fugitives spend the night in *The 39 Steps* and the red room in *Twin Peaks*, a 1950s TV chef has a night she'll never forget. 'People going mad in confined spaces seems to be a thing I keep being drawn back to,' Glass tells me, quite aptly, in a tiny meeting room at BFI Southbank in London, pre-pandemic. 'Maybe that's just how it feels when you're writing something.'

The idea for *Saint Maud* came while Glass was studying at NFTS. 'Initially it was a love story between Maud and God,' she explains. 'I started to wonder, "Who is this girl?" and "Why doesn't anyone else know what's going on?"' Shot with the visual intensity of 1970s psychological thrillers cut through with traces of melodrama and Thatcherite depression, the film wears its obvious influences proudly: Polanski's *Repulsion* (1965) and *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), Bergman's *Persona* (1966) and *Through a Glass Darkly* (1976), all washed out with the unmistakable bleakness of the British seaside.

Glass also draws heavily on William Blake imagery – Maud uses a book on Blake given to her by Amanda almost as an instruction manual on piety – and names her environment appropriately to enhance the symbolism. Maud means ‘powerful battler’; the hospital where she used to work is named after Saint Afra, whose martyrdom echoes Maud’s fate.

But it’s not just dark; it’s funny too. The first description we get of Amanda, from a nurse hurrying out of the house as swiftly as Katie Nanna in *Mary Poppins*, is that she’s ‘a bit of a cunt’. Maud responds to Amanda’s probing about her Mary Magdalene scapular with: ‘I ordered it online.’ Amanda’s drunken row with her friend Richard is ended abruptly with: ‘Darling, don’t be petulant, you’re getting dangerously Norma Desmond.’

‘I knew on the surface it sounded like it could be this bleak, intimate, intense psychological story,’ Glass explains. ‘But from the very beginning it was going to be heightened and stylised and fun and exciting. The humour was really important for me to bring that out. Characters that you like but don’t quite trust.’

Key to this is the deft interplay between Jennifer Ehle and Morfydd Clark. Ehle is a veteran of British costume drama and Hollywood. For Clark this is her first breakout role. Their odd casting, and the Otherness they bring to the location, is the backbone of the film.

‘That was a nice thing that came through the casting,’ says Glass. ‘The fact that they’re both from different places, like America and Wales, and they’ve ended up in this random weird little English seaside town. On the surface they’re so different and come from very different walks of life and seem to have quite different attitudes, but they’re both lonely, isolated people trying to escape their reality.’

There’s little doubt that *Saint Maud* will be a huge turning point in Clark’s career. Her powerful performance brings a sobering clarity to the story, even at its most vivid and disturbing. In the film’s most horrific scene, Maud pushes pins through the insoles of her shoes and steps into them, screaming in pain. It then cuts to her walking along the seafront, the agony boiling beneath her skin as she struggles to keep her composure. Not for a second do you imagine that those pins aren’t really in her shoes as she hobbles along, and not for a second is your empathy broken. It’s a powerful depiction of self-harm – a fragile, almost child-like woman with a reclusive nature and an inability to connect, who finds a strength from within greater than most of us could muster, only to hurt herself rather than help herself.

‘Morfydd is great, she made my job a lot easier,’ Glass says. ‘Both she and Jennifer are phenomenal actors, really effortless; they get stuff so quickly, so we had time to try different things out. She brings so much to it because the character has to go to such weird, extreme places. If you don’t buy into her as a character, the whole film falls apart. Maud’s version of faith is obviously a pretty strange one,’ she continues. ‘It’s morphed into a weird, ultimately self-destructive form of self-care, of trying to keep herself together and keep herself feeling in control. Life is confusing and chaotic, and it’s tempting and

seductive to be drawn to things that make it seem clear and understandable. But being pushed too far in that direction can lead to quite dangerous things.'

Saint Maud explores ideas of repression and the search for ecstasy. The seizures that Maud experiences sometimes feel like orgasms, other times like epileptic fits. Says Glass: 'The connection between sexuality and faith – that's why the moments where she feels God moving through her like a sexual undercurrent didn't come from a particularly theological point of view, it was much more instinctual. Her and Amanda, they're reaching for the same thing, which could be a religious experience, could be a sexual experience. Even if you're not religious, you can connect to that idea of wanting to feel like a part of something bigger than yourself, transcending your body in some way.'

This culminates in the film's most visually memorable moment as Maud, in her dingy, sparse room, vomits, fits, then levitates, Regan MacNeil-style, as Adam Janota Bzowski's stomach-churning score rattles the edges of the scene with its heavy bass. 'To me, that seizure scene is God grabbing her by the shoulders and shaking her up – "For God's sake girl, sort yourself out" – and then giving her this extra boost of rapture, which sets her back on the holy path,' says Glass. This is the pivot point of the film, as act three begins with Maud in the shower, her voiceover full of hope and relief: 'Revelation, and just in time. Oh Lord, your mercy knows no bounds.'

From the connection of the first act to the rejection of the second, Maud now knows her purpose, and we find ourselves in a stalker story, hunter and hunted. As Maud looks up through a seafront telescope towards Amanda's house on the hill, she reminds herself to 'never waste your pain'.

How much of an influence did Glass's own religious upbringing have on the film? Her grandfather was a vicar, she went to an all-girls Catholic school. Was she challenging some kind of sense of herself? 'It's weird, you end up psychoanalysing yourself,' she says. 'Why was I drawn to this? I don't know what it says about me being repressed or not. I'm just interested in what makes people tick and the different ways we all find to make sense of what we're doing here. I guess that comes from all sorts of places, but sometimes the scariest place to get trapped is inside your own mind.'

Saint Maud is a compelling and impactful film, a remarkable debut, and one of the most human and empathetic horrors of recent times. As such, Glass deserves the attention, and the excitement around her as an important future figure in British film is justified.

Mike Williams, *Sight & Sound*, 13 October 2020

ROOM 55

Writer & Director: Rose Glass
Producer: Charlotte Campbell
Production Manager: Keith Abela
Story by: Rose Glass, Sarah Gordon
Cinematographer: James Blann
Editor: Manuela Lupini
Online Editor, Colourist, VFX Supervisor: Boyko Stankov
SFX and VFX Supervisor: Janus Tomczyk
Production Designer: Agis Pylis
Composer: Arran Price
Sound Editor, Dubbing Mixer: Rob Hardcastle
Sound Recordist: James Spurrier

Cast

Charlotte Weston (Alice Lawson)
Alexa Brown (Marylin)
Collette Cooper, Tony Ashcroft, Ruby Thompson (room 49)
Marie Everett, Takatsuna Mukai (hotel porters)
James McClelland (stage hand)
Richard Ward (voice of husband)

UK 2014
22 mins

SAINT MAUD

Directed by: Rose Glass
Executive Producers: Daniel Battsek, Sam Lavender, Mary Burke
Produced by: Oliver Kassman, Andrea Cornwell
Production Manager: Anna Jancsó
Production Co-ordinator: Jessica Moran
Production Accountant: Eddie Kane
Assistant Accountant: Conor Kane
Post-production Supervisor: Charlotte Dean
Production Secretary: Francesca Castelbuono
Production Runner: Jordan Chandler
1st Assistant Director: Toby Spanton
2nd Assistant Director: Rory Broadfoot-Wheeler
3rd Assistant Director: Naomi King
Script Supervisor: Shaida Kazemi
Written by: Rose Glass
Director of Photography: Ben Fordesman
Steadicam Operator: James Elias
1st Assistant Camera: Edward Tucker
1st Assistant B Camera: Jerry Pradon
2nd Assistant Camera: Alison Streatfield

Digital Imaging Technician: Tom Rogers
Gaffer: Ben Manwaring Key Grip: Lee Naylor-Vane
VFX Supervisor: Gary Brown
VFX by: Technicolor
Physical Effects Supervisor: Scott MacIntrye
Edited by: Mark Towns
Production Designr: Paulina Rzeszowska
Art Director: Isobel Dunhill
Standby Art Director: Alannah Byrne
Set Decorator: Anna Mould
Graphic Designer: Charlotte Innell, Jessica Barrell
Property Master: Mark Smith
Make-up & Hair Supervisor: Alex King
Prosthetics Make-up Artist: Robb Crafer
Prosthetic Torso by: KM Effects
Digital Colourist: Rob Pizzey
Original Music by: Adam Janota Bzowski
Production Sound Mixer: Simon Farmer
Re-recording Mixer: Andrew Stirk
Supervising Dialogue Editor: Andrew Stirk
Foley Artist: Ian Waggott
Foley Mixer: Ben Cross
Stunt Co-ordinator: Andy Bennett
Digital Intermediate: Goldcrest Post Production

Cast

Morfydd Clark (Maud)
Jennifer Ehle (Amanda)
Lily Frazer (Carol)
Lily Knight (Joy)
Marcus Hutton (Richard)
Turlough Convery (Christian)
Rosie Sansom (Esther)
Caoilfhionn Dunne (nurse)
Carl Prekopp (Homeless Pat)
Noa Bodner (Hilary)
Takatsuna Mukai (Hiro)
Sona Vyas Dunne (agency worker)
Faith Edwards (agency worker)
Brian Jackson (drummer)
Jonathan Milshaw (handsome man)
Rose Knox-Peebles (dead patient)
Nancy (cockroach)

UK 2019
84 mins

NFTS AT 50

Saint Maud + Q&A with director Rose Glass
Thu 2 Sep 17:45
The Last Tree + Q&A with director Shola Amoo
Sat 11 Sep 17:00
Il Postino (The Postman) + Q&A with director Michael Radford
Sun 12 Sep 17:00
An Evening with Roger and James Deakins
Sun 12 Sep 20:30
Absolute Beginners + Q&A with director Julian Temple and cinematographer Oliver Stapleton BSC
Wed 15 Sep 20:25
The Souvenir + Q&A with director Joanna Hogg
Fri 17 Sep 17:45
The Selfish Giant + Q&A with director Clio Barnard
Mon 20 Sep 20:50

Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit + Q&A with director Beeban Kidron
Thu 23 Sep 18:00
Kurt & Courtney + Q&A with director Nick Broomfield
Sat 25 Sep 14:30
Theatre Girls + Q&A with director Kim Longinotto
Sun 26 Sep 15:40
Surge + Q&A with director Aneil Karia
Tue 28 Sep 17:40
Of Time and the City + Q&A with director Terence Davies
Sat 2 Oct 14:15
Rocks + Q&A with director Sarah Gavron
Sat 2 Oct 17:30



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