



NFTS AT 50

The Selfish Giant

+ Q&A with director Clio Barnard

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

Clio Barnard's *The Selfish Giant* bears a tenuous relation to the Oscar Wilde children's story that inspired it – so tenuous that the director admits she thought of changing the title entirely. The giant of her story is the exploitative and potentially violent scrap dealer Kitten – who at one point threatens to put teenager Arbor's arm through a wire stripper – and his garden is the scrapyards, a field of recycled, often stolen, metal.

Kitten's yard embodies the malaise of a dismantled industrial society in which nothing new is made but everything is available to be picked, stolen, scavenged: a selfish economy in which everything is potentially worth a bob or two (the theme gets a sourly comic spin when the father of Arbor's best friend Swifty sells his sofa from right under his numerous children).

Thankfully, Wilde's mawkish tale of renewal and redemption doesn't haunt the film too obviously, although elements echo faintly. The Christ Child who haunts the Giant's garden, with stigmata on his hands and feet, here becomes the martyred Swifty, whose death prompts Kitten to hand himself over to the police. It's arguably only the residual trace of the Wilde story that entirely makes sense of Kitten's surprisingly sudden and open redemption.

But *The Selfish Giant* isn't best approached as an experiment in recycling a familiar text (narrative scavenging, as it were). The film is a return to the Bradford setting of Barnard's debut feature *The Arbor* (2010), in which actors lip-synched to documentary testimonies about local playwright Andrea Dunbar.

Despite its reworking of an incongruous pre-text, however, *The Selfish Giant* shares little of *The Arbor*'s overtly experimental motivation. Instead, this essay in lyrical realism belongs in a very familiar British tradition that connects such films as *Kes* (1969), *Ratcatcher* (1999), *Sweet Sixteen* (2002) and *Fish Tank* (2009) – depictions of the immediate conditions of social deprivation from the point of view of children and teenagers.

Having chosen to pitch her stall this time directly on the royal road of British art cinema, Barnard nevertheless brings a distinctive poetic spin to her material, making the film as much a study of the porous boundary between town and country as *Kes* was. There's a strikingly eerie ruralist magic to the repeated shots of horses standing on horizons at night – Barnard and DP Mike Eley make strong, often stylised use of horizontals, including the frame of the bed that Arbor sometimes hides under (his own arbour, perhaps?). There's an extraordinary shot late in the film of a landscape that bears the marks of post-industrial disuse, the land and vegetation taking on the look of fatigued, rusted metal, evocative of the inert mineralisation afflicting a world once organic.

The organic forces in the film (in the terms of Wilde's story, the endurance of irrepressible life to make England's dead garden bloom) are represented by the two boys and by Kitten's horse Diesel. The racing with traps, or two-wheeled 'sulkies', is a phenomenon that will be familiar to viewers of the underrated *Eden Valley* (1995), by the Newcastle-based Amber Collective. In Barnard's film the theme provides an almost autonomous sequence of explosive energy, in

which sulkies race down the road followed by a flotilla of trucks carrying cheering spectators.

As for the film's two young leads, their relationship – a little-and-large duo echoing *Of Mice and Men*, although the ostracised Swifty is more astute than his persecutors think – is the core of compassion and solidarity in a harsh world. Sentiment only creeps in at the very last moment, in a shot in which the dead Swifty seemingly reappears to clasp hands with Arbor under his bed, but otherwise the rapport between the two boys has a boisterous, prosaic ease.

Like Billy Casper in *Kes*, Arbor embodies the capacity of the young soul to endure society's best attempts to crush it – and seeing him shin up a lamp post carries echoes of Billy's scrawny athleticism in the Loach film. The school here may not be as mechanically soul-destroying as Billy's, but for all the liberalism it espouses there's an antiseptic, bureaucratic deadness about its shiny corridors, while cheerful placards in the classroom urging 'Be Positive' come across as empty sloganeering. And the school does, after all, entirely give up on the boys.

Conner Chapman and Shaun Thomas are terrific fresh finds for Barnard, and the film is a triumph in the direction of young untried actors. Thomas's less demonstrative role shouldn't blind us to the depth of emotive power that he finds in the quietly tenacious, ethically stalwart Swifty, while Chapman is one of those force-of-nature young talents (as David Bradley was in *Kes*, and Katie Jarvis in *Fish Tank*) who seem to find their personal apotheosis in one perfect role, whether or not they have screen futures ahead of them.

Arbor's perfect, irrepressible defiance emerges in a superb moment in which this pugnacious shrimp of a lad, possibly destined for a successful entrepreneurial career on one side of the law or another, welcomes police officers to his house with a peremptory bark of 'Shoes – off!'

Jonathan Romney, *Sight & Sound*, November 2013

The key to Clio Barnard's work is a radical pursuit of truth, by whatever means necessary. In the ground-shifting documentary *The Arbor* (2010), about the young playwright Andrea Dunbar, she had actors lip-sync to real-life testimony. In *The Selfish Giant*, the drama grew out of the meticulous documenting of a teenager's life in the underbelly of a Bradford estate. Both films are inspired by spirited lives lived in dispiriting circumstances. As a director, Barnard brings a fresh sensibility to British Loachian social realism: *The Selfish Giant* is not merely kitchen sink drama but an examination of the foul smelling, leaky plumbing beneath. While a harrowing picture of Britain's lost underclass, the film also celebrates the funny, lunatic energy of a friendship between two 13-year-old boys, and their entrepreneurial entry into the scrap metal business.

Perhaps because Yorkshire-raised Barnard comes from an artist filmmaker background – her earlier shorts were shown at London's Tate Modern and New York's MoMA – her Northern grit is delivered in an often elegiac and exquisitely photographed package. In *The Selfish Giant*, the moors beyond Bradford's Buttershaw Estate are populated by wild horses and dark, satanic pylons looming in the dusk. The film shows none of the wobbles of a first feature. At 48, Barnard seems to have landed here, fully formed as a filmmaker: *The Arbor* won awards at the BIFAs and the BFI London Film Festival, while *The Selfish Giant* played to critical acclaim in the Directors' Fortnight section at this year's [2013] Cannes.

Kate Muir, *Sight & Sound*, November 2013

THE SELFISH GIANT

Directed by: Clio Barnard
©: Selfish Giant Film Ltd, The British Film Institute, Channel Four Television Corporation
A Moonspun Films production
Presented by: BFI, Film4
Made with the support of: BFI Film Fund
Executive Producers: Katherine Butler, Lizzie Francke
Developed with the assistance of: Film4
Produced by: Tracy O’Riordan
Production Manager: Ameenah Ayub Allen
Production Co-ordinator: Emma Kayee
Unit Manager: Gary Preston
Location Manager: Jonathan Davies
Additional Location Finding: Beverley Lamb, Anna Lee
Post-production Supervisor: Meg Clark
1st Assistant Director: Tony Aherne
2nd Assistant Directors: Reshma Makan, Richard Harris
Script Supervisor: Sylvia Parker
Casting Director: Amy Hubbard
Written by: Clio Barnard
Inspired by Oscar Wilde’s ‘The Selfish Giant’
Story Development: Lila Rawlings
Director of Photography: Mike Eley
B Camera Operator: Hamish Doyne-Ditmas
Steadicam Operator: Simon Wood
1st Assistant Camera: Iwan Prys Reynolds
Gaffer: Paul Murphy
Grip: Mark Jones
Still and Specials Photographer: Agatha A. Nitecka
Visual Effects Supervisors: Tom Debenham, Dominic Parker
Visual Effects: One of Us
Digital Artist: Mike Pope
Special Effects Supervisor: Scott MacIntyre
Editor: Nick Fenton
Assembly Editor: Andrew MacRitchie
Assistant Editor: Steve Mercer
Production Designer: Helen Scott
Art Director: David Bowes
Storyboard Artist: Douglas Ingram
Production Buyer: Helen Jones
Props Master: Neil O’Rourke
Costume Designer: Matthew Price
Costume Supervisor: Sophie O’Neil
Make-up and Hair Designer: Sue Wyburgh
Make-up and Hair Artist: Alice Hopkins
Titles Designed by: Matt Curtis
Film Laboratory: Technicolor Pinewood
Composer: Harry Escott
Guitars: Craig Fortnam
Flugelhorn: Joe Auckland
Euphonium: Trevor Mires
Tenor Horn: Arthur Lea
Percussion: Hugh Wilkinson
Music Recorded and Mixed by: Ian Wood
Sound Designer: Tim Barker
Sound Recordist: Tim Barker
Boom Operator: Chinna Udenze
Re-recording Mixers: Martin Peter Jensen, Forbes Noonan
Sound Re-recorded at: Boom Post

Dialogue Editor: Dan Green
Foley Supervisor: Juraj Mravec
Foley Artists: Sue Harding, Andi Derrick
Foley Editor: Philip Clements
Stunt Co-ordinator: Abbi Collins
Horse Master: Abbi Collins
Additional Horse Master: Paul Murphy
Digital Intermediate: Molinare

Cast

Conner Chapman (*Arbor Fenton*)
Shaun Thomas (*Swifty*)
Sean Gilder (*Chris Kane, ‘Kitten’, ‘The Selfish Giant’*)
Lorraine Ashbourne (*Mary*)
Ian Burfield (*Mick Brazil*)
Steve Evets (*‘Price Drop’ Swift*)
Siobhan Finneran (*Mrs Swift*)
Ralph Ineson (*Johnny Jones*)
Rebecca Manley (*Michelle ‘Shelly’ Fenton*)
Rhys McCoy (*Daniel*)
Elliott Tittensor (*Martin Fenton*)
Everal A. Walsh (*railway man*)
John Wall (*school nurse*)
Mohammed Ali (*Mo*)
Jamie Michie (*teacher*)
Bailey Clapham, Jake Gibson, Sofina-Rose Hussain, Peter-Lee Lowther, Aron Ryan, Macy Shackleton (*Swift children*)
Patrick McCann (*neighbour*)
Joshua Foulds (*Josh*)
Blake Atkinson (*Blake*)
James Booth (*Jay*)
Dougie Rooks (*deputy headteacher*)
Reece Andrews (*headteacher*)
William Fox (*passerby*)
Kayle Stephens (*Chip ‘n’ Pin sulky rider*)
Michael Cahill (*Smart Price Drop man*)
Paul Chapman (*caretaker*)
Beverly Higgins (*school secretary*)
Harry Calvert (*scrap yard worker*)
Robert Hudson, Rob Snell, Max Smith, Chris Yates (*power station workers*)
Ken Christiansen (*policeman*)
Vicki Hackett (*WPC Hayward*)
Matty Bailey (*Kevin*)
Steven ‘Peanut’ Walker (*Wizz*)
Robert Emms (*Phil the barman*)
Garry Page (*Garry*)
Tim Paley (*driver*)
David J. Peel (*Huddersfield scrapyard man*)
Joshua Haase, Simon Hearn, Mark Pitts (*policemen*)
Ragdoll (*Tarmac Tommy*)
Junior (*Diesel*)
Princess Bush (*Chip ‘n’ Pin*)
Queenie (*Mare*)
Duchess (*Foal*)

UK 2013©

91 mins

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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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