



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Beautiful Thing

Please note: this film contains dialogue that some viewers find offensive, and which does not reflect the views of the BFI.

The mid-1990s was a watershed period for independent gay and lesbian film, not only because of the number of feature and short films being made, but because of the critical interest which accompanied them. Contemporary in its subject matter and style, *Beautiful Thing* (1995) offered a multicultural perspective of post-Thatcher Britain. The film was written by Jonathan Harvey and marked the debut of young director Hettie MacDonald, who had emerged from a theatre background, having directed her first West End play at 24.

Known for race riots, high unemployment and social deprivation in the mid-1980s, the South East London council estate Thamesmead is transformed, thanks to Chris Seager's cinematography, into an almost magical place, overlooking a lake bathed in sunlight. In this respect, *Beautiful Thing* is unusual among British films, which, where they portray the gay community or working classes at all, rarely offer such as a positive portrait of love developing over a long sweltering summer.

Touching and funny in a way comparable to *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985) and *Young Soul Rebels* (1991), *Beautiful Thing* manages to appeal to a young mainstream audience. The narrative easily encompasses difficult issues of racism, homophobia, violence, sex and drug use within the disenfranchised underclass of a two-tier Britain, while lightly but acutely depicting a teenage gay romance.

Beautiful Thing emerged from the New Queer Cinema movement, which strove to invest the previously negative term 'queer' with a range of new, exciting and positive meanings in politics and filmmaking. The success of the film seemed to suggest that a substantial number of people were more accepting of homosexuality than previously.

As an urban love story, *Beautiful Thing* wears its politics lightly, but it is subversive nevertheless. The central romance is one between two 16-year-old boys – then well below the age of consent – making this a light-hearted film steeped in socio-political significance.

Beautiful Thing premiered at the London Lesbian and Gay Film Festival in 1996, where it collected the award for best film. In the same year, it was selected for the Directors' Fortnight at the Cannes Film Festival.

Sonya Williams, BFI Screenonline, screenonline.org.uk

Tony Garnett on 'Beautiful Thing'

I had stopped going to the theatre years before, despite having lived for it, and in it, when a young man. Having discovered the screen, I was now impatient with its conventions: usually people on a shelf at the end of a large space, pretending unconvincingly to be someone else and ignoring my presence, except when they paused to ride a laugh. A static camera shot from a fixed angle and lens. Even in intimate theatres, shouting at me. And they usually did all this at dinner time. My loss, I knew. It meant missing a few important evenings, but I was tired of walking out at the first interval.

I have forgotten how I ended up at the Bush, probably because of the writer, Jonathan Harvey. I thought *Beautiful Thing* would make a better film. Channel 4 agreed to back it and to their great credit did not stop me hiring its stage director, Hettie MacDonald, from directing the film. She had understood the text, with compassion and humour. She was clearly good with actors. She was intelligent. I surrounded her with an experienced crew: Chris Seager, Don Fairservice, Nick O'Hagan and Bill Shapter calmly looking after everyone. Hettie came through with assurance.

My main worry was obtaining all the rights Channel 4 demanded for the music of Cass Elliot. The film depended on this. The cost was prohibitive. The negotiation went right past the time to cancel the film. At the last minute we made a deal.

The subject matter was foreign to me. But when we received letters from young men, living in provincial cities, who thanked us for saving them: they now knew they were not alone, they were not freaks, I was glad.

I had just thought it was a beautiful love story.

Tony Garnett, 2013

A contemporary review

Jonathan Harvey's shamelessly optimistic drama first appeared as a successful stage play. Describing the love between two boys on a South London estate, its strength lay in its refusal to deliver the urban misery one might expect from such material. Instead, Harvey offered a vision which was both romanticised and truthful. Certainly, there was domestic violence and homophobia, but flowers decorated the concrete and a foul-mouthed communality existed between residents. Most of all, the play worked against the assumption that to be working class is to be automatically less liberal, less capable of tolerance.

Promoted as 'an urban fairy tale', this Channel 4 adaptation from debut director Hettie MacDonald captures the feel-good nature of the play. Jamie and Ste's relationship develops in the cramped rooms and walkways of a Thamesmead estate, but beers on the balcony and the distant sound of outdoor play create a sense of space and holiday relaxation. Harsh architecture basks in the golden glow of an inner city heatwave and characters dress in bold, primary colours. The stylised, low-budget look of the film calls to mind the Stephen Frears/Hanif Kureishi collaboration *My Beautiful Laundrette*, which framed its gay romance with the same sense of theatricality.

As a play, *Beautiful Thing* received criticism for dodging difficult issues. The same could be argued of the film, but to do so seems to miss the point of Harvey's project, which is to portray the magically transformative powers of romance. That said, the film is rich in understated realism. Jamie, Leah and Ste all come from single parent families. Ste deals Ecstasy at parties and Sandra's ex used to beat her up. These details are more effective for going unremarked: this is simply the way things are. It is also worth noting that, while the last 15 years have seen filmmakers escaping conventionally punitive representations of homosexuality, the happy, homosexual love affair at this film's core remains mildly subversive. That this romance is between two 16-year-old boys (below the legal age of consent) suggests that, rather than ducking controversy, MacDonald and Harvey have, in fact, produced an 'issue' film with a remarkably light touch.

Liese Spencer, *Sight and Sound*, June 1996

BEAUTIFUL THING

Director: Hettie MacDonald
Production Companies: World Productions, Channel Four
Producers: Tony Garnett, Bill Shapter
Production Supervisor: Nick O'Hagan
Production Co-ordinator: Danielle Brandon
Location Managers: Jim Allan, Barry Smith
1st Assistant Director: Susie Liggat
2nd Assistant Director: James Imber
3rd Assistant Directors: Victoria Goodall, Jim Wilkinson
Script Supervisor: Susanna Lenton
Casting: Andy Pryor, Gail Stevens
Written by: Jonathan Harvey
Based on the play by: Jonathan Harvey
Director of Photography: Chris Seager
2nd Unit Operator: Jeremy Hiles
Steadicam Operators: Alf Tramontin, Adrian Smith
Editor: Don Fairservice
Production Designer: Mark Stevenson
Art Director: Chrysoula Sofitsi
Scenic Artist: Guy Rutter
Costume Designer: Pam Tait
Wardrobe Mistress: Charlotte Couchman
Make-up Designer: Elisa Johnson
Chief Hairdresser: Pebbles
Titles: Linda Sherwood-Page
Original Music Composer/Conductor/Arranger: John Altman
Sound Mixer: John Midgley
2nd Unit Sound Recordist: Paul Lemare
Dubbing Mixer: David Old
Sound Editors: Kevin Brazier, Wayne Brooks
Stunt Co-ordinators: David Cronnelly, Gabe Cronnelly

Cast

Glen Berry (*Jamie Gangel*)
Linda Henry (*Sandra Gangel*)
Scott Neal (*Ste Pearce*)
Ben Daniels (*Tony*)
Tameka Empson (*Leah*)
Meera Syal (*Miss Chauhan*)
Martin Walsh (*Mr Bennett*)
Steven Martin (*Ryan McBride*)
Andrew Fraser (*Jayson*)
John Savage (*Lenny*)
Julie Smith (*Gina*)
Jeillo Edwards (*Rose*)
Anna Karen (*Marlene*)
Garry Cooper (*Ronnie Pearce*)
Daniel Bowers (*Trevor Pearce*)
Terry Duggan (*Kevin*)
Sophie Stanton (*Louise*)
Ozdemir Mamodeally (*Slasher*)
John Benfield (*Rodney Barr*)
Davyd Harries, Beth Goddard (*brewery officials*)
Marlene Sidaway (*Betty*)
Liane Ware (*Claire*)
Catherine Sanderson (*Kelly*)
Dave Lynn (*drag performer*)

UK 1996
90 mins

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar

Tue 1 Feb 18:20; Fri 25 Feb 20:45

Young Soul Rebels

Wed 2 Feb 18:20 (+ intro by BFI Race Equality Lead Rico Johnson-Sinclair); Thu 17 Feb 20:45

All About My Mother (Todo sobre mi madre)

Wed 2 Feb 20:45; Wed 16 Feb 21:00

Beautiful Thing

Thu 3 Feb 20:45; Mon 14 Feb 20:30

The Handmaiden (Ah-ga-ssi)

Fri 4 Feb 17:50; Sat 12 Feb 20:10; Sun 27 Feb 17:50

Rent

Sat 5 Feb 12:30; Sun 20 Feb 18:10

Maurice

Sun 6 Feb 15:20; Mon 14 Feb 18:00

The Watermelon Woman

Mon 7 Feb 20:45; Sat 26 Feb 20:30

Happy Together (Chun gwong cha sit)

Tue 8 Feb 18:15 (+ intro by Yi Wang, Queer East); Sun 13 Feb 15:20

My Own Private Idaho

Tue 8 Feb 20:45; Wed 23 Feb 18:00 (+ intro by BFI Race Equality Lead Rico Johnson-Sinclair)

Moonlight

Thu 24 Feb 14:30; Mon 28 Feb 20:45

Brokeback Mountain

Wed 9 Feb 17:45 (+ intro by BFI Race Equality Lead Rico Johnson-Sinclair); Mon 21 Feb 20:25

Go Fish

Wed 9 Feb 20:40; Sat 26 Feb 18:20

Rope

Thu 10 Feb 18:30; Tue 22 Feb 14:30

Victim

Thu 10 Feb 20:40; Sun 13 Feb 13:00; Mon 21 Feb 18:00

Desert Hearts

Fri 11 Feb 20:40; Wed 16 Feb 18:20 (+ intro by BFI Head Librarian Emma Smart)

My Beautiful Laundrette

Sat 12 Feb 18:20; Tue 15 Feb 20:45; Sat 19 Feb 20:45

A Fantastic Woman (Una mujer fantástica)

Sun 13 Feb 18:40; Tue 22 Feb 20:50

Mädchen in Uniform

Fri 18 Feb 20:30; Sat 26 Feb 16:00

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