



**WOMAN WITH A MOVIE CAMERA PREVIEW  
POWERED BY JAGUAR**

# Ali & Ava

+ Q&A with writer-director Clio Barnard and producer Tracy O’Riordan

*Ali & Ava* is inspired by two people Clio Barnard met whilst making her previous award-winning films *The Arbor* (2010), about playwright Andrea Dunbar, and *The Selfish Giant* (2013), a contemporary fable about two teenagers lured into the world of copper theft.

While making *The Arbor* Barnard met and worked with Bradford actor, DJ and landlord Moey Hassan and later, when making *The Selfish Giant*, she met Rio, a mother and teaching assistant at a Bradford school. Though her next film, 2017’s *Dark River*, was set in a rural environment on the outskirts of Bradford and explored issues of trauma and abuse, the insights of Moey and Rio stayed with Barnard, inspiring her to begin work on *Ali & Ava*. Collaborating with Bradford based writer Kamal Kaan as script consultant, she started to shape a story influenced by Hassan, Kaan and Rio.

‘It started with the characters of Ali and Ava, and a question,’ says Barnard. ‘What would happen if you took melodrama as a genre and applied it to a social-realist version of Bradford that’s based on real people? It’s an opportunity to think about what it means to be part of a community. There’s a lot of kindness, generosity and support in Bradford and I wanted to see that writ large on the big screen.’

‘As a British-Bengali Muslim,’ says Kamal Kaan, ‘having lived and grown up in Bradford, I was keen to work with Clio on *Ali & Ava*, a story which reflects the positive experience of the city, countering the misrepresentation of Bradford, which is often portrayed as a divided, impoverished post-industrial city. For me Bradford offers a sanctuary of love, joy and a sense of rootedness to family.’

‘To me the appeal of Clio’s projects is that they are organic and grow out of a strong connection to people and place,’ says Barnard’s longtime producer, Tracy O’Riordan. ‘The idea for *The Selfish Giant* sprang out of *The Arbor* – and in turn the idea for *Ali & Ava* sprang out of *The Selfish Giant*; thereby cementing long-standing contributor relationships and brokering new ones, all within the Bradford community. In early discussions Clio and I talked a lot about music, love stories and comedy, especially once she began working with Adeel Akhtar, who we cast early on as Ali and who is a great comedic actor. The process consisted of Bradford based interviews, research trips and workshops over a period of about two years in which the story started to take shape and evolved up to rehearsal and beyond. Clio is brilliant at listening, connecting and collaborating with people like Rio, Moey and Kamal – and that’s one of the most fulfilling parts of my job, to really get to know these inspiring people, and hear about the detail of their lives.’

Having met and gelled with *Four Lions* star Adeel Akhtar, the script began to develop with him in mind as charismatic Bradford landlord, Ali. ‘I really love Adeel’s playful mind – he’s got an amazing imagination,’ says Barnard. ‘We built Ali together. I wrote a sketch for a story, we met, talked it through, then workshopped the idea together.’

A fan of Barnard’s previous work, Akhtar responded to the collaborative and fluid nature of the project. ‘It always just felt like an evolution of a conversation. It was the idea of giving a space and a voice to people or a type of person that is ordinarily overlooked and not really seen. And allowing those people to have a very intimate connection with each other – I’d not ever read anything like that or

seen anything like that on screen. And that's an exciting place to be in because you're just really discovering something new.'

Rebecca Manley, who played Shelley in *The Selfish Giant*, had met Bradford teaching assistant Rio whilst making the film back in 2012. She met Rio again in 2017 with Clio to develop the character of Ava and co-designed the workshops in which Clio, Adeel and Rebecca explored the characters and relationship to find a story that could walk the line between humour and drama. Throughout this process Barnard was writing the screenplay, weaving in the detail of the Bradford neighbourhoods she'd got to know through spending time with Rio, Moey and Kamal. 'I like to work collaboratively throughout the writing, development and production process with the real people,' says Barnard, 'and continue that process into production by mixing actors and non-actors. As with *The Selfish Giant*, I think of *Ali & Ava* as fictional biographical portraits made in collaboration with the people who are being represented.'

Ahead of a six-week shoot in the city, a diverse team of seasoned HoDs and senior Yorkshire based regional crew were assembled and in addition, opportunities for junior crew and recent graduates from Bradford were seeded early on to create the right working environment and sensitivities. Liaising with David Wilson (Bradford City of Film) and employing local people in supporting roles and filming on location in Bradford homes embedded the film in that reality, and working in the city was a vital creative source for the actors. As well as being instrumental in nailing a convincing Bradford accent, living and working there informed Akhtar's performance. 'Just being there does a lot of work for you in that I think that people's environment changes how they think. So being in Bradford and filming in Bradford helps with that.'

Revisiting *The Selfish Giant*'s Holmewood estate, the team also filmed at Tong and Laisterdyke, along Leeds Road and at the imposing, hilltop cemetery, Undercliffe. Undercliffe's Victorian graveyard has stunning views of Bradford and became integral to two key moments in Ali and Ava's relationship. Other serendipitous moments included a rag-and-bone horse and cart trotting through the scene at the Mosque and the atmospheric fog that blows around Ali's car as he dances on it. 'We had scouted this location specifically for the view of Bradford city in the background, but on the afternoon we were scheduled to film, there was heavy rain, flooding and blanket fog,' says O'Riordan. 'The weather had already played havoc with our schedule, so we had no option but to forge ahead, which ultimately led to a moment in the script that became much more significant, partly because the footage was great.'

That organic sensibility and being open to discovery while shooting characterises Barnard's style and working method according to her cast. 'From the very first moment Clio and I met to the workshops and then being on set – it's just a really generous, open, kind way of working,' says Akhtar. 'She's just very interested in what *your* understanding is.' Rushbrook agrees, 'Clio gives very well placed, pertinent notes, but all the time you feel that it's coming organically from you and in doing that, you feel confident and liberated to be braver or let yourself feel more vulnerable, or try something leftfield... all the things that hopefully make performances a bit different. I think with a love story like this vulnerability and intimacy is required if you want it to be authentic, and that's scary. But she makes you feel safe.'

## **Production notes**

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## ALI & AVA

*Directed by:* Clio Barnard  
©: Avali Film Ltd, British Broadcasting Corporation,  
The British Film Institute  
*a Moonspun Films production*  
*Presented by:* BBC Film, BFI, Screen Yorkshire  
*In association with:* Altitude Film Entertainment  
*Developed with the support of:* BBC Film  
*Made with the support of the* BFI Film Fund, BFI Locked Box Initiative  
*Executive Producers:* Rose Garnett, Claudia Yusef, Lizzie Francke,  
Hugo Heppell, Caroline Cooper Charles, Will Clarke, Mike Runagall  
*Produced by:* Tracy O’Riordan  
*Co-producer:* Ameenah Ayub Allen  
*Line Producer:* Joanne Dixon  
*Casting Director:* Shaheen Baig  
*1st Assistant Director:* Tony Aherne  
*Post-production Supervisor:* Meg Clark  
*Written by:* Clio Barnard  
*Script Consultant:* Kamal Kaan  
*Character Consultants:* Moey Hassan, Rio  
*Director of Photography:* Ole Bratt Birkeland  
*Editor:* Maya Maffioli  
*Production Designer:* Stéphane Collonge  
*Costume Designer:* Sophie O’Neill

*Hair and Make-up Designer:* Fiona Lobo-Cranston  
*Original Music:* Harry Escott  
*Music Supervision:* Connie Farr  
*Production Sound Mixer:* Rashad Hall-Heinz  
*Re-recording Mixer:* Martin Jensen

## Cast

Adeel Akhtar (*Ali*)  
Claire Rushbrook (*Ava*)  
Ellora Torchia (*Runa*)  
Shaun Thomas (*Callum*)  
Natalie Gavin (*Dawn*)  
Mona Goodwin (*Michelle*)  
Krupa Pattani (*Usma*)  
Vinny Dhillon (*Jameela*)  
Tasha Connor (*Karen*)  
Macy Shackleton (*Venice*)  
Ariana Bodorova (*Sofia*)

UK 2020©  
94 mins

Courtesy of Altitude

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## IN PERSON & PREVIEWS

### Preview: Paper & Glue + prerecorded Q&A with director JR

Tue 1 Mar 18:00

### The Power of the Dog+ Jane Campion in conversation with Noah Baumbach

Tue 1 Mar 19:15

### GFF Opening Gala: The Outfit + pre-recorded Q&A with director Graham Moore and actor Mark Rylance

Wed 2 Mar 20:20

### Preview: Rebel Dread + Q&A with Don Letts

Thu 3 Mar 18:00

### Member Picks: Evita

Fri 4 Mar 17:50

### Doctor Who: Revelation of the Daleks

Sat 5 Mar 12:00

### Mark Kermode Live in 3D at the BFI

Mon 7 Mar 18:10

### Woman with a Movie Camera Preview: True Things + Q&A with Director Harry Wootliff

Mon 7 Mar 20:35

### Hive+ pre-recorded Q&A with filmmakers

Tue 8 Mar 18:15

### TV Preview: Gentleman Jack Series 2 + Q&A with writer Sally Wainwright and actors Suranne Jones and Sophie Rundle

Wed 9 Mar 18:10

### GFF International Women’s Day Gala: Happening (L’evenement) + Pre-recorded Q&A with Director Audrey Diwan

Wed 9 Mar 20:40

### TV Preview: Inside No. 9 + Q&A with creators Reece Shearsmith and Steve Pemberton, and executive producer Adam Tandy

Fri 11 Mar 20:40

### GFF Closing Gala: Murina

Sun 13 Mar 19:00

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