



PREVIEW

Benediction

+ extended introduction with actor Jack Lowden

Benediction explores the turbulent life of First World War poet, Siegfried Sassoon, through the eyes of the revered filmmaker Terence Davies. Sassoon was a complex man who survived the horrors of fighting in the First World War and was decorated for his bravery but who became a vocal critic of the government's continuation of the war when he returned from service. His poetry was inspired by his experiences on the Western Front and he became one of the leading war poets of the era. Adored by members of the aristocracy as well as stars of London's literary and stage world, he embarked on affairs with several men as he attempted to come to terms with his homosexuality. At the same time, broken by the horror of war, he made his life's journey a quest for salvation, trying to find it within the conformity of marriage and religion. His story is one of a troubled man in a fractured world searching for peace and self-acceptance, something which speaks as meaningfully to the modern world as it did then.

'When I first said I'd make this film, which is six years ago now,' says Terence Davies, 'I didn't know that much about Siegfried Sassoon's life. So I went out and bought three huge biographies of him. There was so much in them. It seemed he knew everybody – he was never in! So at first, it was difficult to know how to make the film, how to shape it.' For all that, he felt a strong affinity with Sassoon's character and life story.

Within the British film industry Terence – a veteran who is both screenwriter and director of *Benediction* – is widely regarded as one of our truly great filmmakers, thanks to an extraordinary body of work that includes *Distant Voices*, *Still Lives* (1988), *The Long Day Closes* (1992), *The Neon Bible* and *The House of Mirth* (both from 2000) and his remarkable documentary *Of Time and the City* (2008) – set in a working-class area of Liverpool, where he grew up.

In 2015 Terence agreed to write and direct *Benediction* and production company EMU Films came on board with Michael Elliott as a producer in April 2016, before they all began developing the project with the BFI. 'Originally we thought it would have wrapped in about a year,' Terence says now. 'But the timescale turned out to be more than five years.'

Part of the problem was the complexity of Sassoon's life and its various facets: as Terence concedes: 'Only when I started reading about his life did I realise what a huge subject it was. So how could I write it and make sense of it? All within a two-hour film. There was so much to shape – and so much to lose.'

'I thought the best idea was to concentrate on those things that interested me. I didn't know Sassoon was gay, nor that he had converted to Catholicism. Being an ex-Catholic, that was quite a shock for me. Then there was his constant search for some kind of redemption, which never comes because you can't find redemption in anyone or anything. You have to find it in yourself. He did what lots of gay men did back then: they got married. I think he genuinely thought: "The love of a good woman could cure me".'

Quite apart from all this, Sassoon made a name for himself both as a hero on the battlefield and as a fierce opponent of the war, appalled by the way it was being conducted. He was decorated for his bravery in the field (being awarded a Military Cross), but on his return home for convalescent leave in 1917 he wrote a furiously eloquent letter to his commanding officer about the suffering of British troops, refused to perform any more military duties while insisting the government's continuation of the war was 'being deliberately prolonged by those who have the power to end it.' His words were read out in Parliament and reached the pages of the national press. As a result, although he escaped a court-martial he was sent to Craiglockhart War Hospital in Scotland and was treated for 'shell shock.'

Siegfried Sassoon has long been recognised as one of Britain's great World War I poets, along with his near contemporaries Rupert Brooke, Robert Graves and Wilfred Owen. 'I know Sassoon was slightly older than the others, but I still associate him with that idea of doomed youth,' says Michael Elliott. 'Like the others, he experienced the devastation and wrote about it unflinchingly. The war poets became a literary phenomenon – which is why I guess they loom large in the British psyche.'

'I think there's a lot of Terence's personality in this film. You know there are touchstones for him there – Sassoon's sexuality and his conversion to Catholicism. You could see that the combination of Terence telling (Sassoon's) story was an interesting thing. It felt like fertile ground for Terence – and it feels quite autobiographical in a way in this adaptation.'

Preparations for shooting the film inched ahead throughout 2019, with a view to start shooting in the spring of 2020. Everything seemed to be falling to place. 'When we were nearing production, we go to a point where Terence wanted to lock the script – he felt he'd done everything he could in terms of addressing any notes from us or the BFI. We went out for the rest of the finance and BBC Film agreed to come on board. We had Bankside as our sales agent who introduced us to M.Y.R.A. Entertainment for co-funding and we had some Creative England money from their West Midlands fund, which dictated where we would shoot. And that was just fine – a lot of the Sassoon material had happened in stately homes and high society, and there's a lot of that in the West Midlands which is largely untapped and affordable. We already had great production contacts with the films we made up there already (including some episodes of Steve McQueen's BBC TV series *Small Axe*.)

'The West Midlands Production fund came on board and really embraced the project. So we found some fantastic locations there – they were terrific. We based ourselves in Wolverhampton – and a couple of country houses we shot in around there, I don't think they'd ever had a film crew inside.'

Although it had taken a long time to get to this point, things were looking promising – and a date for the start of principal photography shooting was already pencilled in: Monday, 23 March, 2020. And that was when the progress of the film suffered a terrible blow. The burgeoning Covid pandemic was now clearly a threat to normal life and work across the nation – and just three days before that proposed start date, the decision had to be taken to put the film on hiatus. At the time, no one had any idea that the reconnection would be six months away.

'It was miraculous that all the right people could gather whenever they started shooting,' Geraldine James remembers. 'But everybody got together –

because I think they were very keen on the project, committed to it – and committed to Terence too. He was simply wonderful with everyone. There's no one I'd rather have worked with in that very strange time.'

Terence recalls: 'The hardest part was, we were going to the first camera test at Pinewood and that was the day lockdown was introduced – with three days to go. I thought – what if it all collapses and it's not made at all? But then all the financiers were fabulous.'

So, it seems, were the owners of grand houses in and around Wolverhampton, who kept them available for when the film crews returned, after the six-month hiatus. One of these was Chillington Hall, a beautiful 18th-century house at nearby Brewood, which the cast and crew liked so much they stayed for 10 days of shooting – simply because it offered so many splendid locations.

Terence is thrilled by the young actors who appear in *Benediction*: 'The wealth of talent among them, male and female, was quite breath-taking. And that's thrilling.' Among the younger actors, Michael Elliott also singles out Jack Lowden's unswerving loyalty: 'Jack came on board at an early stage. He was really hugely supportive and stuck with the project for one and a half years while we were trying to get our finance sorted.'

The gratitude goes two ways: Calam Lynch remains delighted he got the chance to play the outrageous Stephen Tennant in *Benediction*: 'It was such a privilege and for most of us the first job after lockdown, so the sense of joy was palpable. And to be able to say I've worked on a film with Terence Davies!'

Production notes

BENEDICTION

Directed by: Terence Davies

©: UME14 Limited, BBC, The British Film Institute

Production Company: EMU Films

In association with: Reiver Pictures

Made possible by the support of: HM Treasury & DCMS' Film and TV

Production Restart Scheme

Supported by: Creative England

Made with the support of the: BFI's Film Fund

Presented by: BFI, BBC Film, Creative England

In association with: M.Y.R.A. Entertainment, LipSync

International Sales by: Bankside Films Ltd

Executive Producers: Rose Garnett, Lizzie Franke, Paul Ashton, Margarethe Baillou, Norman Merry, Peter Hampden, Stephen Kelliher, Jack Lowden, John Taylor, Walli Ullah, Jim Mooney

Produced by: Michael Elliott

Co-producer: Deborah Aston

Archive Producer: Jim Anderson

EMU Films Head of Development: Laia Senserrich

Production Co-ordinator: Jen McKeown

Production Accountants: Shane Savill, Emily Diprose

Unit Manager: Richard Pullen

Location Manager: Ian Vasey

Supervising Location Manager: Midge Ferguson

Post-production Supervisor: Jackie Vance

1st Assistant Director: David Crabtree

2nd Assistant Director: Mark Corden

3rd Assistant Director: Georgia Hampson

Script Supervisor: Susanna Lenton

Casting Director: Lucy Rands

Casting Assistant: Ruth O'Dowd

Written by: Terence Davies

Director of Photography: Nicola Daley

Digital Imaging Technician: James Hogarth

Gaffer: Pete Trevena

Best Boy: Mark Shinkins

Grip: Chris Hughes

Stills Photographer: Laurence Cendrowicz

Visual Effects Supervisor: John Paul Docherty

Additional On-set Visual Effects Supervisor: Sheila Wickens

Visual Effects by: LipSync Post

Special Effects Supervisor: Scott MacIntyre

Special Effects Provided by: Scott MacIntyre SFX

Film Editor: Alex Mackie

1st Assistant Editor: Nicola Matiwone

Production Designer: Andy Harris

Supervising Art Director: Adam Tomlinson

Art Director: Nick Turner

Standby Art Directors: Katrina Stewart, Katy Hooper

Set Decorators: Alison Harvey, Hannah Nicholson

Graphic Designer: Jenni Payne

Production Buyers: Jenny Hawes, May Johnson

Props Masters: Mark McIntyre, Jim Mate

Costume Designer: Annie Symons

Costume Supervisor: Debbie Williams

Hair & Make-up Designer: Veronica McAleer

Titles by: LipSync Post

Colourist: Jamie Welsh

Musical Director: Benjamin Woodgates

Choir Direction: Simon Wallfisch

Musical Arranger: Benjamin Woodgates

Music Supervisors: Ed Bailie, Abi Leland

Score Engineer & Mixer: Adam Miller

Choreographer: Jamie Cutler

Production Sound Mixer: Adam Fletcher

Re-recording Mixers: Rob Hughes, Brian Gilligan

Supervising Sound Editors: Stephen Griffiths, Andy Shelley

Loop Group: Sync or Swim

ADR Recordists: Mark Langlay-Smith, Tushar Manek

ADR Voice Casting: Phoebe Scholfield

Foley Artist: Ian Waggott

Foley Mixer: Ben Cross

Horse Master: Mark Atkinson

Publicist: Charles McDonald

With special thanks to the Estate of:

George Sassoon

Cast

Jack Lowden (*Siegfried Sassoon*)

Peter Capaldi (*Siegfried Sassoon (older)*)

Simon Russell Beale (*Robbie Ross*)

Jeremy Irvine (*Ivor Novello*)

Calam Lynch (*Stephen Tennant*)

Tom Blyth (*Glen Byam Shaw*)

Kate Phillips (*Hester Gatty*)

Geraldine James (*Mother*)

Anton Lesser (*Stephen Tennant (older)*)

Suzanne Bertish (*Lady Ottoline Morrell*)

Matthew Tennyson (*Wilfred Owen*)

Julian Sands (*Chief Medical Officer*)

Lia Williams (*Edith Sitwell*)

Richard Goulding (*George Sassoon*)

Jude Akuwudike (*priest*)

Gemma Jones (*Hester Sassoon (older)*)

Ben Daniels (*Doctor Rivers*)

Thom Ashley (*Hamo*)

Orlando Jopling (*conductor*)

Christopher Naylor (*tailor*)

Daniel Tuite (*Major McCartney-Filgate*)

Mark Oosterveen (*1st army doctor*)

Steven Pacey (*2nd army doctor*)

Joyce Henderson (*matron*)

Torquil Munro (*pianist*)

Chrissy Roberts (*female singer*)

Bobby Robertson (*taxi driver*)

Georgina Rylance (*Dorothy Brett*)

Luke Hornsby (*screaming man*)

Joanna Bacon (*Lady Sybil Colefax*)

David Shields (*Alexander Fenton*)

James Keefe (*pianist*)

Harry Brown (*trombonist*)

Justin Quin (*banjoist*)

Jay Phelps (*trumpeter*)

Mark O'Brien (*saxophonist*)

Andrew Bradley (*stage doorman*)

Harry Lawtey (*Bobby Andrews*)

Jonathan Broadbent (*Robert Graves*)

Olivia Darnley (*Edith Oliver*)

Edward Bennett (*T.E. Lawrence*)

Edmund Kingsley (*Rex Whistler*)

Tim Delap (*Geoffrey Keynes*)

Chris Dale (*Anglican priest*)

Kellie Shirley (*singing girl*)

Ian Beach (*amputee soldier*)

UK-USA 2021

137 mins

Courtesy of Vertigo

IN PERSON & PREVIEWS

Preview: Benediction + extended introduction with director Terence Davies + actor Jack Lowden

Mon 9 May 20:15

Gaspar Noé in Conversation

Tue 10 May 21:00

Preview: Summer Ghost + Q&A with director Loundraw

Fri 13 May 18:30

Work in Progress Preview: All at Sea

Tue 26 May 18:10

SPECIAL FILMS & EVENTS

Film Wallahs: Adieu Godard + intro

Wed 11 May 18:20

Focus Hong Kong: The Bride with White Hair + intro

Thu 12 May 18:20

Focus Hong Kong: UK Premiere: Bamboo Theatre + intro

Fri 13 May 18:15

UK Asian Film Festival: Closing Night: Gangnam Girls + intro by director and producer

Sun 15 May 11:30

UK Premiere: The Coup d'état Factory + discussion with chair, Baroness Christine Blower and special guests (TBA)

Sun 29 May 14:00

QUEER EAST

Girls' School + Q&A with Wang Chun-Chi, Chairwoman of Taiwan Women's Film Association

Tue 24 May 18:10

East Palace, West Palace Dong gong xi gong + intro by Chris Berry, Professor of Film Studies, King's College London

Fri 27 May 20:30

Malila: The Farewell Flower + Q&A with director Anucha Boonyawatana

Sat 28 May 15:00

Queer East Closing Night: Metamorphosis + Q&A with director JE Tiglao

Sun 29 May 18:00

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