



**RETURN OF THE OUTSIDER:
THE FILMS OF MIKE HODGES**

Dandelion Dead

Mike Hodges: I agreed to do *Dandelion Dead* because of the script – it's witty, wicked and black. Reading a script is one thing, shooting it is another. I am a fast director but I had to be faster than usual because of the schedule. We had to shoot five minutes of cut film a day. To hang on to quality and shoot that much a day is tough.

I was nervous about doing a 'frock' film à la James Ivory. I have never done a period film before, but was determined to go first and foremost for the story – which is very strong – and not just dwell on the elegant clothes and beautiful vistas.

It is different from shooting contemporary films. For a start, the framing is different. When you have an actor as tall as David Thewlis – and he's wearing a hat – it becomes a tall order! I don't think I have ever shot a film with so many hats in it!

Even though we worked everything out in advance and knew where the TV aerials were and where we needed to cover the yellow lines, that doesn't really make life any easier. With contemporary films I am used to being able to point the camera anywhere so this was quite restrictive.

I don't think I have worked with a totally British cast for years and they were amazing. The cast and crew were the most professional group of people I have ever worked with. For example Michael Kitchen had 22 costume changes in one day – that shows the degree of professionalism that was required.

Patrick Harbinson (Producer): Another period murder, I thought, when Sarah Wilson (LWT's Controller of Drama) first sent me *Dandelion Dead*, but as I started to read Michael Chaplin's script I immediately understood her enthusiasm.

So compelling was Michael's writing that, towards the end, I completely forgot it was a true story, and was wondering how – and I must admit hoping – Armstrong would escape justice. The hard reality of the climax returned me to my senses, and I was left holding a script that told a fascinating story, and was crowded with characters and incidents that could have graced the pages of Dylan Thomas or Joe Orton. That it was all true was just icing on the cake.

With such scripts, I was determined that the series should have a feature quality to it, and was delighted when Mike Hodges – whose films from *Get Carter* to *Black Rainbow* I have loved – agreed to do his first television series in a decade. Mike's elegant, almost classical style of filmmaking has done full justice to the scripts and to the performances of an exceptional cast.

Mike was adamant that we film as much as possible in Hay-on-Wye, on the location of the actual events. The spectacular countryside, the charm of Hay, our extraordinary luck with the weather – our opening shots were snatched in a 15-minute sunny break in a completely rain-sodden day – gave the films a quality they could not otherwise have had.

And working in that small town, where memories of Armstrong assail you at every corner, gave us a haunting sense of history, and added an extra spice to the making of *Dandelion Dead*.

Michael Kitchen: I played Armstrong before in a radio play about the case, called *Excuse Fingers* – so I knew the story, and though an hour on radio is a completely different business to four hours on film, as far as I can remember the character has been treated in essentially the same manner: a rather weak man, dominated by his wife.

There are varying opinions about his guilt. I have no doubt that he did it. There was a description of his reaction at the moment of his arrest given by the arresting officer in a book about the case: losing his colour, shaking etc – not the behaviour of an innocent man. And in the same book there are statements by neighbours of his before he moved to Hay-on-Wye who were convinced he'd poisoned their dog, along with others who believed he'd poisoned the solicitor and his wife who'd first employed him in Hay in order to take over the practice. He may well have been an old hand at it!

Walking past the unmarked spot where Katharine Armstrong is actually buried and the building where the exhumation of her body took place, and taking the same route along the same roads that he took to work was certainly a very peculiar feeling.

And there are still local people either related to or who knew the people involved in the case. An old lady told me she well remembered, as a young girl with her father, being on the same train taking Armstrong under police escort to Gloucester prison.

For many reasons it was a fascinating experience. Few of us on the film had worked as hard as the schedule demanded. In the main that's not a bad thing: no-one wants to spend more time on a film set than is absolutely necessary but achieving eight and a half minutes of cut film in a day is some going. Very long days, six day weeks, moustache gummed to the upper lip, relentless, lunatic period costume changes – sometimes 20 to 30 a day – spats, boots, hats and winter warms in the middle of summer. But it was infinitely preferable being in the thick of it than hanging around on the peripheries.

Production notes

DANDELION DEAD

Director: Mike Hodges
Production Company: LWT
Executive Producer: Sarah Wilson
Producer: Patrick Harbinson
Line Producer: Margaret Mitchell
Production Co-ordinator: Colleen Hughes
Location Manager: Robert Jordan
Assistant Director: Crispin Reece
Script Supervisor: Ann Simpson
Casting Director: Joyce Gallie
Script: Michael Chaplin
Photography: Gerry Fisher
Camera Operators: Gordon Hayman, James Turrell
Focus Puller: John Fletcher
Editor: Malcolm Cooke
Production Designer: Voytek
Art Director: John Ralph
Set Decorator: Joanne Woollard
Costume Designer: Evangeline Harrison
Make-up Supervisor: Carol Cooper
Make-up Artist: Sally Harrison
Music: Barrington Pheloung
Sound Mixer: Tony Dawe
Sound Maintenance: John Samworth
Sound Editors: Colin Miller, Mike Hopkins

Cast

Michael Kitchen (*Major Herbert Armstrong*)
David Thewlis (*Oswald Martin*)
Lesley Sharp (*Connie Davies*)
Peter Vaughan (*Tom Hincks*)
Diana Quick (*Marion Glassford-Gale*)
Bernard Hepton (*Davies*)
Robert Stephens (*Vaughan*)
Chloe Tucker (*Eleanor*)
Joseph Steel (*Pearson*)
Lucy Jenkins (*Inez*)
Roger Lloyd Pack (*Phillips*)
Rhoda Lewis (*Mrs Davies*)
Paul Brooke (*Arthur*)
Denis Hawthorne (*Sir Henry Curtis-Bennett*)
Alexandra Milman (*Margaret Armstrong*)
Brian Pettifer (*bank manager*)
Eve Bland (*Dorothy Martin*)
Stephen Lyons (*Gilbert Martin*)
Nick Miles (*Sergeant Sharp*)
John Owens (*official*)
John Pierce Jones (*Supt. Weaver*)
Robert Oates (*Williams*)
Nicholas Selby (*Spilsbury*)
John Horsley (*Pollock*)
Ralph Nosseck (*Justice Darling*)
Christine Pollon (*Pearce*)
Arbel Jones (*barmaid*)
Hubert Rees (*governor*)
Richard Strange (*hangman*)

ITV tx 6/13.2.1994

UK 1994

214 mins + interval

Mike Hodges interviewed by The British Entertainment History Project:
<https://historyproject.org.uk/interview/mike-hodges>

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Suspect + Rumour

Sun 1 May 14:20

The Terminal Man (director's cut)

Mon 2 May 14:50; Mon 16 May 20:40

Mike Hodges in Conversation

Tue 3 May 18:15

Black Rainbow

Tue 3 May 20:40; Sun 22 May 18:10

Pulp

Wed 4 May 18:15; Wed 11 May 20:50

I'll Sleep When I'm Dead

Thu 5 May 18:00; Mon 30 May 17:50

Morons from Outer Space

Fri 6 May 18:05; Wed 18 May 20:50 + **World in Action: The Flipside**

Flash Gordon

Sat 7 May 12:00; Thu 19 May 20:20 + **The Tyrant King: Episode 1:**

Scarface

Squaring the Circle + World in Action: Goldwater for President? or How to Win Friends and Influence People

Sun 8 May 11:50

A Prayer for the Dying

Sun 8 May 15:20; Sun 15 May 18:10

Tempo

Tue 17 May 18:00

Murder by Numbers + The Hitchhiker: W.G.O.D

Thu 19 May 18:30

Dandelion Dead

Sat 21 May 13:10

New Tempo

Sun 29 May 11:50

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