



GLENDA JACKSON

Stevie

‘Stevie Smith is the lady in the corner of Twentieth Century verse in English, the one with the ghastly floral hat and knitting. Only when you look closer do you notice that those flowers are real and still growing and that what you took for knitting needles are actually daggers,’ wrote Robert Nyle.

Poet and novelist, Stevie Smith, lived in the middle class suburb of Palmers Green in North London most of her life and died at the age of 68 in 1971. She became the third woman to receive the Queen’s Gold Medal for Poetry in 1969, joining such prestigious company as John Betjeman, Siegfried Sassoon, and W. H. Auden. Her loyal following extends not only across the Atlantic, but also to young people more than a generation removed from her own.

Glenda Jackson, who poignantly reveals the significance of Stevie’s life and writings through her portrayal, identifies strongly with the extraordinary woman she calls ‘one of the greatest writers we’ve got’: ‘One of the interesting things I found from doing it (the play) was how so few had actually seen beneath the exterior of her as this rather mousy, shy, strange little lady – they saw her as being somehow rather fey. In fact, I think she was extremely tough.’

‘I mean,’ Glenda explained, ‘she was a very brave woman, I think, with a great deal of spirit and an extremely critical mind. She didn’t miss anything. She didn’t miss anything about people and the truths about most people’s lives: that most people don’t live in a maelstrom of enormous emotional conflicts, in fact, and that the real drama of life is lived out on a really minute scale ... it’s just the minutiae of life that create the dramas and tensions. I think she captured that very well.’

‘We like to think that tragedy is reserved for a few great people,’ continues Glenda, ‘that tragedy only occurs in great circumstances. It’s not true, of course, and I think that in view of how people live seemingly quiet, dull, unruffled lives, she absolutely blows up and out of the window. She was a very, very revolutionary woman, actually ... she had a very revolutionary view of society, she didn’t take it all as read by any means.’

‘Her attitude to authority, for instance: she has a very sceptical view of authority,’ Glenda says. ‘Her attitude to religion: she was I think, a deeply religious woman but she was deeply religious on the level of saying, “Well, if you *are* God, prove it.” She absolutely discounted the social attitudes of her time. She simply didn’t take, even though there would seem to be nothing in her background to make her fight against it, the idea of woman’s greatest fulfilment being within the home and with children.’

Writer Hugh Whitemore, who first conceived the idea of writing a play on Stevie Smith, then translated her ethereal qualities to the screen, thinks the key to her tremendous appeal lies in the sense of identification she awakens in all types of people. ‘She rings all sorts of bells,’ he says. ‘She is a kind of everywoman – very much of a common figure. A lot of her poems are about things we all think about – love and death and getting old, being anxious and looking back at childhood. She really wrote about things we all know – which is what makes her so accessible.’

Glenda Jackson was writer Hugh Whitemore’s first choice for the key role. ‘First of all,’ he says, ‘I think Stevie is very tough. She had no illusions really. She’s a

very decisive writer and I think it needed someone who is a very “gutsy” and decisive actress. Occasionally Stevie is sentimental and I think it needs someone to play against this, otherwise it would become very gluey.’

When Robert Enders of Bowden Productions first saw the Hugh Whitemore play *Stevie* and felt it could be translated into a great film, he was reacting with the instincts of a man who is geared to the cinema. He saw in it certain cinematic values that could be developed far beyond the limitations of the theatre stage. In the months that followed, through the writing of the screenplay by Whitemore and the many discussions on treatment and techniques to be used, to the actual directing of the film by Enders himself, he felt he had witnessed a complete rebirth of *Stevie* that was a long way from being a mere reproduction of the play.

The popular phrase used of such a transition is ‘opening out’; however, it is also ‘opened in’ or inwards. In the theatre you have simply one image, in this case a room with two people, but the power of the camera is such that opening in or closing in can be just as effective and cinematic as its opposite. ‘Take the Hitchcock version of *Rope*,’ says Whitemore, ‘which stayed largely within one room. Yet nobody could be more cinematic than Hitchcock, moving his camera to examine faces, props and objects: the whole focus and balance changes in a way that is only possible in the cinema.’

Using both techniques then – opening out and opening in, the film is able to show us visually and in great detail and clarity the sort of life Stevie Smith led. Both Enders and Whitemore felt that an arbitrary ‘opening out’, a naive and pointless showing of trees and meadows, was of no value since a room can be just as cinematic as a landscape. Where landscape has been used it is to add cinematic comment as when The Man (played by Trevor Howard) speaks the lines of her most famous poem, ‘Not waving, but drowning’, against the cold, ice-covered background of the great lake in Grovelands Park. Again, the camera is used to recreate more vividly the images of loneliness and isolation and death that ran through her childhood: the funeral of her mother with all the pomp and ceremony of a bygone era when Stevie was still a child tells far more of her loss and desolation than words – however well used – in the play on stage.

The ‘opening in’ or ‘closing in’ of the film brings its own very specific rewards in that one is enabled to see and savour detail of performance in a way that was never possible on stage. Talking to Glenda Jackson in the central part of Stevie, Hugh Whitemore says, ‘The closer you get to her, the more riveting she is. To watch her act closely is something audiences in the theatre can’t do. I would think she must be, today, the best screen actress in the world. Certainly the most experienced, with performances of such merit and such variety.’ An opinion endorsed by director Robert Enders and noted cinematographer Freddie Young, who found her performance unique and extraordinary.

Side by side, and indeed, interwoven with this performance is that of Mona Washbourne as the ‘Lion Aunt’. The marvellous warmth of tenderness and feeling between Stevie and her aunt throughout the film – the aunt gradually becoming a rather cantankerous old lady, so frail that it is now Stevie’s turn to look after her. By ‘closing in’ on film, every nuance of that love – compounded or argument and agreement, humour and sadness – becomes closer and more touching.

Production notes

STEVIE

Directed by: Robert Enders
©: First Artists Production Company Ltd.,
Grand Metropolitan (Finance) Ltd.
A Bowden production
A presentation of: First Artists, Grand Metropolitan
Distributed by: First Artists Releasing Inc.
Produced by: Robert Enders
Production Manager: John Wilcox
Production Accountant: Hazel Crombie
Production Secretary: Caroline Neame
Assistant Director: Ken Baker
2nd Assistant Director: Philip Black
Continuity: Marjorie Lavelly
Screenplay based on his play by: Hugh Whitmore
Screenplay based on the works of: Stevie Smith
Director of Photography: Freddie Young
Camera Operator: Chic Anstiss
Gaffer: Pat Noonan
Camera Grip: Dickie Lee
Stills Photographer: Ray Hearne *
Editor: Peter Tanner
Assistant Editor: Michael Connell
Art Director: Robert Jones
Set Decorator: John Lageu
Costume Designer: John Gunter
Wardrobe Supervisor: Babs Gray
Make-up Artist: Dickie Mills

Hairdresser: Joan Carpenter
Titles by: G.S.E. Ltd
Colour by: Technicolor
Music Composed by: Patrick Gowers
Guitar Soloist: John Williams
Music Performed by: Gabrieli String Quartet
Double Bass: Rodney Slatford
[Music] Conducted by: Marcus Dods
Sound Mixer: Claude Hitchcock
Dubbing Mixer: Ken Scrivener
Sound Editor: Jeanne Henderson
Publicity: Lily Poyser *
Lenses and Panaflex Camera by: Panavision
Made at: EMI Elstree Studios

Cast

Glenda Jackson (*Stevie Smith*)
Mona Washbourne (*aunt*)
Alec McCowen (*Freddy*)
Trevor Howard (*the man*)
Emma Louise Fox (*Stevie as child*)

USA-UK 1978©
102 mins

* Uncredited

GLEENDA JACKSON

Women in Love

Sat 2 Jul 17:40; Wed 13 Jul 20:3; Fri 15 Jul 20:30

Horror of Darkness + Let's Murder Vivaldi

Sun 3 Jul 15:20

Mary, Queen of Scots

Sun 3 Jul 18:15; Wed 20 Jul 20:30

Glenda Jackson in Conversation

Tue 5 Jul 18:15

Sunday Bloody Sunday

Tue 5 Jul 20:40; Sun 24 Jul 18:30

Hedda

Fri 8 Jul 18:00; Sat 16 Jul 16:30

A Touch of Class

Sat 9 Jul 15:15; Sat 23 Jul 20:45

The Romantic Englishwoman

Sun 10 Jul 18:10; Mon 18 Jul 20:40

Stevie

Thu 14 Jul 20:30; Sat 23 Jul 12:00

Hopscotch

Fri 15 Jul 18:00; Tue 26 Jul 20:40

House Calls

Sat 16 Jul 18:45; Fri 22 Jul 20:30

The Maids

Sat 16 Jul 20:50; Sun 24 Jul 15:50

The Rainbow

Tue 19 Jul 20:40; Sun 31 Jul 13:00

Giro City + Glenda Jackson & Politics (clip compilation)

Thu 21 Jul 17:50

Turtle Diary

Thu 21 Jul 20:50; Fri 29 Jul 20:30

Strange Interlude

Sat 23 Jul 15:30

The House of Bernarda Alba

Mon 25 Jul 17:50

Elizabeth Is Missing

Fri 29 Jul 18:15

Elizabeth R (the complete series)

Eps 1-3 Sat 30 Jul 14:20; Eps 4-6 Sun 31 Jul 14:30

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