



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Accident

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

The working partnership between American director Joseph Losey and British writer Harold Pinter produced the finest work on screen that either ever did. In their three films together – *The Servant* (1963), *Accident* (1967) and *The Go-Between* (1971) – they explored the British class system with forensic skill, always pitting their modernist disdain for its moral bankruptcy against their own deep-seated, almost helpless fascination. We can add to those finished films their 1972 collaboration on the unmade version of Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, which Pinter described as 'the best working year of my life'.

That they were a great creative team has something to do with their different upbringings and their contrasting talents. Liable to exaggeration of his social background, Losey had been raised in La Crosse, Wisconsin USA by a snobbish mother and a father whose expectation of inherited wealth had been wiped out when his seemingly well-to-do father died, leaving, by their standards, precious little money. By contrast, Pinter had grown up in London's East End among a loving working-class Jewish family, but the experience of being evacuated from London to Cornwall at the beginning of World War II, and then returning just in time for the worst part of the Blitz, left him feeling a loss of identity and a strong sense of how precarious life can be.

What the two had in common, despite Losey being 20 years older than Pinter, were their roots in the theatre and their outsider viewpoint, but there were complementary differences too. Losey was a physically imposing presence, yet his emotions often overwhelmed him. Pinter was more self-contained and concerned with accuracy of expression, even though he believed that no statement could be definitive. Pinter was a tester of emotional truths, a writer at the top of his game when working with Losey, and an actor who knew what actors could do with clear lines written with precise rhythm, cadence and diction.

By the time Losey came to make *Accident*, the 56-year-old director considered himself semi-British. He had been living in the UK for 14 years and his son, Joshua, had been brought up and educated there. *Accident* brought together the same three talents – Losey, Pinter, [Dirk] Bogarde – to work on an adaptation of Nicholas Mosley's novel about two Oxford dons dotting on a beautiful woman student who happens to be an Austrian princess. US producer Sam Spiegel had acquired the rights for Losey and Pinter, but almost immediately Spiegel began to interfere in the script, trying to inveigle Pinter to write it on his yacht, and challenging the casting of Bogarde in the lead. Losey claimed that, after one Spiegel meeting, Pinter vomited in the street – Pinter always denied this. In the end they were forced to buy the rights from Spiegel at a high price.

For me *Accident* is Losey's most resonant film. Its barbed wit and formal complexity distinguish it from the many other British film and television dramas

dealing with class and sex among the English county set. Its one dull note, though, is Jacqueline Sassard, a French starlet 'discovered' at 15 years old who seems to have been cast as aristocratic Anna because of her large eyes and her erotic lassitude. To Losey she was 'never more than an instrument', and her somnolent performance – she says little because her English wasn't good enough – is below the film's very high standard, set not least by Pinter's then wife Vivien Merchant, note-perfect as Stephen's wife, the all-seeing Rosalind.

Stephen (Bogarde) is Anna's effete tutor, William (Michael York) a well-born fellow student who is also pursuing her, and Charley (Stanley Baker) Stephen's athletic friend and rival. The novel begins with a sports-car accident close to Stephen's house. Stephen hears it and investigates, finding that it's William's white car that's lying on its side. William is dead but Anna has survived. 'You're standing on his face,' one of Pinter's most gripping early lines, is said by Bogarde as Anna tries to get out of the car.

The rest of the novel is made up of flashbacks to the events leading up to the crash. According to Losey, Bogarde and Baker 'disliked each other very much'. Bogarde relished the time and space Losey always gave him but he was fed up with the director's 'passion for bullying actors'. Baker shows unusual subtlety in the film. His Charley is quite straightforwardly lustful compared to Stephen but there's also a poignant lostness to him. Both actors, in their contrasting ways, show their mastery of how to make Pinter's lines seem naturalistic while striking sparks off one another.

Pinter, as usual, made radical changes to the storyline. Again he got rid of the first-person narration from Stephen, thereby making him – as Bogarde's nuanced performance illuminates – more of an insecure 'nearly' man, who can only realise his sexual longings by exploiting the accident, taking advantage of the traumatised Anna while his wife is in hospital giving birth.

It was this 'semi-rape' ending that was Pinter's most radical change from the book. Mosley thought it a 'false note'. Bogarde says that Losey 'wanted that cruelty'. But those who see nothing but blatant sexism here may be missing the point. According to critic Penelope Gilliatt, the women in *Accident* are 'the most powerful combatants of all'. The privileged Anna will be protected her whole life by her 'pristine lack of imagination and a drowsy greed'.

William creates the circumstances for Stephen's hidden passion to flower when he invites Stephen to join him and Anna punting on the river. Anna has such an impact on Stephen that he invites the couple to Sunday lunch. Charley also arrives, as if by accident (having learned about it from Anna). Stephen thus finds himself complicit both in the Charley/Anna sexual affair and William's plans to marry her. As Losey said, 'This is a sort of Sunday afternoon brothel where nobody is pretending to play tennis – they're playing sex.'

So deft is the use of time and memory in Pinter's script that Losey avoided the alienating angles of *Eve* and *The Servant*. Allusion and stylish indirection dominate – take, for instance, Stephen's adulterous interlude in London with an old girlfriend, played by Delphine Seyrig: images of their unheard conversations play against an exaggerated formal dialogue in voiceover.

Exemplary of Losey and Pinter at their best, *Accident* takes its time exploring a complex milieu. Occasionally it displays a caressing attitude to the privileges it imagines accrued to randy Oxford dons, but it is otherwise restrained in its use of *objets d'art* and astringent about the world it describes. Certainly for Losey it indicated the way forward, describing its structure as 'the kind of thing that I hope to do and will do maybe in Proust'.

Nick James, bfi.org.uk, 28 June 2018

ACCIDENT

Director: Joseph Losey
©: Royal Avenue Chelsea Productions Ltd
Presented by: London Independent Producers
Producers: Joseph Losey, Norman Priggen
Production Supervisor: Geoffrey Haine
1st Assistant Director: Richard Dalton
Continuity: Pamela Davies
Screenplay: Harold Pinter
From the novel by: Nicholas Mosley
Director of Photography: Gerry Fisher
Camera Operator: Derek Browne
Editor: Reginald Beck
Art Director: Carmen Dillon
Property Buyer: Geoffrey Stephenson
Chargehand Props: Alf Pegley
Construction Manager: Tony Morris
Costume Designer: Beatrice Dawson
Miss Jacqueline Sassard's Costumes by: De Luca, Rome
Wardrobe Supervisor: Sue Yelland
Make-up: Bob Lawrence
Hairdresser: Pearl Tiplaldi
Processed by: George Humphries Laboratories London
Music by: John Dankworth
Harpists: David Snell, John Marson
Sound Recordists: Simon Kaye, Gerry Humphreys
Dubbing Editor: Alan Bell
Made at: Twickenham Film Studios

uncredited
Production Secretary: Vicki Emery
Stills Cameraman: Ted Reed
Publicist: Theo Cowan
Unit Publicist: Maureen Gregson

Cast

Dirk Bogarde (*Stephen*)
Stanley Baker (*Charley*)
Jacqueline Sassard (*Anna*)
Michael York (*William*)
Vivien Merchant (*Rosalind*)
Delphine Seyrig (*Francesca*)
Alexander Knox (*provost*)
Harold Pinter (*Mr Bell*)
Ann Firbank (*Laura*)
Brian Phelan (*police sergeant*)
Freddie Jones (*man in Bell's office*)
Terence Rigby (*plain-clothed policeman*)
Jill Johnson (*secretary*)
Jane Hillary (*receptionist*)
Nicholas Mosley (*Hedges*)
Maxwell Findlater (*Ted*)
Carole Caplin (*Clarissa*)

UK 1967©
105 mins

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Lift to the Scaffold (Ascenseur pour l'échafaud)

Thu 1 Sep 18:30; Thu 15 Sep 20:55; Sun 18 Sep 15:50; Wed 21 Sep 21:00; Tue 27 Sep 21:00

Do the Right Thing

Fri 2 Sep 20:40; Sat 24 Sep 20:40; Wed 28 Sep 18:00 + intro by freelance writer and producer Kaleem Aftab

Wild Strawberries (Smultronstället)

Sat 3 Sep 16:00; Fri 9 Sep 14:30; Tue 13 Sep 18:10; Sat 17 Sep 12:30

Psycho

Sat 3 Sep 20:45; Sun 11 Sep 15:40; Thu 15 Sep 14:30; Tue 4 Oct 18:30

The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser (Jeder für sich und Gott gegen alle)

Sun 4 Sep 13:20; Fri 9 Sep 20:45; Tue 13 Sep 20:30

In a Lonely Place

Sun 4 Sep 16:00; Wed 14 Sep 18:15 + intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer at Large; Fri 23 Sep 18:00; Wed 28 Sep 20:50

The Bride Wore Black (La Mariée était en noir)

Mon 5 Sep 20:50; Fri 30 Sep 18:10; Mon 3 Oct 17:50

Accident

Tue 6 Sep 20:40; Sun 11 Sep 13:10; Tue 20 Sep 17:50

Ratcatcher

Wed 7 Sep 18:15 + intro by Catharine Des Forges, Director of the Independent Cinema Office; Sat 17 Sep 18:00; Thu 29 Sep 21:00

The Umbrellas of Cherbourg (Les Parapluies de Cherbourg)

Thu 8 Sep 20:45; Mon 12 Sep 14:30; Mon 19 Sep 20:45; Sun 25 Sep 15:30

Letter from an Unknown Woman

Sat 10 Sep 12:30; Wed 14 Sep 14:30; Wed 21 Sep 18:00 + intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer at Large

The Motorcycle Diaries (Diarios de motocicleta)

Sat 10 Sep 18:00; Sat 17 Sep 14:45

Cleo from 5 to 7 (Cléo de 5 à 7)

Tue 13 Sep 14:30; Fri 16 Sep 18:00; Tue 20 Sep 20:50; Sat 1 Oct 12:30

Fargo

Thu 22 Sep 20:55; Sat 1 Oct 18:00

Last Year in Marienbad (L'Année dernière à Marienbad)

Mon 26 Sep 20:50; Sun 2 Oct 12:45; Tue 4 Oct 20:40

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Notes may be edited or abridged. Questions/comments? Email prognotes@bfi.org.uk

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