



RE-RELEASES

Nil by Mouth

An uncompromisingly frank portrait of a particular sector of working-class family life in south-east London (where Gary Oldman grew up), *Nil by Mouth* is a powerful, astute, authentically foul-mouthed account of unfettered machismo, booze and drugs, petty crime and domestic abuse. The performances are excellent throughout, especially those of Ray Winstone as the volatile but self-pitying Ray, Kathy Burke as his long-suffering wife Val and Charlie Creed-Miles as her junkie brother Billy. Shot and scripted in a deceptively casual realist style reminiscent of 70s Cassavetes, this profoundly personal and humane film eschews sensationalism and sentimentality to illuminate a vicious circle of abuse and criminality. A dark but dazzling masterwork.

Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-large

There is a moment in Gary Oldman's directorial debut *Nil by Mouth* which for me shattered all critical distance. It's not the event on which the film hinges – when the protagonist Ray, a thief and a thug, viciously assaults his wife Valerie – but just before this, when he stands in his underpants screaming hate into her face. A shock of recognition took me back to the living room of my own childhood, to another atmosphere thick with fear and spittle. I mention this not out of a sense of solidarity with other children of enraged parents nor a solipsistic need to personalise the film, but because it's the kind of cathartic identification with real lives that *Nil by Mouth* goes out of its way to achieve.

The narrative of *Nil by Mouth* is fairly erratic. It follows Ray and his family into a tailspin of abuse and self-abuse. Ray has a prodigious drink and drugs intake; Valerie's younger brother Billy, who works for Ray on and off, is a South London street junkie. Sometimes we follow Billy's lonely quest for identity and substances, but mostly we witness the seething discord between Valerie's family and Ray. When Billy steals some of Ray's drugs, Ray attacks him, biting deep into his nose. This is a typically brutal event in a film that's unapologetic about its gruelling subject matter. It's later on, however, when Ray finds the pregnant Valerie playing pool in the pub with a stranger, that the viciousness builds to a horrible peak.

But for me, all the drugs, violence and criminality are as nothing compared with the moment when the family cataclysm has not come but seems inevitable. When I watched this autobiographically inspired film, I assumed that Oldman's father must have been violent towards his spouse. When I later found out he was not, the personal chiming made more sense to me. My own father never struck out either, but I can vividly recall the expectation that he was about to. I would not have pondered my own experience this way if *Nil by Mouth* had not felt so compellingly authentic. I don't mean authentic in the manner of precise period evocation, or even in the grimly determinate mode of British kitchen sink realism, but in the sense of it being an experience of believable life in the cinema. Because as much as *Nil by Mouth* looks and sounds like South London, it also looks and sounds like a large-scale movie.

'Authentic' and 'believable' are of course terms whose meaning has been shredded in the post-modern era. But what I'm suggesting here is that this film marks a change in the quality of British realist cinema, one which recognises an audience's need for their experiences to find their equivalent on screen. In several ways *Nil by Mouth* seems to me significantly different from what we've come to expect from British realist cinema. Like many British movies financed by television over the last decade or so, Oldman's film has a preponderance of close-ups of people in confined spaces, yet they are lit and lensed in such a way that it never feels less than a cinema experience. There's a burnish and sweep to the image-making similar to what we've come to expect from such ex-pat directors in Hollywood as Tony and Ridley Scott and Adrian Lyne. They also like to get close with a telephoto lens, giving that paradoxical combination of intimacy and distance. As in the best films of his friend and executive producer Luc Besson, Oldman has borrowed the strongest aspects of American cinema for his own entirely different purposes. In a similar fashion, his script harnesses fruity anecdotes and the rhythms of London street talk in such a way that his dialogue rivals the best of American screenwriting in combining believability and pleasure.

But the more significant change is in *Nil by Mouth's* attitude to the people it depicts, the sense that Oldman's is a personal cinema drawn from his own experience as a youth in Deptford – a film that in the romantic sense he simply had to make. Whatever the considerable virtues of Ken Loach's *Raining Stones*, say, or Mike Leigh's *Naked*, they often maintain, in their desire to show social structures at work, a political distance from their characters. Oldman's film moves in so close that the viewer feels absolutely confined with the hellish family depicted.

I'm not suggesting that the mediation is somehow invisible, only that Brechtian distanciation is here supplanted by an intimate relationship to the film subject, one born from psychotherapeutic models. As explained by production designer Hugo Luczyc-Wyhowski, *Nil by Mouth* follows a show-and-tell approach from the work of Cassavetes and from such television cop shows as *Homicide: Life on the Street*, but this is fused with the British realist tradition, particularly as exemplified in the work of Alan Clarke (*Made in Britain*, *The Firm*). It's a brand of realism that in a way acknowledges that British audiences are now more 'in touch with their emotions'. If Oldman's were the only film around by a British director to be so concerned with physical and emotional intimacy, it would pass as an anomaly, but there are others that are equally direct, such as Mike Figgis' *One Night Stand* and Carine Adler's *Under the Skin* [to which I must own a connection: I live with the producer], a study of grieving young women on a sexual binge. Of course there are many other kinds of British film being made at the moment, but *Nil by Mouth* supplies a fresh antidote to the current Hollywood output of event movies, without setting itself in opposition to all American cinema.

Nick James, *Sight & Sound*, October 1997

NIL BY MOUTH

Director: Gary Oldman
Production Company: SE8 Group
Production Company: Smoking Room *
Producers: Luc Besson, Douglas Urbanski, Gary Oldman
Co-producer: Hilary Heath
Associate Producer: Marc Frydman
Production Co-ordinator: Emma Pike
Production Manager: Michael Dreyer
Unit Managers: Adam Bohling, Mitch Davies
Locations Managers: Jo Chate, Stan Fus
Supervisor Post-production: Charlie Vogel
Co-ordinator Post-production: Paul Leonardo Jr
1st Assistant Directors: Ken Tuohy, Mary Soan
2nd Assistant Directors: Finn McGrath, Neil Tuohy
3rd Assistant Director: Kate Hazell
Script Supervisors: Sam Donovan, Cathy Doubleday
Casting: Sue Jones
Screenplay: Gary Oldman
Director of Photography: Ron Fortunato
Editor: Brad Fuller
Production Designer: Hugo Luczyc-Wyhowski
Art Director: Luana Hanson
Costume Designer: Barbara Kidd
Wardrobe Supervisor: Anthony Black
Make-up/Hairstylist: Fae Hammond
Make-up Artist: Pebbles
Tattoos: Tota
Titles: DuArt Digital, Holly Kempner
Music: Eric Clapton
Music Supervisor: Margot Core
Music Editor: Richard Bernstein
Sound Recording: Jim Greenhorn
Re-recording Mixers: Matthew Iadarola, Scott Ganary, Adam Sawelson
Supervising Sound Editor: Eliza Paley
Sound Editors: Sylvia Menno, Branka Mrkic
Sound Effects Editor: Michael W. Mitchell
ADR Editors: Deborah Wallach, George Berndt
Foley Artist: Brian Vancho
Foley Recordist: George Lara
Foley Editor: Bruce Kitzmeyer
Technical Consultant: Gerry Bromfield
Stunt Co-ordinator: Rod Woodruff

Cast

Ray Winstone (*Raymond*)
Kathy Burke (*Valerie*)
Charlie Creed-Miles (*Billy*)
Laila Morse (*Janet*)
Edna Doré (*Kath*)
Chrissie Cotterill (*Paula*)
Jon Morrison (*Angus*)
Jamie Foreman (*Mark*)
Steve Sweeney (*Danny*)
Terry Rowley (*M.C. in club*)
Sam Miller (*club comic*)
Leah Fitzgerald (*Michelle*)
Gerry Bromfield (*drug dealer*)
Neil Maskell (*Schmuddle*)
Syd Golder (*old guy in window*)
John Blundell (*man with knife*)
Kenan Hudaverdi (*laundrette owner*)
Everton Nelson (*street violinist*)
Ronny Fox (*Peter/pool player*)
Frances Ashman (*club singer*)
Dan Carey, Martin Watson, Guseppe Acunzo,
Matthew Scott, Edmund Scott (*band musicians*)
Moya Brady (*wife*)*

UK 1997
128 mins

* Uncredited

A BFI release

Nil by Mouth was remastered with the generous support of Simon and Harley Hessel.

The remastered *Nil by Mouth* will be available to buy on a limited edition 25th Anniversary 2-disc BFI Blu-ray from Monday 5 December.

NEW RELEASES

Decision to Leave (Heojil Kyolshim)

From Mon 17 Oct

Triangle of Sadness

From Fri 28 Oct

The Greenaway Alphabet

From Fri 11 Nov

Aftersun

From Fri 18 Nov

What Do We See When We Look at the Sky?

(*Ras vkhedavt, rodesac cas vukurebt?*)

From Fri 25 Nov

RE-RELEASES

The Others

From Mon 17 Oct

Poltergeist

From Fri 21 Oct

Nil by Mouth

From Fri 4 Nov (Preview on Thu 20 Oct 20:20; extended intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer at Large on Fri 4 Nov 17:50; intro by Kieron Webb, Head of Conservation, BFI Archive on Mon 7 Nov 18:00)

The Draughtsman's Contract

From Fri 11 Nov (+ intro by Kieron Webb, Head of Conservation, BFI National Archive on Fri 11 Nov 17:50)

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Programme notes and credits compiled by the BFI Documentation Unit

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

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