



PREVIEW

Empire of Light

Academy Award® winner Sam Mendes (*1917*, *Revolutionary Road*, *Road to Perdition*, *Jarhead*, *American Beauty*) writes and directs *Empire of Light*. ‘For most people, their most formative period is their teenage years. For me, that was the late ’70s and early ’80s: the music, the movies, the pop culture of that period generally formed who I was. It was a period of great political upheaval in the UK, with a great deal of very incendiary racial politics – but at the same time, an amazing period for music and for culture generally – very creative, very politicised, very energised. *Empire of Light* itself, however, is a movie almost entirely born out of the pandemic. Lockdown was a period of intense self-examination and reflection for all of us. And for me it meant starting to confront these memories that I’d been wrestling with since childhood. That was the spur to write – to explore those memories and to see if I could unlock anything interesting.’

‘Movies deal in mythic landscapes,’ Mendes continues. ‘You’re always looking for a point where the past becomes somehow bigger in scale, and greater in theme, and more fabled than the present. Looking back now, this period in England seemed to me one where the intersection of racial politics and music and movies was particularly special and unusual.’

Mendes has created two characters, Hilary and Stephen, played by Academy Award® winner Olivia Colman (*The Favourite*, *The Lost Daughter*) and rising star Micheal Ward (*Top Boy*, *Lovers Rock*), and has woven them into a story exploring some of the ties that bring us together – the music, the movies, and the makeshift families that get us through. At the centre of *Empire of Light* is their relationship – though they seem different in every conceivable way, they find a rite of passage that brings them both some degree of happiness and strength.

One of the first people Mendes shared the *Empire of Light* screenplay with was producer Pippa Harris, who he worked with on *1917* and *Revolutionary Road*, and with whom he founded Neal Street Productions 20 years ago. Harris found the story and context very moving. ‘This is the first screenplay Sam has written completely from scratch on his own, with no input from another writer. The writing, particularly the delineation of the characters, was extraordinary. This story of a lost soul who finds a strange family within the cinema – I found it truly moving.’

‘Hilary is a middle-aged woman who lives alone on the coast and has worked in the cinema for a few years,’ Mendes explains. ‘She has a complicated past and some demons of her own but, in the way that ad hoc families can support each other, she has been embraced by this eccentric bunch that work in the cinema. She’s struggling to find a meaningful relationship in her life, when Stephen, who is open-hearted and gentle but still very young, also comes to work there.’

Mendes says that the part of Hilary was written for Colman. As he started writing the screenplay during the pandemic, he says, he was watching *The Crown*. ‘And there was Olivia being brilliant, and I thought, “Oh, that’s

who should play Hilary.” I didn’t particularly know Olivia – but I started writing it with her very much in mind.’

For Colman, the idea that Mendes was writing a part for her was ‘quite surreal,’ she says. ‘I had been a drama student going to the Donmar, knowing all about Sam and *American Beauty*. But I didn’t know Sam at all when my agent called and said Sam Mendes wants to do a Zoom. Ohhhhhhhhhhhkay.’

Though Colman may have been nervous or intimidated, she needn’t have been. ‘I don’t know what I was expecting, but he really is so gentle and so kind,’ she says. On set, she saw that reflected in the way he directs. ‘He’ll hold people’s hands. He knows how to speak to every single person in a way that is understanding to them. He’ll become the character – he’ll talk to me like Hilary might, or move like she might.’

Mendes comments, ‘Olivia is very available and open, and yet also somehow mysterious. For me, that’s what makes her so extraordinary, along with her amazing skill.’

Micheal Ward says that when he first read the script – even before he was cast in the role – Mendes asked for his input on the character. ‘It was good for Sam to do that,’ he says. ‘He didn’t need to – I’m a new actor, I haven’t been doing this long. But he valued my opinion – it was exciting to know that he was willing to collaborate on the character. Sam lived through that period, but he recognises he’s not a Black man, and so while he would have seen the tension around him, he wouldn’t know what that walk was like himself.’

If moviegoers see echoes of the current moment in Mendes’ period piece from the 1980s, that’s no coincidence. ‘In the middle of lockdown there was a racial reckoning in the world. We were left alone to contemplate how our own racial politics had been formed, and whether we had fallen down in our attempts to make sure the world was evolving. When I wrote the movie there was also another common obsession: we were all worried whether the cinema was going to die, along with live performances. So, all of those things have gone into this movie, and in that regard, it’s quite raw,’ he says.

Harris also hears other echoes in the screenplay to the current moment. ‘The relationship between Colin Firth’s (*The King’s Speech, A Single Man*) Mr Ellis and Hilary is obviously quite demeaning for her, but one she feels she has to go along with, and again, that’s something that we see replicated around the world still today. So, on one level, you look at *Empire of Light* and it feels as though it’s a world away, and yet on another level, we still see the themes every day in contemporary life.’

The film is a remembrance for more than just Mendes, but also for his friends since childhood – Harris and actor Toby Jones (*Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*), who plays the role of Norman, the projectionist. ‘The first time I remember seeing Sam was, coincidentally, with Toby Jones,’ continues Harris. ‘We grew up in Oxfordshire in the 1980s. I was about 14, and they were a little bit older, maybe 16. We had gone to a rather insalubrious party in a village hall, and across the crowded dance floor I see these two little figures in their rather sharp, natty suits with their little pork pie hats on, and they were dancing, bizarrely, to some of the music that is in this film – I think it was The Specials. I just thought they looked really great, and they were friends of friends, and we all got talking, and the rest is history.’

The songs that populate the film are the soundtrack of Mendes’ life and a key part of the film. ‘The politics of the period – especially the racial politics,

Thatcher’s “there’s no such thing as society”, the racism of Enoch Powell and the National Front, the Brixton riots, the Toxteth riots, the high unemployment and extreme divisiveness – all fed into the music and the culture of the period,’ says Mendes. ‘Stephen loves and adores The Specials, and The Beat, and The Selecter and all the two-tone recording artists – that particular meeting of ska and punk, which was in its heyday. Those diverse bands were able to make great music whilst still being politically relevant. Songs about unemployment, and the death of the inner cities, about teenage pregnancy, and kids who had nothing to do but drink, and about Thatcher... a song like “Ghost Town”, for example, could go straight to number one. Those songs were part of the popular culture, and those bands were a great creative melting pot of Black and white that has never quite been achieved again.’

Production notes

EMPIRE OF LIGHT

Directed by: Sam Mendes

Presented by: Searchlight Pictures

Executive Producers: Michael Lerman, Julie Pastor

Produced by: Pippa Harris, Sam Mendes

Co-producers: Celia Duval, Lola Oliyide

Casting: Nina Gold

Written by: Sam Mendes

Director of Photography: Roger Deakins

Editor: Lee Smith

Production Designer: Mark Tildesley

Costume Designer: Alexandra Byrne

Hair and Make-up Designer: Naomi Donne

Music: Trent Reznor, Atticus Ross

Sound Mixer: Stuart Wilson

Cast

Olivia Colman (*Hilary*)

Micheal Ward (*Stephen*)

Tom Brooke (*Neil*)

Tanya Moodie (*Delia*)

Hannah Onslow (*Janine*)

Crystal Clarke (*Ruby*)

Toby Jones (*Norman*)

Colin Firth (*Mr Ellis*)

UK-USA 2022

115 mins

Courtesy of Searchlight Pictures

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Art in the Making: News from Nowhere + intro by Rowan Bain, Principle Curator at William Morris Gallery TBC

Thu 5 Jan 18:20

African Odysseys: Hussein Shariffe: A Life Between Exile and Homecoming

Sat 7 Jan 12:00-17:00

Seniors’ Free Matinee: UK Theatrical Premiere: Wild and Free, Twice Daily + Q&A

Mon 9 Jan 14:00

Silent Cinema: Metropolis + intro by Bryony Dixon, BFI Curator

Sun 15 Jan 14:40

Projecting the Archive: Thunder in the City + intro by Jo Botting, BFI Curator

Tue 17 Jan 18:20

Experimenta: Nation’s Finest, Putting Down Roots and Birthing + Q&A

Wed 25 Jan 18:15

Relaxed Screening: The Hidden Fortress + intro & discussion

Mon 30 Jan 18:00

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