



NORTHERN VOICES

Billy Liar

Billy Liar

Directed by: John Schlesinger

©: Anglo Amalgamated Film Distributors

Production Company: Vic Films (London)

In association with: Waterhall Productions

Produced by: Joseph Janni

Associate Producer: Jack Rix

Production Manager: Charles Blair

Assistant Director: Frank Ernst

Continuity: Pamela Mann

CASTING DIRECTOR: Miriam Brickman

Screenplay by: Keith Waterhouse, Willis Hall

Based on the novel and play by:

Keith Waterhouse, Willis Hall

Director of Photography: Denys Coop

Camera Operator: Jack Atchelor

Editor: Roger Cherrill

Art Director: Ray Simm

Set Dresser: Ken Bridgeman

Wardrobe Master: Ron Beck

Wardrobe Supervisor: Laura Nightingale

Make-up: Robert Lawrence

Hair Stylist: Joyce James

Music Composed by: Richard Rodney Bennett

Dance Music Played by: Harry Gray and his Band

Conducted by: John Hollingsworth

Sound Recordists: Peter Handford, John Cox

Sound Editor: Malcolm Cooke

Adviser on Fantasy Sequences: Don Higgins

Studio: Shepperton Studios

uncredited crew

Producer's Secretary: Diana Harding

Personal Assistant to the Producers:

John Goldstone

Production Secretary: Ann Skinner

2nd Assistant Director: Jim Brennan

Focus Pullers: Neil Binney, Michael Rutter

Clapper Loader: John Campbell

Grip: Bert Lott

Chief Electrician: Frank Robertson

Electricians: Ralph Weighell, Frank Willis,

Wilfred Campbell, John Illisley, Archie Eyers,

Fred Burrows, Kesra Singh, Percy Fisher

Stills: Harry Gillard

1st Assistant Editor: Jack Gardner

2nd Assistant Editor: Jean Short

Draughtsman: Martin Atkinson

Property Buyer: Dennis Maddison

Props: Johnny Feehan, Phil Meighan, Tom Brooker

Stand-by Carpenter: Clifford Cross

Rigger: Michael Kilgannon

Painter: Bill Read

Plasterer: Daniel Culinane

Plasterer's Labourer: John Nethersole

Stagehand: Arthur Adaway

Sound Camera Operator: Douglas Barnett

Boom Operator: Tom Buchanan

Sound Maintenance: George Widdows

Camera Car Driver: Jack Laxton

Publicity: Edna Tromans

Secretary to Publicist: Mary Franks

Cast:

Tom Courtenay (*William 'Billy' Terrence Fisher*)

Wilfred Pickles (*Geoffrey Fisher*)

Mona Washbourne (*Alice Fisher*)

Ethel Griffies (*Grandma Florence Fisher*)

Finlay Currie (*Councillor Duxbury*)

Gwendolyn Watts (*Rita Corrigan*)

Helen Fraser (*Barbara*)

Julie Christie (*Liz*)

Leonard Rossiter (*Emmanuel Shadrack*)

Rodney Bewes (*Arthur Crabtree*)

George Innes (*Eric Stamp*)

A contemporary review

With *Billy Liar*, John Schlesinger shows us that it is possible to make a film in this country that has movement, energy, grace and charm, that it is possible to make immense comic use of the remarkable Mr Courtenay and to exploit an industrial suburban setting for its absurdly local yet characteristic happenings, for its sense of the light-hearted as well as the drab. Like its central character, Billy Fisher (Tom Courtenay), *Billy Liar* is a film of many moods, a film of an essential ambiguity of feeling. As Billy's mind shifts from reality to Ambrosia – his imaginary country where he always has success – the film shifts with him, changing dreariness to farce. Yet, since Billy does not really know how he feels at any particular moment, we are not too sure how we feel about Billy.

While the film is pre-eminently successful in making us laugh, in constantly inventing new comic situations, we cannot help but recognise that Billy's is essentially a tragic situation. In what is intrinsically a more moving way than Thurber's *Walter Mitty*, Billy's tragedy is the result of his inability to take himself seriously. He can't manage either to come to grips with his family and his job in the undertaker's office, or to find the strength to leave them. His Ambrosial fantasies are much too attractive; and it is part of the charm at the centre of his character that his decision never to desert them, in its rejection of harsh reality, is a decision always to remain young. Yet, because the film is so close to its central character, so much a part of his many moods, we recognise his plight without ever feeling its impact. Like Billy, we find it more agreeable just to sit back and laugh.

There is another problem too, that makes our response more superficial than it might have been. Like Billy, the film rarely takes itself seriously: even in his daily life, there are constant shifts into fantasticality and farce. By making Mr Shadrack (Leonard Rossiter) such an obvious figure of fun, by playing the roles of the grandmother (Ethel Griffies) and of Billy's 'bloody' father (Wilfred Pickles) almost entirely for laughs, the film sacrifices much of its emotional potential. And, at the same time that this element of comic caricature heightens the ambiguity of feeling, it leaves certain scenes dangling, oddly out of place in their context. For instance, the talk with Councillor Duxbury (Finlay Currie) on the moors, silhouetted and strangely symbolic, seems only tenuously related to the rest of the film; as indeed the funeral fantasy, by sharply interrupting the more sombre rhythm of the final sequences and so dispersing our feeling about the old woman's actual death, certainly detaches us from the potential poignancy of the close. Even the opening shots behind the credits, travelling along rows of suburban dwellings, keeping pace with the *Housewife's Choice* which at the moment is playing, although a marvellously lively beginning for a very funny film, seem only obscurely related to Billy's vanquished march through the streets which closes the picture.

If by the end, then, we feel that we have been more amused than moved by the film, that opportunities have been missed, we certainly carry away some of the joy and excitement that appear to have gone into the making of it. After *Terminus* and *A Kind of Loving*, *Billy Liar* represents a more confident achievement for John Schlesinger, who looks very much at home with the

Leslie Randall (*Danny Boone*)
Patrick Barr (*Detective Inspector MacDonald*)
Ernest Clark (*prison governor*)
Godfrey Winn (*disc jockey*)

uncredited cast

Anna Wing (*Mrs Crabtree*)
Elaine Stevens (*Danny's secretary*)
George Ghent (*Danny's P.R.O.*)
Graham Rigby (*supermarket manager*)
Ted Morris (*funeral driver*)
Neville Smith, Leslie Lawton (*youths*)
John Tordoff (*youth in Wimpy bar*)
Reginald Greene (*Mr Mathieson*)
Douglas Clarke, Alan Clayton, James Byron (*servicemen*)
Flo Fallows (*prostitute*)
Bill Wymar (*army man*)
Sheila Fearn (*telephonist*)
Robin Parkinson (*jeweller's assistant*)
Margaret Lacey (*Mrs Mathieson*)
Alice Woods (*prostitute*)
Jack Cunningham (*ticket examiner*)
Lester Leigh (*band leader*)
John Schlesinger (*officer in dream*)
Bryan Mosley
Elizabeth Murray
Jessie Robins
Natalie Kent
Alexander Browne
UK 1963©
98 mins

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challenges of 'Scope. Although the lack of unity seems a failure in conception, perhaps chiefly in Keith Waterhouse and Willis Hall's script, within individual sequences Schlesinger's pace scarcely falters and his judgment rarely errs. Most remarkable and most un-British is the zoom-tracking episode when Liz first comes to town. As she swings gaily through the streets, hopping across obstructions and skipping between cars, the camera follows her easily, observing her mugging response to everything she sees. If both Helen Fraser as Barbara and Gwendolyn Watts as Rita are more than adequate to their parts – are indeed perhaps more suited to the caricatured context in which they have been set – Julie Christie as Liz gives, to my mind, the most stunningly attractive female performance that we've seen on the British screen. That the strength of her performance, and indeed of her female self, heightens the central implausibility of her attraction to Billy and so further undermines the film's unity, is perhaps to be regretted. Yet the joyful manner of her presentation is so right for the general spirit of the film, and such a relief from the stodginess of so many British pictures, that I find it difficult to complain.

Finally, of course, the film is Tom Courtenay's. In this, his finest part so far, no praise could be too much and yet all seems impossible. It's not just that his body is so limber and his face so minutely expressive: it's more that just by a hint of an expression, a particular glance of the eyes, we can see that a change of mood is about to begin. Whether engaged in imaginary machine-gun slaughter of the people he feels are thwarting him, or made conscious of his real limitations when face to face with the magnificent Liz, Courtenay's playing has an intimacy and particularity about it which makes him perpetually fascinating to watch. It is with the help of such performances, plus some enterprising camerawork (Denys Coop), that John Schlesinger has been able to make *Billy Liar* the most enjoyable film to have come out of the new British cinema.

Peter Harcourt, *Sight & Sound*, Autumn 1963