



NORTHERN VOICES

Letter to Brezhnev

Letter to Brezhnev

Director: Chris Bernard
Production Companies: Yeardream, Film Four International, Palace Productions
Producer: Janet Goddard
Co-producer: Caroline Spack
Associate Producer: Paul Lister
Production Co-ordinator: Chriss Kerr
1st Assistant Director: Peter Cavaciuti
2nd Assistant Director: Piers Player
3rd Assistant Director: Matt McConaghy
Screenplay: Frank Clarke
Director of Photography: Bruce McGowan
Focus Puller: Chris Plevin
Clapper Loader: Paul Grech-Ellul
Graphic Artist: Jamie Reid
Editor: Lesley Walker
Assistant Editor: Oliver Huddleston
Designers: Lez Brotherston, Nick Englefield, Jonathan Swain
Costume Designer: Mark Reynolds
Wardrobe: Jill Horn, Dawn Russell
Make-up Artist: Viv Howells
Music: Alan Gill
Music Arranger: Wolfgang Kafer
Sound Recordist: Ray Beckett
Boom Operators: St. Clair Davis, Roy Mason
Sound Editor: Charles Ware
Cast:
Alfred Molina (*Sergei*)
Peter Firth (*Peter*)
Margi Clarke (*Teresa King*)
Tracy Lea (*Tracy*)
Alexandra Pigg (*Elaine Spencer*)
Susan Dempsey (*girl in yellow pedal pushers*)
Ted Wood (*Mick*)
Carl Chase (*taxi driver*)
Robbie Dee (*Charlie*)
Sharon Power (*Charlie's girlfriend*)
Syd Newman (*Dimitri*)
Eddie Ross (*Rayner*)
Wendy Votel, Jeanette Votel (*girls on bus*)
Mandy Walsh (*mother*)
Angela Clarke (*Josie*)
Joey Kaye (*father*)
Frank Clarke (*Vinny*)
Paul Beringer (*boy at party*)
Ken Campbell (*reporter*)
Neil Cunningham (*foreign office official*)
John Carr (*sweaty arse*)
UK 1985
94 mins

Frank Clarke on 'Letter to Brezhnev'

There were so many strands and people, so much serendipity and sheer force of will which went into the making of *Letter to Brezhnev* that, looking back at it now, over thirty years later, I am still filled with wonderment and pride at how we pulled all of those myriad strands together and wove them into a precious gem that captured not only the zeitgeist of 1980's Liverpool under the cold hard glare of Thatcher's early reign but that equally important aspect of the times: the ever present shadow of the cold war between the west and the then Soviet Union, the resulting deep chill being palpable and felt by us all.

So, inspired by the above, I squirreled myself away in my tiny flat in Toxteth and began banging away at the keyboard of a battered old 1940s typewriter and, in between chain smoking cheap ciggies and swigging back strong mugs of tea, I wrote the first draft of the script in three mentally exhausting weeks. I had been at it day and night with hardly a wink of sleep.

I am the first to admit that the smudged, Tippexed and tea-stained screenplay was as rough as sandpaper but there was something in there that shone through. It was as honest as I could make it and it was also about us, Liverpool and Kirkby (our home town) people, and I wanted our voices to be authentic.

Once I had written that rough first draft I was in no doubt whatsoever that, one day, even though I was on the bones of my arse and didn't have two roubles to rub together, we would make it into a fully-fledged feature film here in Liverpool. When I say we, I mean my gang of friends who eventually threw love, devotion, time and talent at *Brezhnev*. Most of them, Chris Bernard, Sandra Pigg, Peter Firth, Neil Cunningham and Glenys Davies, had been friends of mine for years and I knew what individual talents we could all bring to the project, but there were other unsung heroes of the piece who delivered up their own unique magical gifts.

Willy Russell was one of the first people to read *Brezhnev* and he ended up paying for the final draft of the screenplay to be printed for every member of the cast and crew. His kind-hearted wife Annie was involved early on in pre-production and much more besides. Willy also helped me with the final draft of the script and his touch was invaluable, the 'When did you learn how to drive?'/ 'Now!' sequence where the girls rob the two mushes' car was Willy's and I thank him and Annie for their help and involvement.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Before any of these things happened I was tenaciously reaching out to every television company in the land in the hope that one of them, like a cinematic dream sequence, was going to produce a big fat wad of money and finance the film. All I got instead was a load of old flannel: 'Great script, Frank,' followed by an even bigger and fatter, 'Thanks but no thanks.'

I was down, but not out.

Cut to:

Fiona Caselton was an heiress friend of some people I knew, and I prayed for our paths to cross with a view to her reading *Brezhnev* and investing in its production. The gods took pity on me and conspired for us to meet at Fiona's parents' place on the Isle of Man. Fiona passed the screenplay to her younger brother Charlie, who promptly offered to invest £30,000 in the film. Although this turned out to be nowhere near the amount the film eventually came in at, it was a symbolically significant investment in that it made others sit up and notice that something was in the air. It was courageous of Charlie to take such a leap of faith.

Although Charlie was the first of many to put their hands in their pockets, my dear friend Peter Firth had already read the screenplay and was up for playing the Russian heart-throb Peter. He also generously allowed me to use his name to help attract others to the project.

Earlier, in the summer of 1983, I adapted the screenplay into a stage play and hired Liverpool's Unity Theatre to stage two performances of the piece with Chris directing and local actors playing the two Russians and the lead, Elaine. I had to coax our Margie, who

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Lime Street + Armchair Theatre:

The Hard Knock

Fri 31 Mar 18:20

Of Time and the City

Sat 1 Apr 20:40; Tue 18 Apr 18:20

Saturday Night Theatre: Roll On Four

O'Clock + Play for Today: Kisses at 50

Tue 4 Apr 18:10

Billy Liar

Thu 6 Apr 20:30; Fri 14 Apr 18:15;

Thu 27 Apr 20:50

Letter to Brezhnev

Fri 7 Apr 18:20; Thu 20 Apr 20:50

Priest

Sat 8 Apr 20:40

The Arbor

Tue 11 Apr 20:40; Sun 30 Apr 14:30

Play for Today: Comedians

Sat 15 Apr 15:15

Play for Today: The Land of Green

Ginger + Armchair Theatre: The Pity

of it All

Sun 16 Apr 15:20

Rita, Sue and Bob Too

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was living in Paris with the famous graphic artist Jamie Reid, to come back home for the play. She was on the next flight and went on to create the warm and poignantly iconic role of Teresa with my brilliant youngest sister Angela playing a blinder as Josie, Elaine's cheeky little cow of a kid sister.

The applause nearly took the roof off. The audience were heaving with laughter yet also stunned to hear the cast speak in thick Liverpool accents with some choice, earthy dialogue. The fact that those voices had not been heard before on Liverpool stages and that the protagonists were two vivacious Kirkby women only made the play more potent and comically romantic.

It could only be a matter of time before we captured that same formidable energy on film.

In early March of 1984 I jumped a taxi over to Chris's flat in Sefton Park to give him the great news from the Isle of Man and offer him the job of director. I can remember the moment like it was yesterday. I burst into his flat and hurried into his back room where I could hear him talking to someone. 'I've got it Chris! I've got some money to start *Brezhnev*.' Now I'm not sure who Chris was talking to in that room but whoever it was Chris didn't want them to hear anything about money and flashed me a 'keep the two parts shut in front of this one' look. We had a shorthand between us in those hungry days and it didn't do to mention having a spare 30 grand in front of strangers, not if you wanted to keep hold of it.

Dissolve to:

Things then moved up a gear in passion and intensity as Chris and myself held hilarious casting sessions in the Everyman Theatre annex. I don't know to this day where Glenys Davies found those people who queued down the stairs and into the street to audition for the rest of the smaller roles, but I ended up creating some extra dialogue to accommodate some of them:

'They bored the liver out of us, anyway they'll scrape the body off the side of the bus in a minute.'

'Mm, very board.'

The Votel Sisters' name sounded like sci-fi strippers from the future and they looked like them too, but we loved them and they were in.

There was one role, though, that I was dying to cast and that was Elaine's mother. We had interviewed plenty of local actresses for the part of Mrs Spencer, but they all lacked that certain something. We were just about to leave for the day when the late Mandy Walsh breezed into the room with six plastic carrier bags stuffed full of shopping and proceeded to move us both to side-splitting tears about her recent sex-filled weekend in Rhyl. She just had that unique Liverpool spirit and a perm so tight it near gave *me* a haemorrhage, never mind her. Me and Chris looked at each other and grinned. We had found Elaine's mum.

I had not one ounce of shame in those poverty-stricken days, and so with my executive producer's cap very much in my hand I approached some famous Liverpool businesses for help with the actors' outfits. With Sandra wearing a very short, sexy little number we marched in to see Lewis's department store's head honcho and told him of our plight. We needed clothes, shoes and accessories for the leading ladies that would encompass the change of seasons in the film. With Sandra flashing her most beguiling smile, he gave us permission to help ourselves to all of the costumes required. The same went for the Army and Navy Stores, who furnished Peter Firth and Alfred Molina in fine, thick black leather jackets, boots, socks, hats and so much more. I even approached the town's grandest hotel, the magnificent Atlantic Tower, situated down at the Pier Head overlooking the river Mersey, and managed to persuade them to donate their poshest Port of Liverpool suite to Peter, which was at his disposal for the entire shoot.

Cut to:

And then it was upon us, the cast and crew were in place and they had all agreed to defer their fees until after the film had wrapped, was in the can and sold. It was, artistically at least, out of my hands now. I passed the baby over to Chris and I knew, I had always known, how safe and well-nurtured it would be in his charge.

Frank Clarke, booklet essay for *Letter to Brezhnev* Blu-ray/DVD (BFI, 2017)

Programme notes and credits compiled by Sight and Sound and the BFI Documentation Unit

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