



NORTHERN VOICES

Rita, Sue and Bob Too

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Director: Alan Clarke

©: Channel Four Television Company

Production Companies: Umbrella Entertainment, British Screen, Channel Four

With the assistance of:

National Film Development Fund

Executive Producer: Oscar Lewenstein

Producer: Sandy Lieberman

Co-producer: Patsy Pollock

Production Supervisor: Garth Thomas

Production Co-ordinator: Laura Grumitt

Production Accountant: Maggie Phelan

Assistant Accountant: Gary Jones

Location Manager: Clinton Cavers

Assistant to the Producer: Julie Watts

Production Runner: Nick Strasburg

1st Assistant Director: Mike Gowans

2nd Assistant Director: Jon Older

3rd Assistant Director: Cordelia Hardy

Continuity: Francine Brown

Castling: Beverley Keogh

Screenplay and original plays: Andrea Dunbar

Script Consultant: Jennifer Howarth

Director of Photography: Ivan Strasburg

Steadicam Operator: John Ward

Focus Puller: Luke Cardiff

Clapper: Mark Strasburg

Gaffer: John Devine

Electrician: Frank Sheeky

Generator Operator: Ray Bateman

Editor: Stephen Singleton

Assistant Editor: Anthony Morris

Production Designer: Len Huntingford

Assistant Art Director: Peter Jones

Prop Master: Peter Dawson

Dressing Prop: Danny Hunter

Standby Prop: Eddie McMahon

Chargehand Standby Carpenter: John Sullivan

Standby Carpenter: Colin Baillie

Standby Rigger: Micky Seymour

Standby Painter: Peter Spice

Costume Designer: Cathy Cook

Assistant Costume Designer: Katherine Naylor

Chief Make-up Artist: Alan Boyle

Hairdresser: Barbara Sutton

Title Design: Plume Design

Music: Michael Kamen

Music Supervisor: Daniel Secunda

Music Recording Engineer: Paul Samuelson

Sound Recording: Mike McDuffie

Boom Operator: David Lindsay

Dubbing Mixer: Alan Dykes

Assistant Dubbing Mixer: Nick Church

Sound Editor: Allan Morrison

Assistant Sound Editor: Jonathan Moony

Stunt Co-ordinators: Roy Alon, John Lees

Publicity: Minty Clinch

Cast:

Siobhan Finneran (*Rita*)

Michelle Holmes (*Sue*)

George Costigan (*Bob*)

Lesley Sharp (*Michelle*)

Willie Ross (*Sue's father*)

Danny O'Dea (*Paddy*)

David Britton, Mark Crompton, Stuart Goodwin,

Max Jackman, Andrew Krauz, Simon Waring

(*Rita's brothers*)

Maureen Long (*Rita's mother*)

Joyce Pembroke (*Lawn-Mower Lil*)

Patti Nicholls (*Sue's mother*)

Jane Atkinson (*Helen*)

Bryan Heeley (*Michael*)

'The film that turned the festival blue' was one shocked tabloid's verdict on Alan Clarke's bleakly bawdy comedy about a married man bedding his teen babysitters, which scandalised the Brighton Film Festival in May 1987. In the affectionate 'making of' in the neatly restored and well-packaged BFI DVD release, cast and crew recall the critics' accusations of fakery at the press conference. It goaded producer Oscar Lewenstein into protesting: 'This artist is reporting from the lower depths. This is a report!'

Adapted from teenage working-class writer Andrea Dunbar's controversial 1982 London Royal Court play, and its predecessor *The Arbor, Rita, Sue and Bob Too* was indeed a nakedly autobiographical reworking of her tumultuous life on Bradford's run-down Buttershaw estate. A wary Dunbar, whose first reaction was 'I'm not fucking writing for any wanky fucking film director,' was well-matched with Clarke, then best known for the raw, hard-hitting *Scum* (1979) and TV's *Made in Britain* (1982). Clarke committed utterly to constructing images that honoured the writing's caustic vitality and its milieu, and to 'not putting myself in front of the film'. Dunbar's combative dialogue, and the physical back-and-forth of the girls' gobby exchanges with lovers and family alike, open up smartly in Clarke's long, restless Steadicam takes, giving the film an almost documentary style.

Striding fiercely across the estate, or skittering around Bob's house or on the moors, Rita and Sue and the wily, weaving Bob recall David Thomson's praise of Clarke, with his trademark walking shots, as a 'poet for beasts who pace and measure their cages'. First-time actresses Michelle Holmes (the brassy Sue) and Siobhan Finneran (a stoical Rita) acquired the naturalism that Clarke sought in two weeks' intense rehearsal with George Costigan's Bob. Their fluid, flirty threesome is captured in a freewheeling visual style, where the camera rejects a fixed character point of view for a watching brief. Observe that high-up opening shot, wandering across the decayed estate via Sue's drunken father's unsteady progress home, to tag on to Sue's and Rita's brisk march to babysitting in upmarket Baildon, which introduces us to an unknown Bradford. Far from the bustling monochrome city centre of *Billy Liar* (1963) or *Room at the Top* (1959), it's a snapshot of Thatcher's Britain, threading from the workless estate to Bob's aspirational homeowners' suburb.

The replacement of the restless 60s Northern male hero with bold, thrill-seeking teen girls is reflected in the film's novel use of space. Leaving school without work or prospects, Rita and Sue are socially trapped but physically free, roaming the streets for distractions. Bob's car, nosing on to the night-time moors, enters a liminal space, where the frustrated husband and bored girls can escape and transgress. A defiant sex comedy, its casual view of coupling nodding at the 70s *Confessions of...* series, the film celebrates sexual pleasure as a giggle, a palliative for poverty. Released at the peak of the Aids crisis, its bald take on promiscuity shocked many critics. Yet the in-car sex scenes are deeply unerotic, played for deadpan comedy with the camera pressed earnestly against the window as Sue's jiggling foot sets the car horn blaring, or the girls laugh at Bob's erectile dysfunction. Possibly the first 'dogging' movie, its bickering trio and incongruous mid-coitus arguments elicit laughs rather than titillation. However, even allowing for *autre temps, autre moeurs* Bob's

Paul Oldham (*Lee*)
 Bernard Wrigley (*Terry Middleton, the teacher*)
 Kulvinder Ghir (*Aslam*)
 Dennis Conlon (*taxi driver*)
 Joanna Steele (*Sylvia*)
 Joanne Barrow (*Judy*)
 Rachel Shepherd (*schoolgirl*)
 Paula Jayne (*2nd schoolgirl*)
 Alison Goodman (*Hilda*)
 Marie Jelliman (*gym mistress*)
 Black Lace (*themselves*)
 Nancy Pute (*Mavis*)
 Ken Hainsworth (*Billy*)
 Niall Costigan (*Simon*)
 Sinead Parkinson (*Jenny*)
 Paul Hedges (*Hosepipe Harry*)
 Laura Devon (*neighbour on balcony*)
 Charles Meek (*taxi driver*)
 Kailash Patel (*Aslam's sister*)
 Usma Islam, Naeela Jaben Sabir,
 Shabar Hussain (*Aslam's nieces*) *
 Claude Powell, Alexander Cruise, Nelson Fletcher
 (*West Indians in taxi office*) *
 Mel Fredricks (*white man in taxi office*) *
 Blake Roberts (*West Indian in cab*) *
 UK 1987©
 91 mins

* Uncredited

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blithe teen sex grooming is disquieting, despite the girls' just-legal status and vocal sexual agency. Perhaps to counter this unease, and the film's dour undertones, Clarke was obsessed with keeping performances light, and scenes speedy, urging Costigan: 'Keep it frothy, keep them laughing.' There's real hilarity in Lesley Sharp's Michelle, Bob's wife, enraged at her betrayal and dropping her smug gentility for a slapping assault on her errant babysitters. But beating under everything, including the trio's raunchy club dance to Black Lace's winking 'Gang Bang', and their raucous public shaming on the estate, is a pulse of poverty and hopelessness.

Female friendship is the emotional engine here (as it is in that other mid-80s paean to a good time *Letter to Brezhnev*), the film's giddily implausible ending owing more to Rita and Sue's enduring bond than to a socially rebellious *ménage à trois*. The hard-drinking Dunbar, who died in 1990, was ambivalent to the end about the film that had against all the odds committed, as Lesley Sharp shrewdly observes, 'her life, her neighbourhood, her England, to the screen'. But Costigan, still hailed today in Bradford streets as 'Bob!', is in no doubt about the film's durability: 'It'll live for as long as we've got an underclass.'

Kate Stables, *Sight and Sound*, July 2017

A contemporary review

Rita, Sue and Bob Too has already been compared to such 60s slices of British industrial life as *A Taste of Honey* and *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, and clearly bears more recent comparison to *Letter to Brezhnev*. In fact, uncluttered by either the romantic sentimentality or the stereotypical scouse wit of the latter film, Andrea Dunbar's script is an altogether dourer, grittier affair. Bradford writer Dunbar has an undoubted ear for local rhythms of speech and there is an unmistakable ring of authenticity to her dialogue. In its picture of the poverty, unhappiness and desperation of many people's lives in the North of England, the film is acutely observed.

But it is also primarily a comedy, and every supposedly shocking observation is leavened with bouts of very funny black (and crude) humour. The comic situations clearly draw on the standard fare of television comedy, farce, soap opera and tabloid newspaper stories – closer, as all interviews confirm, to the writer's own experience than the more respectable 'sophistication' of classical film genres. It is this which has perhaps led to accusations of sensationalism, with critics mistaking the clever synthesis of these popular forms for a cynical regurgitation of them.

Adrian Wootton, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, September 1987