



SENIORS

Bronco Bullfrog

Bronco Bullfrog

Directed by: Barney Platts-Mills

©: Maya Films

Made by: Maya Films

Produced by: Andrew St. John

Associate Producer: Michael Syson

1st Assistant Directors: Tim Van Rellim, Garth Thomas

2nd Assistant Director: Tim Lewis

Continuity: Jean Winters

Written by: Barney Platts-Mills

Script Adviser: Dave Foulger

Photography: Adam Barker-Mill

Focus: Gordon Thornton

Loader: George Stephenson

Key Grips: Les Bryan, Tony Picus

Graphics: Charlie Jenkins

Edited by: Jonathan Gili

Assistant Editor: Susan Sarkozy

Music by: Howard Werth, Tony Connor, Keith Gemmell, Trevor Williams

Performed by: The Audience

Sound Recording: Tony Jackson, Ivan Sharrock, Michael McDuffie, Stuart Young

Boom Operator: Stephen Ransley

Local Adviser: Sam Shepherd Snr

Cast:

Del Walker (*Del Quant*)

Anne Gooding (*Irene Richardson*)

Sam Shepherd (*Jo Saville aka Bronco Bullfrog*)

Roy Haywood (*Roy*)

Chris Shepherd (*Chris*)

Geoff Wincott (*Geoff*)

Freda Shepherd (*Mrs Richardson*)

Stuart Stones (*Sgt Johnson*)

Dick Philpott (*Del's father*)

Jo Hughes Snr (*Del's uncle*)

Mick Hart (*Grimes*)

Ken Field (*Dave*)

Jo Hughes Jnr (*Parker*)

Marguerite Hughes (*Marge*)

E.E. Blundell (*landlady*)

Trevor Oakley (*Parker's friend*)

Tina Syer (*Tina*)

Terry Hayes

UK 1969

86 mins

+ intro and Q&A with Ian O'Sullivan, BFI Library and actor Roy Haywood

Barney Platts-Mills' debut feature stars an entirely non-professional cast of local teenagers from Stratford, East London.

The film grew out of a documentary, *Everybody's An Actor Shakespeare Said* (1968) made by Platts-Mills about the 'Playbarn' project run by veteran British theatre figure Joan Littlewood at the Theatre Royal in Stratford. The project aimed to divert local youths from loitering and petty crime and into creatively channelling their energy and imagination through acting and improvisation. Inspired by Littlewood, Platts-Mills encouraged the youths to come up with a story based on events taken from their own lives. These were used as the basis for *Bronco Bullfrog*. The young cast give the film an air of authenticity and their sometimes awkward, hesitant performances reflect adolescence in a non-contrived way.

The film treats its characters warmly and emphasises that their chosen courses of action – petty crime, delinquency, and in Del's case, elopement with Irene (which, since Irene was 15, would make Del guilty of abduction) – are determined by the limited choices they have.

The look of the film is reminiscent of the cinema vérité/Free Cinema style which had ushered in the 1960s, but any sense of optimism suggested by such films is dashed. The mood of *Bronco Bullfrog*, shot in black and white against a backdrop of East End bombsites and the new brutalism of urban high-rise flats, closes the decade on a pessimistic note of limited horizons for its working-class protagonists.

As evidence that not all of London had been swinging in the 1960s, *Bronco Bullfrog* foreshadowed the 'no future' ethos which characterised the Punk movement of the mid-to-late-1970s. The film also anticipated the treatment of disaffected youth which became prevalent in British television dramas such as Mike Leigh's *Meantime* (1983).

Ian O'Sullivan, BFI Screenonline, screenonline.org.uk

With the industry at large aiming to depress film costs to a million dollar average, it is still encouraging when a couple of young men can go out and bring in a really good feature film for around £17,000. *Bronco Bullfrog* may be no *Easy Rider*, and is unlikely to make anyone a vast fortune: it is still one of the most original and attractive British films in years.

Of the shorts he has directed, *Everybody's an Actor* reveals Barney Platts-Mills' keen eye for human detail, enormously generous and unpatronising view of his fellow men, and almost chronic failure of structural sense. *Everybody's an Actor* was shot in Stratford and set out to be an account of Joan Littlewood's work in improvisational drama with the local youngsters. It was made under some difficulties. The boys started out by seizing vital parts of the filmmakers' equipment in the cause of a rather weedy protection racket (half-a-crown a time). The crew none the less won their confidence and interest, though ultimately the whole place was broken up.

Meanwhile Platts-Mills and Andrew St John then turned to an idea of making a story film with some of the youngsters from *Everybody's an Actor*, who had

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kept on nagging to know when they were going to make 'a proper film'. *Bronco Bullfrog* was shot in six weeks, entirely on location, mostly in and around Stratford. The casting started from the boys who had appeared in *Everybody's an Actor* and took in various of their relations and acquaintances. Del Walker, the hero, was a boy with a rather sullen, nervy face who had not said a word for weeks in the Littlewood sessions but quite suddenly burst into life. The only one imported from outside Stratford was the heroine, a languidly beautiful girl of 15 who works Saturday mornings for Platts-Mills' newsagent in Parsons Green. The stalwarts of the film were the Shepherd family. Sam Shepherd plays Bronco Bullfrog, an accomplished thief with the cachet of a Borstal term; his brother Chrissie plays one of Del's gang; and as the heroine's shrew mother Mrs Shepherd shames any known British character actress.

The script was based on various experiences the boys had related to them. In the story Del is a moderate delinquent – not really vicious, but uncertain and with nothing else to do evenings but boot people who look the wrong way at him. He falls for a 15-year-old girl; and faced with the opposition of his own father and her mother (her dad is doing time), they go out together, with little positive deliberation and in face of the intolerable odds presented by police and parents and the hazards of life itself.

The cast were all given scripts, and were very delighted with them; but Platts-Mills thinks none of them actually read them. The film was improvised scene by scene with the director indicating the lines of the action or the dialogue and recalling actual or acted incidents which would provide a basis for working. The result is extraordinary, an entirely consistent acting style which achieves the difficult feat of using the players' own gaucheness and inarticulateness to express deliberately and artistically the gaucheness and inarticulateness of the characters.

Moderately disciplined by a narrative line, Platts-Mills' structural casualness becomes a positive and attractive quality. Del's adventures take their arbitrary character from his directionless life, but there nevertheless appears to be an inner impulse (fate perhaps?) to move the film along. Platts-Mills explains his ability to win the confidence and sustained interest of his actors: 'I've known them a long time now, and anyway, I left school at 15 too, and I'm more like them than I am like most of the other people I meet.' If this is a patently romantic idea, at least he shows supremely the ability to understand and sympathise with both characters and actors at their own terms, to enjoy their comedy and oddity and moral frailties at their proper level, without any kind of patronage or detachment.

The film is above all very funny. There is a moment of high comedy in Del's first encounter, laboriously brought about, with the girl and her mate in a caff. They glower embarrassedly at each other without a word until the girls announce – after a couple of minutes and the refusal of a cup of tea – that they must be going. The strength of the film is that its high quality of observation is human, not anthropological.

David Robinson, *Sight and Sound*, Summer 1970