



O DREAMLAND! LINDSAY ANDERSON'S DARK BRITISH CINEMA

This Sporting Life

This Sporting Life

Directed by: Lindsay Anderson

©: Independent Artists

Made by: Independent Artists

Produced by: Karel Reisz

In Charge of Production: Albert Fennell

Production Manager: Geoffrey Haine

Assistant Director: Ted Sturgis

Continuity: Pamela Mann

Casting: Miriam Brickman

Screenplay by: David Storey

Based on the novel by: David Storey

Photographed by: Denys Coop

Camera Operator: John Harris

Film Editor: Peter Taylor

Assistant Editor: Tom Priestley

Art Director: Alan Withy

Set Dresser: Peter Lamont

Propertyman: Ernie Quick

Dress Designer: Sophie Devine

Make-up: Bob Lawrence

Hairdresser: Ivy Emmerton

Music Composed by: Roberto Gerhard

Conducted by: Jacques-Louis Monod

Sound Recordists: John W. Mitchell,

Gordon K. McCallum

Sound Editor: Chris Greenham

Made at: Beaconsfield Studios

uncredited

Production Secretary: Norma Garment

2nd Assistant Director: Claude Watson

3rd Assistant Director: Ken Softley

Focus Puller: Neil Binney

Clapper Loader: Christopher Neame

Stills: George Courtney Ward

Special Effects: Charles Staffell

2nd Assistant Editor: Phillip Baker

Draughtsmer: Eric Saw, Michael Lamont

Scenic Artist: E.W. Bristor

Wardrobe Mistress: Vi Murray

Laboratory: Denham Laboratories

Boom Operators: Tony Cripps, Trevor Carless

Sound Assistant: Frank Sloggett

Sound Camera Operator: Ron Butcher

Dubbing Crew: Ken Cameron

Publicity: Robert Herrington

Cast:

Richard Harris (*Frank Machin*)

Rachel Roberts (*Mrs Margaret Hammond*)

Alan Badel (*Weaver*)

William Hartnell (*Johnson*)

Colin Blakely (*Maurice Braithwaite*)

Vanda Godsell (*Ann Weaver*)

Anne Cunningham (*Judith*)

Jack Watson (*Len Miller*)

Arthur Lowe (*Slomer*)

Harry Markham (*Wade*)

George Sewell (*Jeff*)

Leonard Rossiter (*Phillips*)

Katharine Parr (*Mrs Farrer*)

Bernadette Benson (*Lynda*)

Andrew Nolan (*Ian*)

Peter Duguid (*doctor*)

Wallas Eaton (*waiter*)

Anthony Woodruff (*head waiter*)

Michael Logan (*Riley*)

Murray Evans (*Hooker*)

Tom Clegg (*Gower*)

Ken Traill (*trainer*)

Frank Windsor (*dentist*)

John Gill (*Cameron*)

Impacting with a visceral power right from its opening scene, Anderson's debut feature marked the first film in his long collaboration with David Storey, who adapted his own novel about a rugby player whose macho brutishness masks a vulnerability and repressed yearning for his landlady. Fed by his own complicated feelings towards his star, Anderson guided Richard Harris to a performance that saw him hailed as 'Britain's Brando'. It's an 'Angry Young Man' classic.

bfi.org.uk

A contemporary review

'*This Sporting Life* is not a film about sport. Nor is it to be categorised as a "North Country working class story." It is a film about a man. A man of extraordinary power and aggressiveness, both temperamental and physical, but with a great innate sensitiveness and a need for love of which he is hardly aware.' (Lindsay Anderson)

This Sporting Life begins like a rigger match itself: at once the whole field springs to action. A sudden, subjective shot, like the mysterious pavilion in *Hiroshima mon amour*, perplexes like a first-minute goal, but gradually fits into the pattern of a subjective flashback technique which dominates the first third of the picture. Formally, this is the most complicated and diffuse section and I think it should be handled rather as an introduction, an exposition, which establishes the methods of the film and the background to it.

The technique may seem a bit confusing and even alienating. Some flashback scenes (the dance-hall and the subsequent fight; Machin's appearance at the amateur singing contest; all the scenes involving Johnson) may strike a lower level. But in general this device seems the best possible way to establish atmosphere, characters and relationships simultaneously. The first brutal blow on the field where loudspeakers blare the 'Entrance of the Gladiators,' or the dressing-room with its 'smells of dry dust and sweat, carbolic, a tang of leather and polish,' fertilises the heavy soil in which tragedy can later strike root. The rigger playing in itself is never more than an active background to the story, a fitting battlefield for the drama.

We are introduced to the close hierarchy of the team and to the wider social hierarchy of the industrial town; to the industrialists, Weaver, for whom his players are his own personal stable, and his tired rival Slomer, whose 'old and famous Rolls is parked in the tradesman's drive' when he goes to Weaver's Christmas party. We are given the fullest possible background to Frank Machin's story, his unscrupulous advance to rugby league stardom, but only glimpses of Mrs Hammond, the widow he lodges with and grows to love. Yet when we reach the heart of the picture, the story of their relationship, we suddenly realise that everything has in fact been prepared for this central section. It is as though the concentrated tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet* had grown from the fragmentary technique of, say, *Antony and Cleopatra*.

But the flashbacks serve a more important purpose than that of a mere structural device. The critic who dismissed this technique as 'old hack, grown weary in Hollywood service' and 'the most lucid memories ever evoked at a dentist's, under gas,' is betraying his own failure to interpret beyond what is actually on the screen. If the scenes had occurred in a sophisticated French film, no doubt, it would have been a case of deliberate *mise en scène*. But in Britain's industrial North?

uncredited

David Storey (*rugby player*)
Glenda Jackson (*singer at party*)
Gerry Duggan

UK 1963©
134 mins
35mm (1 and 15 May) + Digital (23 May)

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This Sporting Life

Wed 1 May 20:20; Wed 15 May 17:50; Thu 23 May 12:00

Lindsay Anderson: Meet the Pioneer

Thu 2 May 18:10

No Film Can Be Too Personal

Thu 2 May 20:20

Home

Sun 5 May 15:20

The White Bus

Sun 5 May 17:30

If....

Mon 6 May 17:50; Thu 16 May 20:30; Tue 21 May 18:10; Fri 24 May 12:10; Tue 28 May 20:45

BFI Library Event: Outing Anderson

Wed 8 May 20:00 BFI Reuben Library

In Celebration

Thu 9 May 20:25; Wed 22 May 18:00

O Lucky Man!

Sun 12 May 14:10; Sat 18 May 14:20; Mon 27 May 19:20

Britannia Hospital

Tue 14 May 20:35; Sat 25 May 18:00

The Whales of August

Thu 16 May 12:20; Sat 25 May 16:00; Fri 31 May 20:30

The Old Crowd

Thu 16 May 18:30

Lindsay Anderson vs the Short Films Industry + intro by Patrick Russell, Senior Curator of Non-fiction, BFI National Archive

Thu 23 May 18:20

Stand Up! Stand Up!

Thu 23 May 20:30

Never Apologize

Fri 24 May 17:50

In Collaboration: Anderson and Others

Sun 26 May 18:10

Lindsay Anderson Experimenta Mixtape, curated by Stephen Sutcliffe

Thu 30 May 18:10

With thanks to

The Lindsay Anderson Archive at the University of Stirling

O Lucky Lindsay Anderson!

4-week course from 7 May – 28 May, 2-4pm at City Lit, Keeley St. exploring the work and influence of visionary director, Lindsay Anderson, with course tutor John Wischmeyer. To book online

www.citylit.ac.uk/courses/o-lucky-lindsay-anderson or call 020 3871 3111 and quote course code **HF364**

In fact, the sudden, subjective glimpses at the beginning, counterpointed by the tough realism of the setting, stir up our interest in the character and encourage us to look out for his interior drama. Our continuity will obviously be a loose one, drawing the 'molecules' of the hero's thoughts and emotions into a slowly thickening texture. Everything that happens is going to be seen from his point of view.

Just how consistently this interior quality is present throughout the film (although in different forms) emerges clearly from one scene – in fact the weakest in the entire work – when it is not present. This is the evening out at the restaurant, where Machin behaves as he never really would – at least, not at that stage of the story. (In the novel, this scene occurs much earlier.) Here the subjective view is abandoned, and the film takes the standpoint of a detached onlooker. In most British films this would be the natural point of view; but in the context it comes as a puzzling break in the unity of the whole. We must have been with Machin if it strikes us so strongly that we are now outside him.

There is, perhaps, yet another break – and this is where the role played by the flashback technique becomes somewhat impure. We were encouraged at the outset to adapt ourselves to an interior style which was consistently carried through until about the middle of the picture. Then, roughly after the Christmas party scene, the subjective narrative rightly changes into a more straightforward one, concentrating on the complex relationship between Frank and Mrs Hammond. But once this change in style has occurred one may feel that the film itself has only used the more formal method of subjectivity, rather like a useful gimmick which can be dropped once it has done its job. Only in the last 20 minutes or so, with the visionary rugby scene in the mud, is the subjective technique taken up again, to fulfil the drama it has introduced.

At its best, however, the 'portrait of a man' blends with the 'story of a man': interior and at the same time narrative cinema. Among the personal 'molecules' of Frank's story there are plenty of useful reference points for the story to hang on to: the £1,000 cheque; the excursion; the Christmas party. Action and psychological portrait start and attack together, one being used in order to help the other. We approach the story through the interior drama, and soon realise that in fact the interior drama is the story. The result is a thick texture, carrying the complexity of life itself, defying us to give a straight answer to the question of what the film is finally about.

We may approach *This Sporting Life* as a study in human behaviour or, as its creators prefer to call it, in temperament. It certainly offers a key to Frank Machin, the aggressive ex-miner, the glorious gladiator under the grey sky of Wakefield. A helpless giant, always moving, always chewing, to women a 'Tarzan', 'tiger', 'cat' or 'performing ape,' Machin is imprisoned by his size and strength and demands that his own and others' feelings live up to them. But the world, at least the only woman he needs, 'cannot accommodate this sheer greatness.' 'I was a hero,' he says in the novel, 'and I was crazy because she seemed the only person in the world who wouldn't admit it.' His is the typical fate of tragic heroes who strive to achieve something worthwhile but go about it the wrong way, and cannot help getting into a mess which they are then unable to explain. His real purpose is a frantic search for his own identity. His character may bear a literary almost intellectual charge in its tragic emphasis, but his best means of expression are his bare fists.

Robert Vas, *Sight and Sound*, Spring 1963