Too Much: Melodrama on Film

Brief Encounter

Brief Encounter
Director: David Lean
Production Companies: Cineguild, Independent Producers
Producer: Noël Coward
In Charge of Production: Anthony Havelock-Allan, Ronald Neame
Production Manager: Ernest J. Holding
Assistant Director: George Pollock
Director of Photography: Robert Krasker
Camera Operator: Bunny Franke
Editor: Jack Harris
Associate Editor: Marjorie Saunders
Art Director: L.P. Williams
Art Supervisor for Mr Coward: G.E. Calthrop
Music Extracts: Rachmaninoff
Piano: Eileen Joyce
Music Performed by:
The National Symphony Orchestra
Music Conducted by: Muir Mathieson
Sound Recording: Stanley Lambourne, Desmond Dew
Sound Editor: Harry Miller
uncredited:
Location Manager: T. Tomson
2nd Assistant Director: Victor Wark
3rd Assistant Director: Chick Simpson
Continuity: Maggie Unsworth
Assistant Continuity: Renée Glynne
Screenplay: Noël Coward, David Lean, Anthony Havelock-Allan, Ronald Neame
Based on the playlet 'Still Life' by: Noël Coward
Additional Photography: Ronald Neame
Focus Puller: Arthur Ibbetson
Clapper Loaders: E. Owen, Alan Bryce
Back Projection Operator: Charles Staffell
Assistant Editor: Winston Ryder
2nd Assistant Editor: John Cooke
Assistant Art Director: Elven Webb
Draughtsmen: William Kellner, Herbert Westbrook, R. Field-Smith
Scenic Decorator: George Demaine
Dubbing Sound Camera: Peter T. Davies
Boom Operator: Eric Clennell
Cast:
Celia Johnson *(Laura Jesson)*
Trevor Howard *(Dr Alec Harvey)*
Stanley Holloway *(Albert Godby)*
Joyce Carey *(Myrtle Bagot)*
Cyril Raymond *(Fred Jesson)*
Everley Gregg *(Dolly Messiter)*
Marjorie Mars *(Mary Norton)*
Margaret Barton *(Beryl Waters)*
uncredited:
Dennis Harkin *(Stanley)*
Valentine Dyall *(Stephen Lynn)*
Nuna Davey *(Mrs Rolandson)*
Irene Handl *(organist)*
Edward Hodge *(Bill)*
Sydney Bromley *(Johnnie)*
Wilfred Babbage *(policeman)*
Avis Scott *(waitress)*
Henrietta Vintcent *(Margaret Jesson)*
Richard Thomas *(Bobbie Jesson)*
George V. Sheldon *(clergyman)*
Wally Bosco *(doctor)*
Jack May *(boatman)*
UK 1945 87 mins Digital

In partnership with the David Lean Foundation and Noël Coward Foundation.

The 80th Anniversary screening on Sunday 16 November will include a discussion with theatre director Emma Rice, filmmaker Barnaby Thompson and writer Oliver Soden

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

Brief Encounter has always been regarded as a quintessentially British film, typical of British cinema and of Britishness itself. This has been its glory but also a stick to beat it with. It was swiftly heralded, at home and abroad, as the acme of British cinema. There was talk of it representing a 'British school', not only by C.A. Lejeune (who used the phrase) but also by André Bazin (though he retracted his enthusiasm a few years later). It was straightaway a reference point in British writing about film, notably in the work of the *Penguin Film Review* and Roger Manvell, which set the agenda for the serious consideration of cinema in Britain for many years. The script was published (a rare enough accolade) in 1950 as one of *Three British Screenplays* and in 1974 as one of four *Masterworks of the British Cinema*. By the 1960s it was also being excoriated for the very same Britishness, by the journal *Movie*, for instance, and in Raymond Durgnat's book *A Mirror for England*. Its place has nonetheless remained secure.

There is a still from the film on the cover of Denis Gifford's 1968 'illustrated guide', *British Cinema*, and both on the cover and as a backdrop to the opening pages of a chapter on 'The British Tradition' in Gilbert Adair and Nick Roddick's *A Night at the Pictures: Ten Decades of British Film*, published in 1985 for 'British Film Year'. In such general accounts of British cinema, *Brief Encounter* is taken to be both so well known and so archetypal as to be the obvious emblematic choice. In the Adair and Roddick volume, 21 critics (including such specialists in British cinema as Andy Medhurst, Rachael Low, Pam Cook, James Park, Colin McArthur and Charles Barr) were invited to nominate their top ten British films; in the resultant poll of polls, *Brief Encounter* came third. Beyond this, *Brief Encounter* has also come to be taken as a symbol of Britishness itself. When anglophile Helena Hanff goes to the cinema in Manhattan in the film of *84 Charing Cross Road* (1986), it is a screening of *Brief Encounter* that sets her dreaming longingly of London again (though, of course, *Brief Encounter* is not set in London, and London is not Britain – the vagueness is the point). It has become part of the contemporary concern with heritage. A still figures on the cover of Nicola Beauman's study of the inter-war British woman's novel, a work concerned (along with its publisher, Virago) to rescue a wealth of British fiction that had been in danger of being consigned to oblivion. Heritage as tourism is equally at home with *Brief Encounter*. More than one disused railway station has been opened up as a *Brief Encounter* tea room, though Carnforth station in Lancashire, where the film was shot, has slid into decay. *

Brief Encounter's Englishness is something very specific and limited, but if I try to put my finger on why *Brief Encounter* affects me so, it is this Englishness that seems to get it best. It has mainly to do with the way the film handles emotions, the heartbreakingly touching awkwardness of its characters, what Laura describes as the English being so 'shy and difficult'. In fact this quality may be found in such nationally diverse films as *Tokyo Story*, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* and *Babette's Feast*, but then perhaps it is very 'English' of me to love those films too.

It is common to characterise this way with emotions as inhibited or even emotionless. The English are cold fish with stiff upper lips. Yet this is to mistake restraint for repression and lack of expression for lack of feeling. To see *Brief Encounter* as only cups of tea, banal conversation and guilt is not really to see or hear it at all. When Laura praises Alec for behaving 'so beautifully' when Dolly joins them in their last moments together, praises him because 'no one could have guessed what he was feeling', this does not give us a warrant to fail to see (to 'guess') why Alec and Laura act with restraint or how much and deeply they feel. On the one hand, their – and especially Laura's – holding back from going with their longing for one another is not just conventionality or inhibition, but also a sense of affection and loyalty to others, a desire not to hurt anyone. Such niceness is for women indeed inextricable from the internalised address of patriarchy - Laura's unheard confession to Fred begins by saying that she can't tell him because he would be hurt 'and oh, my dear, I don't want you to be hurt'. The sense of English restraint being to do with gentleness and consideration for others may also be felt to sit ill with the actual record of British imperialism. It is an illusory ideal – but not an unattractive or contemptible one.

Such restraint is not the absence of feeling. Indeed, there can be no concept of restraint without an acknowledgement of feeling – restraint must keep something emotional in check. In *Brief Encounter* the gestures the characters make, what they say and how they say it, are seldom overtly and directly expressive (though Alec's declaration of love and Laura's 'I can't go on' speech are in fact very direct), but there is a huge pressure of emotion: in her saying to Alec, after she has so obviously fallen for him as he talks of his specialism, 'It's been so very nice – I've enjoyed my afternoon enormously', in Alec's pressing Laura's shoulder to say goodbye for the last time; behind Laura's eyes in every close-up of her.

Part of the pleasure of *Brief Encounter* is simply the recognition of the way that restraint, not wanting to hurt, wanting to be nice, desiring comfort, stymie emotional abandon. The very familiarity of this for some people is a pleasure because it confirms part of how we experience our affective lives. There is an extra pull too in what I think of as a nostalgia for ordinariness: the very dowdiness of *Brief Encounter* evokes the cosy lure of normality.

Yet if *Brief Encounter* recognises the difficulty of going with one's feelings for a certain strain of Englishness, it also recognises the strain, fully registers the surging of emotion. It is because of both the social pressures toward and the genuine appeal of comfy conformity, both so meticulously realised, that the desire to love against the grain comes across so powerfully. Moreover, *Brief Encounter*'s recourse to music and to filmic devices also suggests, in this quite extraordinarily verbal film, the limitations of everyday speech to express emotion. Far from lacking emotion, the film is throbbing with it but also registering that emotion cannot be pinned down, summed up, that emotion is overwhelming. That is why *Brief Encounter* is not only a 'lovely', but also a vibrantly 'good' film.

Richard Dyer, *Brief Encounter* (BFI Publishing, 1993) Reproduced by kind permission of Bloomsbury Publishing. ©Richard Dyer

* Please note that since this article was written Carnforth Station has been restored and refurbished, and the Carnforth Station Heritage Centre and Brief Encounter Refreshment Room opened for visitors in 2003.