Love, Sex, Religion, Death: The Complete Films of Terence Davies

The Terence Davies Trilogy
Tue 21 Oct 18:15 (+ intro by season curator Ben Roberts); Sat 1 Nov 12:10; Fri 7 Nov 20:55
Distant Voices, Still Lives
Thu 23 Oct 18:20; Mon 27 Oct 18:20; Sat 29 Nov 18:30
Terence on Television
Sat 25 Oct 15:00
The Neon Bible
Sat 25 Oct 18:10; Sun 16 Nov 18:20
Of Time and the City
Sun 26 Oct 12:10; Wed 29 Oct 20:45 (+ pre-recorded intro by Jason Wood, BFI Executive Director of Public Programmes & Audiences); Fri 28 Nov 20:40
Remembering Terence Davies
Tue 28 Oct 18:30
The Long Day Closes
Tue 28 Oct 20:45; Wed 19 Nov 18:20 (+ intro by season curator Ben Roberts)
The Deep Blue Sea
Sat 1 Nov 15:10; Thu 6 Nov 18:10; Wed 19 Nov 20:45
Sunset Song
Sun 2 Nov 18:00; Mon 3 Nov 20:20
A Quiet Passion
Fri 7 Nov 18:00; Fri 21 Nov 20:30
Book Launch: Terence Davies Screenplays, Volumes I and II
Tue 11 Nov 20:00 BFI Reuben Library
The Unrealised Projects of Terence Davies
Tue 18 Nov 18:20
Benediction
Sat 22 Nov 20:20; Sun 30 Nov (+ intro by season curator Ben Roberts)

With thanks to
James Dowling, John Taylor, Dan Copley, Sophie Smith, Edge Hill University

The Terence Davies Estate

Edge Hill University

Remembering Terence Davies

We are pleased to announce Mark Kermode will be joined by actors Debi Jones and Ann Mitchell, cinematographer Florian Hoffmeister, producers Sol Papadopoulos, Roy Boulter and Sean O'Connor, writer and producer James Dowling, Terence Davies's manager John Taylor and BFI CEO and season curator Ben Roberts.

The event will also feature a screening of Home! Home! *(UK 2024. 16min. Digital)*

My favourite way to talk about the films of Terence Davies has always been to call them musicals. To do so both reveals the poignant joy at the heart of Davies's cinema, which was too often marked as dour and unyielding, and to uncover the sadness and estrangement that exists at the core of the musical genre itself.

It might seem counterintuitive, but, yes, Davies's films were musicals, a genre that exists in the space between the public and the private self. These were often deeply interior works, which moved to the external rhythms of songs and melodies that were profoundly meaningful to him. Never was this more apparent than in *Distant Voices, Still Lives* (1988), which forewent traditional linear narrative for a series of anecdotal memory shards triggered by popular songs he remembered being shared by family members when he was a child, and *The Long Day Closes* (1992), which drifted along on the recollections of music and movies to form a twilit portrait of his own adolescence that felt like a direct transmission from its maker's mind.

These films are melancholy, occasionally harrowing, and are also indescribably beautiful, two of the greatest works in all of cinema, with no tonal or aesthetic equal. Arguably, he doesn't even have imitators; no one would dare. Because no one made movies like Davies, who precisely sculpted out of a subjective past, creating films that glided on waves of contemplation and observation, inviting viewers to join him in the burnished darkness of a past about which he felt complex, contradictory feelings.

To have even a passing acquaintance or interest in the cinema of Terence Davies is to know something about his biography, for the first 16 years of his filmmaking career were devoted to films based on his own life: his childhood growing up in working-class Liverpool in the 1950s, yes, but also his dreams and nightmares born out of those years.

Born in 1945, Davies, the youngest of 10 children, seven of whom survived infancy, always felt out of step (in school, in family, in the Catholic church), and would eventually share his anxieties and memories, with striking honesty, openness and aesthetic ingenuity, in the art form he knew and loved best: the movies, with which he had been besotted from an early age.

In 1972, he studied at the Coventry Drama School on a grant awarded by the Local Education Authority. Yet always sceptical of circumscribed school settings, he disliked the closed-minded environment, and, when one day he happened to hear about the BFI Production Board on BBC Radio, he decided to set off on his own to create work with personal expression, sending the BFI a script titled *Children*. To his surprise, they responded with an £8,500 award and the go-ahead to direct it.

Dear Bud: The Creative Mind of Terence Davies

Edge Hill University, the repository of the Terence Davies Archive, curates a free exhibition of previously unseen materials from Davies' personal archive and the archive of production company Hurricane Films. The exhibition will include materials from both Terence's personal life and film career such as family letters and belongings, behind-the-scenes photos, props and draft scripts, highlighting his career long connection to the BFI, his deep love of music and a glimpse of his creative space with an interactive recreation of his working desk.

1-30 Nov BFI Southbank Mezzanine

Terrified, as he had never even been on a movie set before, Davies would describe the experience as miserable, yet the short film, finished in 1976, a startlingly grim black-and-white interpretation of his own childhood, his deeply ingrained guilt over his homosexuality, and the excruciating death of his abusive father, was clearly the work of a major filmmaker in training: the pacing, the composition, the performance style – all augured a career fuelled by a singular vision. And miraculously, in this very first attempt at moviemaking, Davies would happen upon one of the most brilliant visual compositions in his entire career – Davies's surrogate character, the boy Tucker, and his mother being quite literally erased from a window as his father's coffin is slid into a hearse, an image made possible via a zoom out on a double-reflection (the front door and a second window across the street). Rarely in cinema has there been a more striking image of death but also of the possibility of change, despite its inescapable funereal tone.

The character of Tucker would remain Davies's stand-in for two more black-and-white 16mm shorts made over the subsequent seven years, yet in *Madonna and Child* (1980) and *Death and Transfiguration* (1983) he would explode the autobiographical format, rather than recreating events from the past, inserting a version of himself into a feared alternate future, one marked by loneliness, loss and guilt. (Tucker would also appear as the main character in a novel, 1983's *Hallelujah Now*, which used a stream-of-consciousness approach to further delve into Davies's trauma and sexual anxieties.)

These tiny yet monumental films, forming what would become known as *The Terence Davies Trilogy*, paved the way for his feature breakthroughs of *Distant Voices, Still Lives* and *The Long Day Closes*, radically nonlinear experiments in autobiography, memory and music that feel more like woven tapestries of feeling than traditional movie narratives. These films also proved that Davies had little interest in traditional schools of British realism. Despite evoking a measure of working-class authenticity and depicting the abuse Davies's siblings and mother suffered at the hands of his psychotic father (played by an astonishing Pete Postlethwaite), *Distant Voices, Still Lives* had little interest in 'kitchen-sink realism', using minimal dialogue, highly composed 'unreal' images, and pub chants and piano-side singalongs in place of traditional cause-and-effect dialogue, while *The Long Day Closes* wafts to the unsettled brain patterns of a child named Bud (Davies's nickname growing up) living in that sadly brief sliver of time after his father mercifully died and before the nightmare of puberty took over.

At times, Davies was brutally direct in his unwillingness to employ the language of queer pride – he said to the *Irish Times* as late as 2011, 'Being gay has ruined my life. I hate it. I'll go to my grave hating it.' These were not the words of a provocateur, but of a man who was eternally frank about the trauma of growing up marginalised and dehumanised by a homophobic 20th-century culture; as a child he was well aware that homosexual behaviour was against the law. Despite this – or perhaps because of it – Davies created one of the great gay filmographies in cinematic history, complexly patterned films in which queerness was detectable in the very contradictions and crosshatches themselves.

This would be as true for his personal films – which would also include his marvellously poetic documentary *Of Time and the City* (2008), a remembrance of Liverpool in the 1950s and 60s – as for the works of the next, longer phase of his career, which ran the gamut from adaptations of classic novels (*The Neon Bible*, *The House of Mirth*, *Sunset Song*) and plays (*The Deep Blue Sea*)

In Person & Previews

Terry Jones: The Renaissance Man
Sat 1 Nov 15:00
Laura Mulvey in Conversation
Tue 4 Nov 18:10
Blake's 7: Redemption & Star One + Q&A with actors Jan Chappell and Sally Knyvette
Sat 8 Nov 11:00
Screen Two Symposium
Wed 12 Nov 11:00
Priest + intro
Wed 12 Nov 18:10
Mark Kermode Live in 3D at the BFI
Mon 17 Nov 18:30

Regular Programme

Halloween Screenings: Office Killer
Fri 31 Oct 18:30
Halloween Screenings: The Hunger
Fri 31 Oct 20:45
Silent Cinema: Stella Dallas
+ intro by composer Stephen Horne
Sun 2 Nov 15:00
50th Anniversary Screening: Hester Street
+ intro by Dr Julia Wagner, author of Hester Street (BFI Film Classics)
Mon 3 Nov 20:50
Seniors: Adoption Örökbefogadás + intro
Wed 5 Nov 14:00
Relaxed Screening: The Long Day Closes
+ intro and discussion
Mon 24 Nov 18:05
Projecting the Archive: The Only Girl
+ intro by film historian John Oliver
Tue 25 Nov 18:15
Restored: Mephisto
Wed 26 Nov 17:50

to unconventional biographical dramas of poets (*A Quiet Passion*, *Benediction*), all of them extraordinary, all of them fashioned of unquenchable longing, personal expressions of living as an outsider in a world that doesn't know what to do with you.

The final image of what is now, unfathomably, his final feature, *Benediction* (2021), of the pacifist gay poet Siegfried Sassoon weeping for the memory of his and so many young men's amputated youths, set to the matching threnodies of Wilfred Owen's poem 'Disabled' and Ralph Vaughan Williams's unutterably gorgeous and mournful 'Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis', expresses a sadness that's too much to bear – and it feels apt for a filmography in which the world could be overwhelming in its cruelty.

Yet for anyone who knew Davies himself, the presiding recollection is the infectious joy, the overwhelming pleasure – the childlike delight – that he clearly took in all that he loved: the people, the movies, the music, the books and the poems. Above all, Davies loved T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, a copy of which he often kept on his person and which kept him constantly engaged in thoughts on time, memory, mortality and the soul. Once he quoted passages of them to me: 'For the roses had the look of flowers that are looked at,' and 'Then the cloud passed and the pool was empty.' He then said, 'In those moments, you're aware of the ecstasy of the moment, and even as a child I was aware that the ecstasy was going, it was going even as I was experiencing it.' Beauty itself was too ephemeral not to make him weep.

My own memories of Terence Davies will never be decoupled from the experience of sitting with him for an interview over several blissful hours in his humble rowhouse in Mistley, Essex, in 2012, drinking tea and listening to him recall, with astonishing precision, his own career and famously meticulous filmmaking process with both self-deprecation and incandescent wit, and exalt in memories of his favourite musicals and melodramas with undimmed glory.

At the conclusion of that deeply nurturing conversation, as I was nervously pressing stop on my audio recorder, Davies then looked up at me with a warm smile and asked, 'So… what is your book about?' Concerned and amazed, I responded: 'You! The book is about you.' Davies's face turned red and lit up like a child, delighted but also humbled beyond belief.

'Me?!' It was an expression of unbelievable modesty coming from a man many agree was England's greatest filmmaker of the last half century, but also evidence that Davies, never a commercially successful director in all the boring ways we measure such things, was always on the edge of being forgotten. It's impossible to imagine, however, that Davies's cinema will ever be forgotten by anyone who has seen a frame of it; his monumental films held candles as vigils to the form itself, and now without him, we will – we must – keep that flame burning.

Michael Koresky, bfi.org.uk, 7 October 2023

Michael Koresky is the author of the book *Terence Davies*, published by University of Illinois Press in their Contemporary Film Directors series.