



Davies, Terence (b. 1945)

by Jim Ellis

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British filmmaker Terence Davies creates aesthetically compelling films that offer honest and complex psychological portraits of gay adults and youths.

Davies was born on November 10, 1945 into a working-class Catholic family in Liverpool, the youngest of ten children. At fifteen, he began work as a bookkeeper, a profession he continued for the next twelve years. This background provides the subject matter for much of Davies' work, which is to a large degree autobiographical.

In 1972, Davies won a place at Coventry Drama school, where he wrote the screenplay for his first short film, *Children* (1976), the first part of what is known as the Terence Davies Trilogy. The remaining two parts of the trilogy are *Madonna and Child* (1980), made while Davies attended the National Film School, and *Death and Transfiguration* (1983), which was funded by the British Film Institute and the Greater London Arts Council.

In 1984 Davies published a novel, *Hallelujah Now*, which, like the short films, similarly takes the form of a trilogy concerned with sexual and religious guilt. Both the films and the novel document, in a fragmentary and elliptical way, the life of a working-class gay man from childhood to death.

Davies' first feature film, *Distant Voices, Still Lives* (1988), was highly acclaimed, winning the International Critics Prize at Cannes and awards at sixteen other film festivals, including Locarno and Toronto. This film, along with his next feature, *The Long Day Closes* (1992), is set in the Liverpool of Davies' childhood. The first film explores in two parts a working-class family dominated by a tyrannical father; the second film is focused more closely on the relation between the youngest son in a family and his mother.

Both films are highly formalist attempts to convey the structure of memory. They are characterized by loose (virtually absent) narratives, associative editing, and long takes that attempt to bring out the extraordinary in the mundane. In one notorious and exquisitely beautiful example of the latter, the camera focuses on a faded carpet for a number of minutes as sunlight slowly moves across it.

Music, in this case the popular music of the 1950s, plays a prominent role in all of Davies's films, often providing what would otherwise be conveyed through dialogue or narrative. This reliance on music may be the product of Davies' fascination with the Hollywood musical.

Distant Voices, Still Lives and *The Long Day Closes* act as something of a corrective to the British kitchen sink dramas of the 1950s and 1960s, which portrayed working-class life in gritty black and white, typically showing it to be nasty, brutish, and short. While Davies does not romanticize this life, he does attempt to show, along with the privations, the beauty and the culture of the British working-class community.

The Neon Bible (1995), set in the American South in the 1940s, is an adaptation of the novel by John Kennedy Toole. In it, a sensitive youth remembers his childhood, which is populated by a domineering

father, a withdrawn mother, and the glamorous former nightclub singer, Aunt Mae. While this is Davies' first non-autobiographical film, it does exhibit many of his usual interests, mimicking, for example, the structure of memory and using songs as structuring or bridging devices.

Davies' most recent film is an adaptation of Edith Wharton's novel *The House of Mirth* (2001). Another film, *Sunset Song*, based on the novel by Scottish author Lewis Grassie Gibbon, was in production in 2004, but not yet released.

In spite of his relatively small canon, Davies is highly regarded among critics and other filmmakers for his artistry. Davies' representations of gay adults and alienated youths do not conform to the school of positive stereotypes. Indeed, they are often infused with great sadness. Yet the aesthetically compelling films offer honest and complex psychological portraits.

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Jim Ellis is Assistant Professor of English at the University of Calgary, where he also teaches in the film program. He has published essays on gender and sexuality in early modern literature and a series of essays on the work of Derek Jarman and his contemporaries.