

Class Theatre, Class Film. An Interview with Lindsay Anderson

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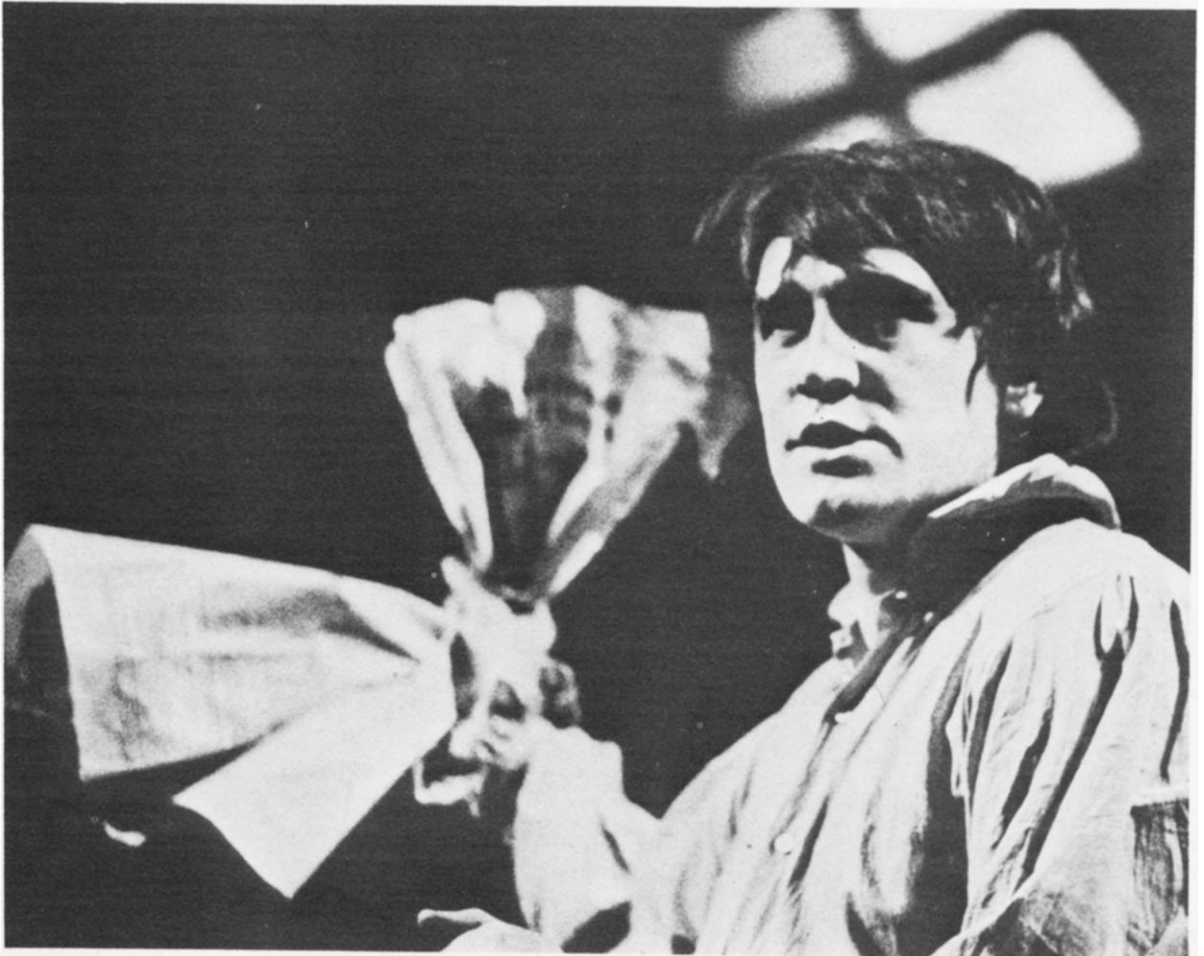
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CLASS THEATRE, CLASS FILM

AN INTERVIEW WITH

LINDSAY ANDERSON

by Paul Gray





From *THE WHITE BUS*, a feature film made in 1965-66.

Gray: In what way are British films distinct from those of other countries?

Anderson: We haven't had film-makers with the creative independence of directors like Antonioni and Fellini, or Godard and Resnais. This is ceaselessly bemoaned by British bourgeois critics, who want works divorced from the economic and social context that produces them, but it would be impossible to get the money to make such films. On the other hand, British films tend to be less esoteric—we have a strong tradition of social responsibility. This may be related to the rather literary nature of the British cinema—films tend to be produced from novels rather than from original screen plays. Stylistically the British cinema has been slow to follow the more advanced European directors, again partly because of the economic necessity of making films with mass appeal. Also, few technicians in Britain ever see any foreign films. But there is a younger generation of technicians, editors, and cameramen slowly moving in.

Gray: Many of the films made in England seem to be aimed particularly toward the middle class.

Anderson: This is largely true, and is plainly a comment on the British cultural situation. One likes to think that it's a little less true than ten years ago, when a film with a working class character was really a rarity. I would like to think that *This Sporting Life* is not exactly a bourgeois film; it has been accepted by non-bourgeois audiences. But this country so obstinately remains a class society that the respectable cultural

Richard Harris in stage production of THE DIARY OF A MADMAN, 1963, at the Royal Court.

organs have in general—quite unconsciously—fought against taking in the interests and values of the working class. *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* and *This Sporting Life* were unfavorably received even by “radical” publications such as *The New Statesman*. It’s astounding that you still can’t make a film in this country in which the principal character is a worker without this being taken as the most interesting thing in the film. The film critics have been writing for years about John Garfield and Humphrey Bogart—equally working class—but those movies have no relevance to our own social situation and do not threaten the position of the bourgeois hero. Now we have apparently radical pictures like *Darling* (significantly popular with New York critics) or *Nothing But the Best*, which appear to be taking a critical attitude towards society, but which are actually respectable, “intelligent,” bourgeois assessments of the bourgeois situation. They view from within the situation which they seem to satirize. So they end up as satirical conformist works. They never go to causes, or imply the necessity of a real disruption, a real destruction of the society which has produced them.

Gray: Beginning with *Look Back in Anger* in the 1950’s, there appears to have been a great resurgence in British theatre, led by playwrights such as Harold Pinter, John Osborne, and John Arden. In the same period there seems to have been the rise of the film dealing with working class heroes. Do you think there’s any connection between the two?

Anderson: Well, there was an immediate and direct connection in practical terms. A play, *Look Back in Anger*, a director, Tony Richardson, and a writer, John Osborne, together forced the first penetration into the British cinema of certain ideas and terms. The only reason that Tony Richardson was ever able to become a film director was John Osborne insisting that he direct the film version of *Look Back in Anger*. A little earlier there was *Room at the Top*, which, strictly in terms of its issues, was virtually the first honest film statement of the class situation. Still, it was the kind of situation that might have been seen in numerous Warner Brothers films of the late thirties, starring John Garfield. The crack-up of Britain’s old social stratification was reflected first in the theatre. But the class system is more modified than transformed, and the movement of the late fifties hasn’t gotten very far. The upper class in Britain is always so clever; it possesses a unique talent for assimilating disturbing elements. The working class actor, for instance, has become fashionable and appears in the Sunday supplements.

Gray: How would you distinguish your films from other current British films?

Anderson: My work in cinema doesn’t bulk very large. In the fifties, I made documentaries. And from about ’57 to about ’62 I made no films, and worked in the theatre. This was largely because I wasn’t interested in making sponsored films. It’s almost impossible to find financing for creative work. Since then I’ve only made one feature film, *This Sporting Life* in 1963. I just finished making what you might call a featurette of about forty-five minutes, designed as part of a trilogy of Delaney scripts.

Gray: What is the relation between film and theatre in your work?



ANDORRA, at the National Theatre, 1964. Robert Stephens and Lynn Redgrave.

COWAN

Anderson: Well, I have been told that my work in the theatre is cinematic. I've never been quite sure what that meant. I know that in working in the theatre I'm always very conscious of rhythm and a kind of precise timing, and this is my most uncomfortable obsession when cutting a film. I am slightly at odds with certain contemporary developments which place more emphasis on disintegration than on integration. My tendency is towards a very controlled and rhythmic form. I am not sure if that makes my theatre work "cinematic," or makes my films "theatrical."

Gray: About thirty years ago, Eisenstein claimed that film's new developments in cutting, editing, and montage killed the theatre as a performing art. Care to comment?

Anderson: I think economic factors are more important causes of the theatre's apparent decomposition. But I doubt that the theatre is dead, for there are so many very talented people who like doing it, and who can do it in an exciting way. Eisenstein was talking nonsense and probably riding on a wave of enthusiasm. The aesthetics of cinema is very different from the aesthetics of theatre—the enjoyment is different. The theatre remains a place where the author and the actor are more important than the director, while the cinema is ultimately the director's medium. The director has to take the responsibility.

Gray: Do you feel that an author can be represented in the theatre with fewer distortions than in a film? Or is it a matter of responsibility for the total experience?

Anderson: The latter. I think that a writer is more likely to be satisfied as a playwright than as a script writer because a film script undergoes a more profound and radical transformation. In my experience a writer is apt to find the film made from his script an agonizing experience. Even if the film is a good one, it is agonizing to see something which he has imagined turned into something else. He is apt to feel a gross sense of deprivation, a helplessness.

Gray: In the theatre there appears to be a great problem in the collaboration of directors and playwrights. Is this true for the film writer and director?

Anderson: I've never had disturbing creative divisions between myself and any author whose work I've directed in the theatre. Frankly, playwrights rarely know the difference between a good production and a bad one, they're so delighted by the words. I've worked with Max Frisch twice, and I found that he's perceived exactly what I had been after in directing his plays, and agreed with it. His suggestions have always been marvelously creative, contributing to—without challenging—my fundamental conception. I don't see why there must be a conflict; you're working towards the same end. I certainly can't brook directors who see plays as material in which to advertise their own talent. Likewise, in the cinema, there shouldn't be any problem because the director should—must—choose his collaborator very carefully, and be sure of harmony and understanding.

Gray: Over the last ten or twenty years the director has become the major force in the film, while the theatre still relies on fragmented collaboration. Do you feel that more playwright/directors such as Brecht would decidedly improve the nature of our theatre?

Anderson: I don't think the primacy of the film director is any greater than it ever has been. The theory of the *auteur* as coined by the *Cahiers du Cinema* has spread like a virus through the highbrow or would-be-highbrow critical world of the West. The only new thing about this theory has been the touting of second- or third-rate talents by trying to show blinks of attitude or approach in their pictures. So, Howard Hawks is treated as if he were Dostoyevsky. This is ridiculous. I doubt that there's been any development in the theatre because of Brecht as a writer/director. It's very nice if a director can write his own script, or if an author can stage his own plays marvelously. This results in more highly integrated and personal work. It's a fashionable idea but I see no trend towards its realization.



SERGEANT MUSGRAVE'S DANCE/
Royal Court, 1959.

TONY ARMSTRONG-JONES

Gray: But given the number of contemporary films which seem to be introspective statements by director/authors, don't you feel that the director has emerged or will emerge in a new capacity?

Anderson: Well, this is hardly a new development in the cinema; it simply has developed on a scale that has previously been impossible. For instance, Fellini's *8½* is in the tradition of the French avant-garde film of the early thirties. What is new is a large, educated, international audience which makes such a film economically feasible. The most important stylistic development is the escape from the straightforward narrative film, previously the basis of the cinema (certainly of the American cinema). We have reached a point where the material of the film can be presented in more interesting, more subjective ways. This increases the kinetic potential of a film.

Gray: Do you believe that there is a difference between the two media in the impact of their subject matter on the spectator?

Anderson: In general, the cinema is not as developed an intellectual medium as the theatre. I don't think that the cinema is really a medium for the discussion of ideas, or words. For me the cinema is a poetic medium, while the theatre is less exclusively poetic.

Gray: Do you find there are great differences in working with the actors in the theatre as opposed to the film? Do good theatre actors make good film actors or vice versa? And what are some of the problems in this area?

Anderson: I don't sense any difference. Obviously the superficial techniques are different. But the truthfulness and reality which you strive for are exactly the same.

Gray: Yes, but there is clearly a need for the hard-core realistic actor in contemporary British films and theatre. How does this affect the grand old traditions of British acting? Do those actors such as Gielgud, Richardson, or Olivier experience great difficulty working with these new movements?

Anderson: I think they do have trouble. They may lack flexibility. Most of them were brought up at a time when the theatre was an even more totally bourgeois preserve. So you do have the extraordinary fact that many of these very accomplished senior



THE LONG AND THE SHORT AND THE TALL. *Royal Court*, 1959. Kenji Takaki, Alfred Lynch, Peter O'Toole.

DOMINIC

actors are totally incapable of playing in anything but a respectable West End accent. They can't put on a northern accent, and that's death today.

Gray: How would you account for the fact that there appears to be little or no avant-garde activity in either the film or the theatre in London today?

Anderson: We're living in a society which is making a determined refusal to face reality. Britain today is really a sort of madhouse. The whole life of the nation is built on the most absurd paradox. You've only to switch on the television set and one minute you'll be seeing a politician addressing the nation on the need to face realities and devote ourselves to genuine productivity; the next moment you get a series of commercials bludgeoning you into trying to buy a pile of absolutely useless or trivial products. There is a radical disparity between the reality of that situation and the reality with which this country is attempting to live. One consequence is a great resistance to a more theatrical style of theatre, because we're still stuck with predomi-

nantly middle-class audiences which dislike plays that have too deep or uncomfortable a relationship with social truths. This is the great stumbling block to what I think should be the development of theatre.

Gray: Then you feel that film and the theatre are in the same relationship to society, in similar situations?

Anderson: Yes, and both are deplorable. At the moment, one hears of all the splendid things that are happening in Britain, from the National Theatre to a certain small group of films. The achievement of these groups is largely fashionable; in relation to what *should* happen, their achievement is very small indeed. The general climate is just as conformist as it ever was, but now it is expressed in shinier terms. The premium on success in Britain has become much stronger. It's no longer fashionable to be an outsider or to retain certain personal standards of integrity. This used to be at least respectable. Not any more.

Edited by KELLY MORRIS



THE WHITE BUS. *Lindsay Anderson and actor Arthur Lowe.*