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Tony Richardson: An Interview in Los Angeles

Author(s): Colin Young and Tony Richardson

Source: *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (Summer, 1960), pp. 10-15

Published by: University of California Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1210184>

Accessed: 09-02-2018 12:43 UTC

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Tony Richardson: An Interview in Los Angeles

The novels and plays of the "new wave" of young nonconformist, anti-Establishment English writers have been providing literary and drama critics on both sides of the Atlantic with a large share of their copy in the last two or three years. It was only a matter of time before some of the original material found its way onto the screen. The Boulting Brothers made a rather hapless version of Kingsley Amis' novel Lucky Jim, and Jack Clayton chose Room at the Top (from John Braine's novel) as his first feature film; but the name most firmly associated with the new writers as sponsor, theater producer, and finally film producer and director is that of Tony Richardson, himself a young man in his thirties.

Before he was taken on by George Devine, artistic director of the Royal Court Theatre, Tony Richardson had been noticed for a production of a Chekhov one-act on English television and various one-night stand Sunday Night shows in theaters off the West End. At that time John Osborne was an unknown and largely unwanted writer. His play, Look Back in Anger, had been turned down by several London theatrical companies when it came to Richardson's attention; its success established Osborne and Richardson in the London theater, and soon they formed a company (Woodfall) to produce the films of their choice. The first two were from Osborne's plays, Look Back to be followed by The Entertainer. Although he is not yet the sole author of his own material, Richardson's films are peopled by the disenfranchised, who are yet treated sympathetically, as if they were important: he obviously thinks they are.

A few weeks ago Mr. Richardson came to Hollywood at the invitation of Richard Zanuck of Twentieth Century-Fox to discuss the latter's

suggestion that he film Sanctuary—based on Faulkner's novel and also on his play Requiem for a Nun. It was subsequently announced that he had postponed the production of A Taste of Honey in England in favor of the Faulkner project.

The following interview took place rather hurriedly between other appointments. The resultant bias of the conversation (which is here condensed) toward financial rather than artistic matters was in large part accidental, and it is hoped that Mr. Richardson will have other opportunities to declare himself in the near future, perhaps when the later films of which he speaks below have been seen in this country.

—C. Y.



How does it come about that the films you direct and produce all happen to be contemporary subjects?

The sort of films I will always want to make will be this kind, about the world we are living in, films that are part of that world, and I think this is the sort of thing the film does best. So far it has been possible to finance these films—although there will always come a time when one can't, but so far we have been very lucky. *The Entertainer*, my latest, is completely finished—I've just in fact slightly re-edited it, and re-dubbed one reel. Walter Reed will release it, same people who released *Room at the Top*

Tony Richardson
and Dame Edith
Evans during
the shooting
of
LOOK BACK
IN ANGER.



here. British Lion will release it in Britain. *Entertainer* was financed quite differently than *Look Back in Anger*. The earlier picture was financed completely by A.B.C. which is a subsidiary of Warners, who also put up some money for Richard Burton. *The Entertainer* was partly financed by Bryanston (a subsidiary of British Lion), partly by Walter Reed, and partly by the National Film Finance Corporation, all quite independent of any major company. Until recently, Harry Saltzman was associated with me and John Osborne in the company which has produced all my films—Woodfall. Bryanston has a more or less permanent arrangement with Walter Reed, who puts up about 25 per cent of the budget in return for the American rights.

Look Back in Anger was made for about £250,000, *The Entertainer* cost just over £200,000, while the last film we made, *Saturday Night, Sunday Morning* (book by Alan Silitoe, directed by Karel Reisz) cost £117,000. *Look Back* was more expensive—because the property was much more expensive, and so was

the cast. Richard Burton is a very expensive actor; all the cast was expensive—none of them were on deferment of salary, and there were undoubtedly more studio overheads. (It was shot at Elstree.) In *The Entertainer*, Olivier, Osborne, and myself all took deferments and although it is a much more ambitious picture it was made more cheaply. Deferments of services or of the actual property are quite common in England now.

In England it is impossible, of course, to finance a film except through a distributor. The whole business of financing is difficult, perhaps more so in England than anywhere else in the world, because England is trying to live up to a scale of production which is quite unreal for so small a country. Films ought to cost the sort of money that they cost in France, but in fact England has half been caught up in an American tradition, and although their films of course do not cost as much as here, they still cost far too much, for the size of the country, and for the amount that they can take back. It ought

to be possible to make a film, and especially the sort of film that I want to make, for about 30 or 50 thousand pounds, as you can in France. But with the present financial and union setup it is quite hopeless. All my films cost too much money.

Can you explain the role of the unions? Is it exactly the same as here?

No—but the industry in Britain is heavily unionized and it is not possible to operate with such a small group as is used, say, in the new-wave French films. But it isn't only a question of the unions—there are charges imposed on the producer in England which in America are laid against the distributor, such as the bank interest, which in the case of one of my films amounts to many thousands of pounds.

In Britain you can't do a film outside the unions—nor would it be desirable to do so, because after all you have to have professional people working in every department. I don't want to sound antiunion, because I believe in unions, yet it is necessary to concede that they are at present conceived in a way that is perhaps not right for a certain kind of small, unambitious film. And the union is the only source of technicians who can do professional work. There are no other sources, as in America, from the universities and so on. If I did not go to the union I would have no idea of who could photograph a picture . . . even Walter Lassally is a member of the union.

However, in the end, I have no desire to work outside the union—it is just that we could wish them at times to be a little more imaginative. But much more serious is the general system of financing and distribution . . .

The whole tone of the picture business is to strive for technical perfection, but we all know this doesn't matter a tiny damn—the thing can be appalling in many ways technically and yet still be a wonderful and marvellous film. Gloss guarantees nothing . . . whereas the cost of technical perfection hampers the film industry.

We are going to shoot *Taste of Honey* entirely on location. This is something I've wanted to do for a long long time . . . and all the technicians in the unit also want to do this.

I have a team of technicians now who want to work in this way, and we are going to try to work with a minimum unit. We shall end up with a crew of about 50: you need four on camera, any night exteriors require a lighting crew, and in fact to work efficiently you have got to have a certain amount of lighting during day scenes also, and this all involves generators. Then you have the art department, assistant directors, make-up and hair and wardrobe, production people and accountants—reducing it to the minimum it is about 50. Reducing it beyond this makes for an inefficient operation.

. . . There is a scene in Jean Luc Godard's *A Bout de Souffle* which goes on for twenty minutes, shot in a real room and the setups are obviously very clumsy and awkward, and people have to climb over furniture to get any sort of shots at all . . . but nevertheless, *this helps* the film. The thing I don't like about it is the final sort of gesture the film makes . . . under its cloak of contemporary French cynicism—the contemporary French shrug. But I also don't think you can go out and make movies with six people. Even in a unit of 50, there would be no one not doing more than one man's job.

Taste of Honey will be shot three weeks in Manchester and five in London . . . the action no longer is confined to the one house of the play. Shelagh Delaney and I have done the script. The man who did the script of *Look Back* did a first draft of *The Entertainer*, then John and I went away and rewrote it.

The Entertainer was shot six weeks on location, and two in the studio. Only the apartment scenes were shot in the studio. I hate studios. I no longer want to shoot even interiors in a studio, I would rather work in the limited conditions which a location imposes upon you. For the sort of realistic films I want to make, by improvising one's way out of the impossibilities of real conditions you get something on the screen that is more true, somehow, than something contrived on a set. It is a question of taste—you can't get back and shoot long shots of rooms—you're on top of the people in rooms, you can't do a lot of camera movement, which isn't a thing I am terribly interested in. I think

a real set forces you to come to a simple sort of relationship with the people, to make a direct statement with the camera more than anything else . . . more than you do in studios. For once inside a studio you start taking walls out, you start thinking "Wouldn't it be fun if we tracked from here to there, pan round there?" and—you know—do a lot of fancy stuff. One is getting in fact less of the human reality.

Apart from two sets, *The Entertainer* was completely shot on location. The sets were treated differently in *The Entertainer* than in *Look Back*. In *Look Back* the set, the apartment, was built for the action. I think it worked—it was utterly unlike the reality of the room. In *The Entertainer*, I tried to set the thing in an absolutely real room, exactly as the room would be, but I don't think it's as good. I think once you start going into a studio you have to build a completely different sort of set. But anyway, all the scenes in the apartment of *The Entertainer* were very difficult because they are essentially quartet or quintet scenes, which were really written in the theatrical convention—dif-

ficult to do on the screen. However, the movie as a whole is very unlike the play. For instance, the music hall episodes served a different function in the play—they commented in an almost Brechtian fashion on the play. Although they were also almost realistic music hall numbers, Archie Rice was also commenting on his own situation—and with all sorts of political and social references. The minute you put him in a real place everything changes. The theater can have this kind of juxtaposition—this is one of the great advantages of the theater. And this is why it is so difficult to translate an Osborne play to the screen, and why I think filmed plays are so impossible. In the theater you can do these things which are suggestive and atmospheric, it's like double time in Shakespeare. In *Othello*, you can give the impression of Othello's being jealous for six weeks whereas in fact he's only been there a day. Now movies are specific and particular, and exist in a place and a time, so that Archie Rice becomes a character existing at a specific seaside town, doing particular numbers; the numbers can no longer have this

LOOK BACK
IN ANGER:
Mary Ure,
Richard Burton,
and Claire
Bloom in the
specially
built set.



double significance—they are just the sort of numbers that this dead-beat, third-rate music hall artist would have. And you have to suggest the other values in a different way.

We do it through his character—we get closer to his character, and implicit in it are all sorts of gestures and attitudes. But they are not externalized in the way they were in the theater.

I started with *Look Back* and *The Entertainer* because I happened to have directed the plays on stage, and I knew the subjects, and it became possible to use these as a means of starting making films. I never, ever, want to make a film of a play I have staged again. I think the two media work in a completely different way, and once materials, stories, characters, subjects are put in a particular mold, however much you try to translate them into a different mold they are still a bit stuck as they were—though I think *The Entertainer* is much less so than *Look Back*. This is why I'm glad to be doing *Taste of Honey* because I have *not* worked with it on the stage. Once you've actually staged a play, you have your favorite bits and you know how they work, and if you're doing it with the same actors, they have *their* bits, so that it's even worse.

Alan Sillitoe's novel *Saturday Night, Sunday Morning* had a limited success in England—it wasn't a best-seller, but it earned the critics' esteem. I think novels are fine for films—it's only plays that I think are difficult.

The *City of Spades* project (on which Gavin Lambert was invited to do the screenplay) will not be done for a while. After *Taste of Honey*, John Osborne's writing a film script, Arnold Wesker (author of *Roots*, one part of a trilogy running now in the Royal Court Theater) has written one; another man, an American called Clancy Segal who has just written a book, has written a film script for me. I'll do one of those—I'm not sure which. I want to do an original script more than anything. There is really no shortage of ideas—I also want to do a film on India—a four-hour epic sort of film—the freeing of India from the British. It will take me about four years to get the material together for it—work has just started. I want to cover from 1911 on—the political evolution of the country.

It's such a marvellous subject, because its references are so enormous; it's just about the only successful meeting of East and West, where people have got together, and in spite of the things that went wrong, the horrors and enormities that were permitted, nevertheless, in the end something very valuable was hammered out. The subject is the sort of big-scale historical thing which I think we are close enough to be able to tackle.

You have said that you have a personal interest in the contemporary subject. You have also managed to finance one or two of these. Since no one else seems to do much of that, are we to assume that not many other people share your interest?

I think that's true—you see a very extraordinary thing has happened, in England. Everyone is writing *plays*—all the young creative talent is directed at the theater. There are at least 20 interesting playwrights in England at various stages of development, who have written one or more good plays, or maybe plays that aren't quite successful yet but obviously will write a good play—similar to this wave of directors in France who want to make films, whereas there's no one writing plays in France of any value under about 50—the generation of French theater is Sartre, Anouilh, Beckett, and so on, just as there has been no significant original writing in America in the theater since Williams and Arthur Miller, which is, you know, about 20 years old. You can't really define these cultural breakthroughs—but when one occurs as now in England, then a whole series of people begin to think in this sort of way. It happened with the Elizabethan drama, and although it seems an overwhelming comparison, this same sort of thing has happened in the movies in France and in the theater in England, just as it happened in Russia following the revolution—all sorts of people, in different circumstances, came together to make the movies. I don't think there are many people yet in England who want to make the films I have been speaking of in England, but I think there will be. Film is a director's medium, and I don't think there are

enough directors who want to do this sort of film.

Incidentally, when will we get to see The Entertainer?

It will be released here the end of August. You must also notice *Saturday Night, Sunday Morning*, directed by Karel Reisz. He wanted to do it and had an idea about it, and we set it up for him to do. Albert Finney plays the lead—he's quite marvellous, will be the next great actor. Shirley Enfield (who plays Larry's girl friend in *The Entertainer*), a very talented actress, is also in it, and we have tried to keep a continuity of technical crew as far as possible—the whole unit will continue on *Taste of Honey*.

They all have an attitude in common, and work together in a certain way. The theme of the story is, roughly, the release of the week end. It is about a sort of rebel, a sort of anarchist, a sort of anti-authoritarian boy living in this terrible drab ghastly town, who is really against authority, against the Establishment. He sleeps around at the week end, gets drunk, creates wild scenes, and so on. Then he gradually matures, and channels his rebelliousness into a more potent form. He works in a large bicycle factory as a machinist. It's about work—the whole business of work in those towns, the sort of tensions it produces.

CYNTHIA GRENIER

Ill-Starred Thirteenth Festival of Cannes

Faced with the depressing quality of most of the twenty-seven competition films and the generally lack-lustre atmosphere of the Thirteenth Annual International Film Festival held at Cannes May 4–21 this year, one was sorely tempted to believe there was something to the malevolent power that superstition accords the number 13 after all.

There were, of course, a number of first-rate films, but the day by day average of pretentiousness or mediocrity stretching over nearly three weeks was pretty rough on the faithful filmgoer. Boosted in advance by the popular press as having the most scandalous collection of films ever presented in a festival, the actual projection revealed a singularly unappetizing and often downright dreary detailing of sexual vagaries. The range of deviation was unquestion-

ably wide: incest, rape, voyeurism, homosexuality, and seduction of a twelve-year-old. In this context adultery and prostitution appeared rather old hat. Let it not be thought, though, that any of these subjects were treated lightly or that any of the deviations were shown to have an agreeable side: all were seen from a heavily moral viewpoint.

The festival opened and closed with the showing of two long American films, both of which rather spectacularly bored the sophisticated, largely Parisian, audience. *Ben-Hur* for all its Oscars, its millions, and its monumental ballyhoo, provoked many a titter, and at its end won only the barest flutter of polite applause. The final film, *Savage Innocents*, a hybrid entered under Italian colors, directed by American Nicholas Ray, acted by Japanese Yoko Tani and