Terence Davies by Jason Wood

Though laying claim to a mere six features over the last four decades, Terence Davies is one of Britain’s most uniquely gifted filmmakers. Noted for his recurring themes of emotional and physical endurance, and the potentially crippling effects of dogmatic religiosity on the emotional life of individuals and societies, Davies has also frequently focused on the influence of memory on everyday life.

Stylistically, Davies’ works are notable for their symmetrical compositions, attentiveness to music and carefully calibrated pace. The sole screenwriter on all of all his films, Davies may have suffered debilitating funding issues and seen his output curtailed (as Davies comments, ‘I didn’t work for eight years and I genuinely thought, “That’s it. It’s over”’) but there is an unparalleled richness and perfection to Davies’ slim filmography.

Born in Liverpool in November 1945, Davies was the youngest in a large working-class family. Adored by his mother but frequently a target for his gruff father, Davies sought sanctuary in culture. The discovery of the cinema was as much a watershed moment for him as was his later struggles with sexuality in the face of the staunch Catholicism in which he was raised. Davies was educated at Catholic primary and secondary schools in Liverpool, followed by work in accounting and bookkeeping. From 1965 to 1973 he also gained amateur acting experience. Finally leaving the drudgery of full-time employment behind, Davies enrolled at the Coventry School of Drama in 1973 and during that period had a number of short stories and other pieces broadcast on radio, directed a stage play and had a one-act play performed at Manchester University. From 1977 to 1980 Davies was a student at the National Film and Television School. He has also produced two works for radio, A Walk to the Paradise Gardens, an original radio play broadcast on BBC Radio 3 in 2001, and a two-part radio adaptation of Virginia Woolf’s The Waves, broadcast on BBC Radio 4 in 2007. In 1984 Davies also published a novel, Hallelujah Now, based on his early life.

Completed with funding from the British Film Institute, it was with Children (1976) that Terence Davies announced his unique poetic lyricism to the world. A drama about social and domestic violence and its effects on Robert Tucker, a bullied young pupil at a Catholic boys’ school in Liverpool, the film is told in a series of extended flashbacks, with
Davies intercutting Robert’s troubled childhood with scenes from his adolescence, including a brief sexual encounter with another man. Semi-autobiographical, it heralded a non-linear approach to the representation of memory and the passage of time.

Madonna and Child (1980), the second film in what came to be termed The Terence Davies Trilogy, returns to a middle-aged Robert, caught in a struggle between Catholicism and his sexuality, as he tries to reconcile his public and private personae and his love for his elderly, ailing mother in the cramped Liverpool council flat they share. Completed as Davies’ graduation work from the National Film and Television School, it again embraces the interplay between past and present, taking an imprecise approach to time’s passing. Both harrowing and tender, the film concludes with an astonishing vision in which Robert imagines he is dying and brought to God’s judgement.

Committed with funding from the British Film Institute and a grant from the Greater London Arts Association, Davies concluded the trilogy with Death and Transfiguration (1983). Now an old man on the brink of death, Robert Tucker spends his final Christmas Eve reminiscing on some of the events of his life from his hospital bed, whilst also allowing himself a few sensuous flights of fancy. Robert recalls his beloved mother’s funeral and his part as an angel in a school nativity play, before a nurse comforts him in his dying moments, the screen becoming bathed in white light as his final breath departs his body. Offering evidence of the director’s increasingly assured visual sense and use of fluid tracking shots, Death and Transfiguration also makes poignant use of Doris Day’s It All Depends On You, the use of popular pastime songs becoming another of the defining signatures of Davies’ work. A thoroughly remarkable achievement suffused with longing, loneliness and joy, The Trilogy, which was nominated for a Grierson Award, placed Davies at the forefront of a new generation of British filmmaking artists.

Further sharpening the experience of remembering and the development of a very personal and unique cinematic language, Distant Voices, Still Lives (1988) is undoubtedly Terence Davies’ masterpiece. One of the finest features ever produced in this country, it’s a highly distinctive marriage of style and content, combining the social concerns of much British cinema (in this case, life in a working-class Liverpool Catholic family) with formal and existential preoccupations more readily associated with European art cinema. Derek Malcolm described the film as ‘Coronation Street directed by Robert Bresson’.

An autobiographical work, the film examines the life of a working-class family in Liverpool, encompassing the wedding of the elder daughter, the christening of the younger daughter’s infant child and the secondment into the armed forces of the family’s son. Communal pub ditties are also recorded, providing a rich evocation of lives lived through
the war years. Presiding over the family is the sadistic father (Pete Postlethwaite), who is always too quick with his fists, and the long-suffering, perennially loving mother (Freda Dowie).

Unfolding as a series of meticulously constructed vignettes told from the perspectives of different members of the same family (more than mere reminiscance, this is a film about the actual act of remembering), Distant Voices, Still Lives is rich in poetry, emotion and performance. An incredibly affecting work in which ordeal and sufferance are brilliantly juxtaposed with passages of intense happiness and communal spirit, it is also the film with which Davies established his ability to write incredible female characters and moderate their position in a patriarchal society. The director’s sense of time and place is also acute, with 1940s Liverpool being incredibly well rendered by the use of a muted but never brackish colour palette that gives certain frames the look of having been hand-tinted. The director’s visual aesthetic is all the more impressive given the film’s modest budget.

Awarded the International Critics Prize at Cannes, Distant Voices, Still Lives introduced Davies to a wider audience who immediately hailed him as one of the true poets of his medium.

Extending Davies’ autobiographical memoirs from the 1940s to the 1950s, The Long Day Closes (1992) is another lyrical hymn to the director’s childhood. Eleven-year-old Bud (a heartbreaking performance from Leigh McCormack) finds escape from the greyness of 1950s Britain through trips to the cinema, Christmases, birthdays and the protective love of his doting mother. But as Bud gets older, the agonies of the adult world, the casual cruelty of bullying, the tyranny of school and the dread of religion (coupled with an increasing uncertainty concerning sexual identity) begin to invade his life. Time and memory blend and blur through Davies’ fluid and incredibly expressive camerawork; slow tracking shots, pans and dreamlike dissolves combine to create the world of Bud’s imagination and the lost paradise of his bittersweet childhood.

Adopting its protagonist as our eyes and ears, the film skilfully avoids the pitfalls of nostalgia. Pain, bitterness and resentment frequently disrupt the equilibrium and the use of dialogue from Hollywood films of the 1950s and a constant soundtrack of popular songs of the period only serve to highlight the fact that happiness and contentment are temporary states to which we can only intermittently return. The film’s opening and closing images set the tone beautifully, the use of Boccherini’s ‘Minuet in G’ lending the images a transcendent quality that from the very first frame suggest that the viewer is in the presence of greatness. Selected for Official Competition at Cannes and winner of the Best Screenplay at the 1993 Evening Standard Film Awards, The Long Day Closes defined a directorial style that quietly and adroitly defied classification.

The Long Day Closes
Neon Bible remains under-seen and woefully neglected.

A sumptuous adaptation of Edith Wharton's novel which follows the fortunes – or lack of – of an ambitious but financially imperilled young woman looking for a rich husband in early twentieth-century New York, The House of Mirth faithfully captures the turbulence of Wharton's privileged society. Davies' furthest departure yet from his childhood obsessions, the film proved perhaps more successful than The Neon Bible in terms of its director connecting more fully with the feelings and struggles of his characters.

Lily Bart (Gillian Anderson) is a ravishing socialite at the height of her success who quickly discovers the precariousness of her position when her beauty and charm attract unwelcome interest and jealousy. Torn between her heart and her head, Lily always seems to do the right thing at the wrong time.

Davies' first literary adaptation and his first film set in a foreign country, The Neon Bible (1994), is based on John Kennedy Toole's coming of age story set in the 1930s and 1940s American Bible belt. Retaining an interest in memory, reflection and recollection, the film unfolds as a series of remembrances by 15-year-old David (Jacob Tierney), who cogitates on the subject of his troubled childhood while riding a train to an unknown future. As a small boy, David (Drake Bell) was a friendless outcast who watched his father, Frank (Denis Leary in an early dramatic role) vent the frustration of their poverty by beating his wife, Sarah (Diana Scarwid). Left alone with his increasingly unstable mother after Frank enlists in the army and is swallowed up by World War II, David finds sanctuary following the arrival of the glamorous Aunt Mae (Gena Rowlands in formidable form). A lively big band singer who regales David with stories of her days on stage, Mae is however ultimately unable to shield David from the unavoidable horrors of adolescence.

Rich in atmosphere and visually resplendent (it was the director's first foray into widescreen), the film's slow pace and elliptical style was not to all tastes and it was given a hostile and chastening reception in Cannes by critics who perceived the film as suffering from the application of by now familiar concerns – church, childhood, domestic strife and the sanctuary of culture – to unfamiliar characters and landscapes. A transitional work that sometimes awkwardly straddles the experimentation of early Davies with a drive towards more conventional narratives, The
She seeks a wealthy husband and in trying to conform to social expectations misses her chance for real love with Lawrence Selden (Eric Stolz). Lily’s quest for a husband comes to a scandalous end when she is falsely accused of having an affair with a married man and is rejected by society and her friends, finally sinking into the mire of genteel poverty.

Sumptuously drawing on John Singer Sargent, James Tissot and Johannes Vermeer, Davies’ epic and beautifully cast production (Anderson has never been better served in film by her director) perceptively hones in on the cruelties of the social rituals of the privileged whilst delivering a tragic treatise on injustice, solitude and love given, but not necessarily returned. Resolutely unsentimental, the pacing is exactly right with the director perfectly treading the line between Merchant-Ivory and the more metaphorical, expressionist style of his earlier works.

Shown to acclaim at Cannes, Of Time and the City marked a welcome return for Terence Davies after a prolonged period of inactivity following the failure of numerous projects to materialise. Seemingly cut adrift from the UK film industry, for Davies, a deeply sensitive man, the sense of vindication following the reception of this impassioned documentary about his Liverpool birthplace must have been pronounced.

Created as part of Digital Departures, set up by North West Vision and Media to tie in with Liverpool’s City of Culture status, this idiosyncratic and personal paean to Davies’ hometown blends a poetic verbal account of Davies’ early life with footage of the city. A eulogy that also weaves together the themes that define the auteur’s early narrative works (homosexuality, Catholicism, death, loss and the power of cinema), Of Time and the City also expresses great anger and regret. This is particularly evident in the heartbreaking black and white images, many of which are reproduced from Nick Broomfield’s Who Cares and Behind the Rent Strike, of the post-1945 slum clearance programme which saw the working-class communities relocated to purpose-built flats on the outskirts of the city.

It is also present in the contemporary footage showing the Liverpool of today as a place of relative loneliness and desolation, a place where alcohol is pedalled to young teenagers and where the costly makeover and regeneration initiatives have come at the expense of a distillation of personality and identity.

Narrated in Davies’ distinctive voice with a frequently playful sense of humour (the audio clips of Around the Horn are pregnant with innuendo), the film has been deliberately structured as a work of fiction so as to act as a fascinating, if largely memory-driven and non-linear portrait of a place to which there was always so much more than football and the Beatles. Of equal note to the images are the sounds, with Davies drawing together a rhapsodic collection of music including Handel, John Tavener, Liszt and Mahler.
Named after the dilemma of choosing between two equally undesirable situations, *The Deep Blue Sea* is adapted by Davies from Terence Rattigan’s play, which initially shocked with its frank exposure of British insecurities about sex and class. In the hands of Davies – whose adaptation was endorsed by the Rattigan estate – the story of a destructive love triangle also reflects the state of early 1950s Britain, a country in the throes of post-war rationing whose sense of power, worth, wealth and identity has been eroded.

Hester Collyer (Rachel Weisz) leads a privileged life in 1950s London. The beautiful wife of passionless but doting high court judge Sir William Collyer (Simon Russell Beale), Hester, in a material sense at least, wants for nothing. To the shock and dismay of those around her Hester walks out on her marriage and life of permanence and luxury to move in with a dashing young ex-RAF pilot, Freddie Page (Tom Hiddleston). Finding herself emotionally stranded and physically isolated, Hester feels Freddie drifting away from her, and in an attempt to win him back attempts suicide. Succeeding only in estranging her further, Hester is forced to confront all too clearly the foibles of the human heart.

Post-war Britain has been very much a vital and recurring setting for Davies. Stripping away much of Rattigan’s exposition and many of the extraneous characters that inhabited the original production, Davies, a scholarly aficionado of the melodrama (he tips a number of nods to David Lean’s *Brief Encounter*), gives contemporary audiences an almost unbearably moving and assiduously non-judgemental story about women’s lives and desires. By extension, the film also looks in a wider sense at the quest, frequently fruitless or at best fleeting, for individual fulfilment and freedom.

Handsomenly designed, the sets and costumes are impeccable, and luminously shot by Florian Hoffmeister, *The Deep Blue Sea* also makes characteristically exceptional and resonant use of music. ‘When music is used correctly in film it really is absolutely thrilling. It’s like being bathed in the most gorgeous joy’, comments Davies. A recurring leitmotif, Samuel Barber’s *Violin Concerto* gently underscores the emotions and, alongside the terrific and incredibly subtle performance of Rachel Weisz, is one of the film’s most fundamental and essential components. The raucous communal pub sing-alongs, an abiding memory of the director’s childhood, again feature, also performing a wide function as the backdrop to a venomous row between Hester and Freddie initially conducted in front of a gallery of onlookers. Hester’s forcing Freddie outside to conclude the spat is an important detail, revealing her disregard for convention and the director’s attentive eye for the period and for detail in general.

Embraced by an adoring British press and opening to record box-office numbers for a Terence Davies film, *The Deep Blue Sea* offers numerous reminders of why Davies is a director to be embraced and positively cherished. With a proposed adaptation of Lewis Grassic Gibbon’s 1932 novel *Sunset Song* in the works, it would seem that the director’s career is enjoying a very successful second act.

**JASON WOOD** is a film programmer and contributor to *Sight and Sound* and the *Guardian*. He has also published several books on cinema.
Terence Davies filmography
[feature film directing credits only]

1976
CHILDREN

1980
MADONNA AND CHILD

1984
DEATH AND TRANSFIGURATION

1988
DISTANT VOICES, STILL LIVES
Script: Terence Davies. Photography: William Diver. Editing: William Diver. Production Design: Miki van Zwanenberg and Jocelyn James. Players: Freda Dowie (Mother), Pete Postlethwaite (Father), Angela Walsh (Eileen), Dean Williams (Tony), Lorraine Ashbourne (Maisie), Sally Davies (Eileen as a child), Nathan Walsh (Tony as a child), Susan Flanagan (Maisie as a child), Michael Starke (Dave), Vincent Maguire (George), Antonia Mallen (Rose), Debbie Hones (Micky), Chris Darwin (Red), Marie Jelliman (Jingles), Andrew Schofield (Les). Produced by Jennifer Howarth. 95 mins.

1992
THE LONG DAY CLOSES

1994
THE NEON BIBLE

2008
OF TIME AND THE CITY

2011
THE DEEP BLUE SEA
Script: Terence Davies (adapted from the play by Terence Rattigan). Photography: Florian Hoffmeister. Editing: David Charap. Production Design: James Merifield. Players: Rachel Weisz (Hester Collyer), Tom Hiddleston (Freddie Page), Simon Russell Beale (William Collyer), Ann Mitchell (Mrs Elton), Karl Johnson (Miller), Harry Haddon-Patton (Jackie Jackson), Sarah Kants (Liz Jackson). Produced by Sean O’Connor and Kate Ogborne. 98 mins.

Julia Peniston), Terry Kinney (George Dorset), Anthony LaPaglia (Sim Rosedale), Laura Linney (Bertha Dorset), Jodhi May (Grace Julia Stepney), Elizabeth McGovern (Mrs Carry Fisher), Eric Stoltz (Lawrence Seldon), Penny Downey (Judy Trenor). Produced by Olivia Stewart. 140 mins.