

CINEMATHEQUE ONTARIO

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All screenings take place at the Art Gallery of Ontario's Jackman Hall,
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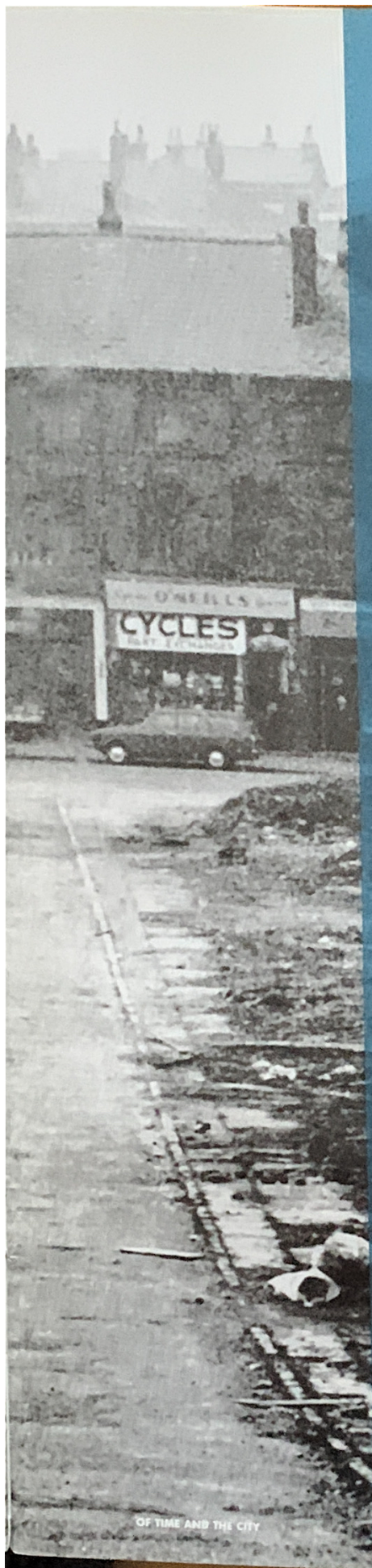
DISTANT VOICES

THE FILMS OF TERENCE DAVIES

"A gifted cinematic poet . . . Davies uses film like Proust's madeleine to recapture the past. Storytelling is wound around a montage of images and songs that have a mystical personal resonance." – Stephen Holden, *The New York Times*

"Davies doesn't offer a cinema of plot or a cinema of ideas, but a cinema of raw feelings and incandescent moments that wash over you like waves." – Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Chicago Reader*

"The autobiographical films Davies made – though they are more and less than that – are one of our treasures." – David Thomson



OF TIME AND THE CITY

Terence Davies is a lonely figure in cinema culture. He bears enough surface similarities to leading contemporary auteurs – the lingering shots, the attention to details of architecture and colour, his use of spare performance, his rich approach to music – to make one feel like he should adhere to a specific “school.” And yet no filmmakers claim him as a kindred spirit, no critics have placed him in a cadre. On the flip side, he is almost never described as a pioneering or even iconoclastic auteur. There are many fascinating reasons why he stands in this awkward zone, all of which make his films enormously interesting even for the casual cinephile.

Davies's isolation begins with the fact that the films are often uncomfortably autobiographical and personal. Obviously so in his two most celebrated films: *Distant Voices*, *Still Lives* and *The Long Day Closes*, in which the central character is a young boy with just about the same personal history as Davies himself. So too is the first part of *The Trilogy* about Davies' experiences in school, abused by teachers and students alike. (The rest of the film is a fascinating imagined future history for that boy, a false autobiography that plays out like a gay horror film, moments of shame and then regret colouring even the simplest of actions). *The Neon Bible* and *The House of Mirth*, set as they are in the United States, are less obviously about Davies' life, although directly related to the same autobiographical concerns. His most recent film, *Of Time and the City*, is a personal essay on his hometown of Liverpool and so, ipso facto, about himself and the emotions his birthplace evokes.

With this sense of autobiography comes a very English bashfulness around cinema and its power. Davies is eminently careful that his (majestic) cinematographical flourishes never make the leap to pretension; the films shy away from grand statements about humanity, even though they are filled with overwhelming, universal emotional truth. Of course, in other regards, Davies is not English at all. He is playing a game of romantic homage within a British cinema routinely devoted to gritty social realism; he is a storyteller of the working class, surrounded by but dismissive of Marxist analysis, a Liverpudlian who hates the Beatles.

Davies is also an unlikely transcendentalist. He is unafraid of his childhood Catholicism, which he claims to have held on to fervently, well into adulthood. The films believe in the possibility of spiritual redemption, in deriving hope from suffering, in the importance of ritual and prayer to appease the darker sides of the human soul. (The boy character of *The Long Day Closes* seems only to dream of better things when his eyes are closed at church, for example.) Of course, Davies has some serious doubts about faith too. In fact, one could argue that each film ends on a note of transcendental distress; if one were to make a sequel to a Davies film – what an ideal – it would likely begin with the aftermath of a collapsing faith. (Even Lawrence Selden in *The House of Mirth*, which runs so closely to the original Wharton novel, seems headed in that direction).

Then there's the music. Davies films are filled with people singing songs. In pubs, at home, walking down the street. Just like in a musical. But these are not musicals. Songs serve as tint to the scene, sometimes as character detail, rarely to further narrative. The given singer's countenance, her expression of joy or fear while singing, is key for Davies. These moments of song are among the most joyous in Davies' films; it is as though they represent the only truly happy memories he can conjure up. The overall collection of songs and music in each film also carries great meaning; they delineate time, often with the songs chronologically jumbled up but internally coherent to a given period, and also serve as a frame for the emotional life of the film. (*The House of Mirth* does not follow this pattern but utilizes opera in a similar way at times).

This subtle and unique use of music, this treading on the boundary of the downbeat musical, signals for some critics the deepest difference between Davies and his contemporaries. Roughly said, he is a gay man making deeply unfashionable gay films. No "coming out," no iconographic cowboy sex, no sense of empowerment, no liberation, never a drag queen moment and certainly not one note of disco. His gay gaze is one of crushed longing and intense fear of the men around him, a hyper awareness of sexualized erotic man monsters ever-present but to be avoided at all costs. (Davies claims that the beatings he took as a schoolboy for being a "sissy" made it impossible for him to fall in love, that he is celibate and that "being a homosexual is easily the worst thing to happen to me in my life"). Salvation can only come through the undying, blindingly all-consuming love of one's mother. She represents everything good and happy in a Davies film, yet is also the object of pathos, the worst abused in the household, pitiful in her stiff upper lip drudgery and made to age brutally in front of our eyes. Other women (and an occasional older, kindly man) are there to provide comic relief, a version of the banter Davies soaked up on screen from Doris Day and the other Olympian Gods of Hollywood.

These moments of subtle levity, these gentle gestures to a different time in cinema are finally what sets him apart from the crowd. Davies, like many great artists, is obsessed with how we might repurpose cinematic artifice and Hollywood's Golden Age. Yet he fails to share the macho delight directors like Godard, Scorsese and the like have for ripping the history of cinema from its original context and remounting it (not a pun) in a mode of their own choosing. Davies is far more reverent than that. Cinema's history and culture are a source of power and wonder for him, fragile dream bubbles ready to explode from an indelicate touch. Cinema is not to be dallied with, looted for a shot or costume idea, but sanctified as an essential part of a master's ongoing, heartbreaking exploration of the resilience and fragility of the human condition. - **Noah Cowan**

CineMaeque Ontario would like to thank Susan Oxtoby and Steve Seid, Pacific Film Archive, Berkeley, for their generous assistance in the preparation of this retrospective.



EXCLUSIVE LIMITED RUN!

"Nothing has given me more pleasure this year: the sweetness of its temper, the unfashionable seriousness of its design and its mixture of worldliness and innocence make for something sublime. ... What a lovely film this is, and what a welcome comeback for one of Britain's greatest film makers"
- Peter Bradshaw, *The Guardian*

"Along with Guy Maddin's equally stunning documentary My Winnipeg, Davies's film is a milestone in autobiographical cinema, but also a document on Northern Britain in mid-century that will resonate for years to come."
- Anthony Quinn, *The Independent*

OF TIME AND THE CITY

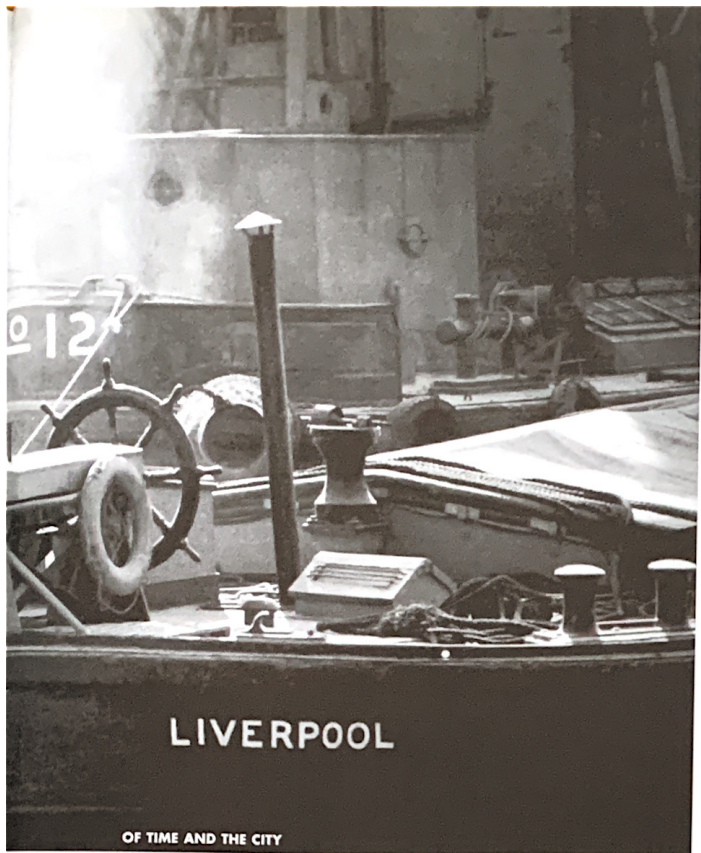
Director: Terence Davies
UK 2008 77 minutes

Of Time and the City was commissioned by the city of Liverpool as part of the celebrations surrounding its designation as the European Capital of Culture 2008. Davies was the obvious choice; much of his masterful body of work breathes through Liverpool's damp lungs. Yet the burghers were surely not expecting such a tribute as this. Davies' social history eschews the men cast in statues for the enormous, convulsive changes wrought on what were once known as the "working classes." He recalls a time of great poverty and camaraderie, when the cinemas were the only palaces his family and friends could actually enter. He remembers scandalous priests and corrupt officials who were never punished, while lonely men in the city's various parks were tossed in jail for a wink and a nod. He surveys the fatter, less desperate citizens of today, and finds them wanting. Churches have become discotheques, the promenades have emptied, the architecture of heavy Victorian industry seems tailor-made for modern loft living. All well and good, but Davies wonders where the spirit of community might have gone - and finds some answers through the prisms of post-industrial rot and Catholicism's collapse into the Mersey river.

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OF TIME AND THE CITY

Of Time and the City is also often great fun. Davies' voice-over, which runs throughout the work, is a delight. An insightful intellectual with a distinctive drawl, he often manages to be incredibly funny in a wry, sometimes cynical and deliriously romantic way. A precise balance between evocative archival footage and newly shot material completes this unique and inspiring work. This is the first film Davies has made in eight years. It would be criminal to make us wait so long for the next one. — Noah Cowan

Friday, January 23 7:00 p.m.

Saturday, January 24 7:00 p.m.

Sunday, January 25 3:00 p.m.

Special ticket prices apply. Please see page 28 for details.

THE NEON BIBLE

Director: Terence Davies
UK 1995 92 minutes
Cast: Gena Rowlands, Jacob Tierney

"It's immediately apparent – from the measured pacing, the immaculate compositions and elegant camera movements, the audacious ellipses and the inspired use of music – that this is a hallmarked Davies film. As such, it is extraordinarily moving" (Geoff Andrew, *Time Out Film Guide*). *The Neon Bible* is a glorious confirmation of the human capacity for joy in the face of the incredible negations of life. It's obvious that *Bible*, though set in the American South, is an emotional and spiritual parallel to [Davies'] own story. Again, a young boy [Jacob Tierney] living in poverty with a loving mother and a brutal father finds hope through music – here in the person of Aunt Mae, a small-time singer down on her luck but full of optimism. Gena Rowlands' warm, intelligent performance makes Aunt Mae all the more believable and powerful. It may seem a great distance between Liverpool and the Deep South, but Davies' compassion and wit reduce it to a heartbeat. "Elegiac, formal and sometimes boldly stylized. The result is an extraordinary experience in which the familiar is made deeply and effectively unsettling" (Kevin Thomas, *Los Angeles Times*). — David Overbey, 1995 Toronto International Film Festival Programme Book

Friday, January 23 8:30 p.m. Rated PG. Mature theme, violence.



THE NEON BIBLE



THE HOUSE OF MIRTH

THE HOUSE OF MIRTH

Director: Terence Davies
UK 2000 140 minutes
Cast: Gillian Anderson, Eric Stoltz

"It is Davies's unwavering allegiance to the visual that raises *The House of Mirth* from tasteful literary adaptation to a full-bodied movie to set beside *The Magnificent Ambersons* and *The Life of Obaru*" (J. Hoberman, *The Village Voice*). *The House of Mirth* is a film of compelling austerity and exquisite beauty, both bitterly ironic and deeply poignant. In this bravura adaptation of Edith Wharton's 1905 novel, Davies recreates the social prejudice and moral hypocrisy of upper-class New York society at the turn of the century. The film details the tragic decline of a young socialite (Gillian Anderson) into obscurity and disgrace. With no independent income, and a much whispered about affair with the enigmatic Selden (Eric Stoltz), she is fiercely determined to find a husband who will both guarantee her financial security and position in high society. Anderson's performance as the tormented Lily is simply magnificent; with every glance and gesture, she conveys the suffering of a woman who is viciously judged by her morally bankrupt peers. "It's a feast of small sensations – a movie of gestures. . . . The wide-screen *mise-en-scène* is superbly restrained; the colors are richly muted" (Hoberman). — 2000 Toronto International Film Festival Programme Book

Saturday, January 24 4:00 p.m. Rated PG. Mature theme.



THE LONG DAY CLOSES

NEW 35MM PRINT! DISTANT VOICES, STILL LIVES

Director: Terence Davies
UK 1988 84 minutes
Cast: Freda Dowie, Angela Walsh

The recent re-issue of Terence Davies' most celebrated film elicited an outpouring of reverence from many critics, including Philip French ("magnificent . . . poetic, infinitely moving") and Andrew Pulver ("arguably the high point of postwar British art cinema . . . this film is a masterpiece"). A breathtaking work that richly deserves its acclaim, *Distant Voices, Still Lives* remains an inspired film of great tenderness and insight. The first half deals with the terrifying wartime experiences of a family ruled by the iron fist of an abusive father (Pete Postlethwaite), while the second half flashes forward to the tangled lives of the widowed mother and her grown up children. Poetic and elliptical in form, its gorgeous images drained of colours like faltering memories, *Distant Voices, Still Lives* never shies away from the cruelty and fragility of experience, making its joyous moments (the film is filled with songs and celebrations) all the more believable and heart-wrenching. "Formally stunning, a masterfully assembled audiovisual requiem" (Desson Howe, *The Washington Post*). "Davies' storytelling is a unique joy. . . . A masterpiece" (Dave Calhoun, *Time Out Film Guide*). - George Kaltsounakis

Monday, January 26 7:00 p.m. Rated PG. Mature theme.

NEW 35MM PRINT! THE LONG DAY CLOSES

Director: Terence Davies
UK 1992 84 minutes
Cast: Freda Dowie, Angela Walsh

"Beautifully poetic, never contrived or precious, the film dazzles with its stylistic confidence, emotional honesty, terrific wit and all-round audacity" (Geoff Andrew, *Time Out Film Guide*). A highly autobiographical account of a working-class Catholic boy's coming-of-age in Fifties Liverpool, *The Long Day Closes* is also consumed with the magical escape offered by cinema, an escape similarly sought by its eleven-year-old protagonist. Bullied by schoolmates, overbearing instructors, and bratty siblings, Bud turns to music and movies for inspiration and solace; his blissful immersion in both is as irresistible as it is uplifting. One can see the influence of Douglas Sirk here, but *The Long Day Closes* is original filmmaking at its best: intoxicating, warm, filled with elegant long shots, mesmerizing montages, and rich allusions. The brilliant, textured use of light, sounds, songs, and music, and the dream-like ambiance that suffuses the film add to one's feeling of having watched a hauntingly personal reminiscence. "*The Long Day Closes* is filled with surreal, expressionistic touches that lend it the aura of a phantasmagoric cinematic poem. . . . beautifully photographed and edited" (Stephen Holden, *The New York Times*).

- George Kaltsounakis

Thursday, January 29 7:00 p.m. Rated PG. Mature theme.

THE TERENCE DAVIES TRILOGY (CHILDREN; MADONNA AND CHILD; DEATH AND TRANSFIGURATION)

Director: Terence Davies
UK 1984 100 minutes
Cast: Phillip Maudsley, Nick Stringer

Originally there were three medium-length films, all of which had the same protagonist, Robert Tucker, and followed him from childhood to death, illustrating a lifetime struggle between Robert's (homo) sexuality and his Catholicism and family background. Davies edited all three into a feature-length film with three acts of a continuing drama. He has stripped his fragmented narrative to the barest essentials: the way the light falls through a window to light a room and the character sitting in it, a glance, an obliquely heard half-phrase, the tones in which a name is pronounced, all provide more needed information than dialogue (of which there is a minimum). The sudden understanding shock of sexual self-discovery when the young Robert sees the water running over the body of an older boy in a school shower room has never been captured so accurately (and economically) onscreen before. The film is not a happy one (films about repression never are) but it is terrifyingly moving. - David Overbey, 1984 Toronto International Film Festival Programme Book

Saturday, February 7 7:00 p.m. Rated 14A.



THE TERENCE DAVIES TRILOGY