

M E M O R

I E S O

The

^{T E R} Long

^{D A V} Day

Closes

BY GERALD PRATLEY



THREE FILMS shown in competition at this year's Cannes Festival related to childhood. Billie August's *Best Intentions*, written by Ingmar Bergman, concerns the family life of Bergman's parents before he was born. In *Léolo*, the Canadian entry, and *The Long Day Closes*, the British entry, their directors, Jean-Claude Lauzon and Terence Davies respectively, bring us recollections of their family life during childhood in vastly differing styles and treatment. Both the British and Canadian films were extremely well-received and heavily tipped to win major awards. Comparisons will undoubtedly be made as these two films open commercially about the same time; however, in this case, I am writing about *The Long Day Closes*.

Terence Davies has been to the Toronto Festival previously with the lovely *Distant Voices, Still Lives*. If this feature can be considered two separate films (the *Still Lives* section was shot two years after *Distance Voices*), then his new picture might be thought of as the conclusion of a trilogy—somewhat along the lines of Bill Douglas' now classic autobiographical trilogy (*My Childhood*, 1972; *My Ain Folk*, 1973; *My Way Home*, 1978). Davies picks up after the death of his strict father. He gives us a year in the life of 10-year-old Bud in his working class home in Liverpool among his sisters, friends and his mother, for whom he has a deep and lasting love, expressed silently and without sentimentality. It is the mid-fifties, and Davies casts his recollections as a joyous time of long summer days, going to school in the rain, of street life, music forever on the radio, and magic moments born in the picture palaces.

The youngest of ten children, Terence Davies was born in Liverpool, in 1945, the year WW2 ended. He began his working days as a clerk, then as an accountant in offices across from the Cavern Club where the Beatles were later to begin their illustrious career. During these years Davies joined the Writer's Club and acted with local drama groups. At the Coventry Drama School in 1972 he wrote the screenplay for *Children*, the first part of a biographical trilogy depicting the moving account of a man's long

struggle with emotional and spiritual confusion. He shot it for \$15,000 and made a second part, *Madonna and the Child*, two years later at the National Film School in London. The final part, *Death and Transfiguration*, was completed in 1983. The budgets have been described as being "lower than low." The past nine years have been devoted to writing and raising the money to make *Distant Voices, Still Lives* and *The Long Day Closes*. The former, costing half-a-million dollars, was shown in the Director's Fortnight in Cannes in 1988 and won the International Critics Prize, also the main prize at the Locarno Festival, and the Critics' Prize at Toronto. It became a huge, and to Davies, surprising success around the world. "I was astonished at the way audiences connected with the film. I didn't know that so many people had such difficult lives."

The Long Day Closes is on a much larger scale than Davies' previous films. "It was shot almost entirely in the Rotherhithe studios of Sands Films, where my production designer, Christopher Hobbs, recreated 'a memory realism' of the street on which I grew up. He did it entirely from my memory, since nothing, not even a photograph, now remains." It took Davies just eight weeks to shoot, and he came in on time on a three-million-dollar budget. The increased cost is reflected in his highly individual and deeply personal style: meticulous framing; intricately planned camera shots; dream-like special effects; and a final, enormously complicated optical treatment of a night scene with

clouds passing across the moon taking over four months to complete.

A slight figure, Davies speaks gently and quietly, yet with intense certainty about his work. "I believe that content always dictates the form. When it's the other way around, it never works. I still feel very clumsy in many ways and I'm aware of my faults more often. The disappointment is that I thought as I got older and made more films it would get easier; whereas, in fact, it gets harder. On the other hand, I don't have any sense of living up to my last film, just living up to the script that I'm shooting because that's the most difficult part.

"I could have done with just one more week over the original eight-week schedule, but we just couldn't raise the money. When you make a film you make it with all the constraints there are. I take that as an automatic read." A perfectionist in everything he does, Davies writes his scripts longhand. "That way I feel as if I've written them. It must be a black pen with a red underlining. I only write two drafts but before the first I do about ten months of writing notes, thoughts and observations. In my first draft I write down every track, pan, dissolve, every bit of dialogue—everything." Like Hitchcock before him, by the time the script is finished Davies knows every single camera set-up before he goes on the floor.

To those critics who think the moody, poetic and portrait-like quality of *The Long Day Closes* confuses the narrative, Davies replies that "when you are dealing with a child, events don't follow logically or even clearly from one thing to another."

left: Bud (Leigh McCormack)



**top: Terence Davies with Leigh McCormack
bottom: Marjorie Yates as Mother**

er. Our story is 'young boy is loved at home, likes his primary school, hates secondary school, and is afraid of the future.' That's not spectacular, and you can't expect a child to behave as an adult. They don't explain how they feel—they just say they feel, and not even that sometimes. That's what I've tried to cap-

ture in my film. And there's a subtext too: the terror of awakening sex, the terror of religion, the terror of the future, the terror of the loss of happiness. When you're a child, they're all unnamed terrors. You can't put a finger on them."

The depth and richness of Davies' film—with its living sound and fluid cameras, its striking production design, its costumes and settings—are the combined efforts of a dedicated artistic and technical crew inspired by the memories and emotions of the director. Michael Coulter, the cinematographer, has an impressive list of credits, the most recent being *Where Angels Fear to Tread* and *Monster in a*

Box. Bud is played to perfection by 13-year-old Leigh McCormack, and his mother by Marjorie Yates, the distinguished stage and television actress (*A Very British Coup*, *Weatherby*). Moviegoers who share Davies' memories of and affection for the films of his childhood will note how effectively he makes

use of their soundtracks. However, even with his larger budget, Davies could not afford to pay for excerpts. Trying to guess the titles adds to their appeal.

As the title implies, Davies has now ended his 18-year quest to come to terms with his working-class boyhood and family upbringing in Liverpool, a process he describes as "finding the dramatic truth, not the literal truth, but a reworking at an aesthetic distance" of his childhood. "It's the last part of the autobiography I can do," he said. "It's my life between the ages of seven and 11, although I've compressed it to the time between primary and secondary school, the year that

ended my four years of happiness. Our way of life seemed so rich then. We were poor, living in a small house, but we had the radio, the cinema, the pub, the dance hall. That was the fifties. We didn't expect more.

"That time between my father's death when I was seven and leaving primary school were just so happy I remember I was almost sick with happiness. My film, then, is a story of a paradise, of a paradise that's already being lost and will only survive as a memory. I tried to hold on to the security of those years, but the end of the film says it doesn't stay like that, you've got to come to terms with it. My feelings are mixed. If I could change everything and could go back to it I would, but you've got to face life. I'm sorry that it's over," he concludes. "I know that it is, and so, in a way, I'm glad it's finished."

When the Cannes festival ended and the jury announced its decision, *Best Intentions* won the Golden Palm. *Léolo* and *The Long Day Closes* received no recognition. **T I**

GERALD PRATLEY is a freelance writer, film critic and former head of the Ontario Film Institute.