Obituary: John Schlesinger, filmmaker, 1926-2003

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When news was announced of the death of John Schlesinger, at the age of 77, I confess to ambivalence. One of the four major British film directors of the early 1960s, his output was huge and uneven. While there was much of interest, particularly in the way he worked with actors, the results were mixed. This reflected his determination to work at all costs; frequently, what suffered was the quality of the material.

In thinking about what was memorable—and why—in his films, I repeatedly came up against recollections of performances and set pieces where memory found no place for the films in which they occurred. This is suggestive, at least, of what he found important in his work, as well as its limitations.

Schlesinger was born into a middle-class Jewish family in London in 1926. His family was able to encourage Schlesinger's interest in theatre and film, giving him his first cine camera when he was 11. He made films throughout his time at public school. He was also a talented pianist.

At 18, shortly before the end of the Second World War, he was conscripted into the army. Breaking his leg and falling ill with rheumatic fever, he was transferred to the Combined Services Entertainment Unit, where he performed as a magician. Many of his peers in the Combined Services Entertainment Unit also became successful—the comic actors Kenneth Williams and Stanley Baxter, for example. The playwright Peter Nichols dramatised his experiences with the unit in the play *Privates on Parade*.

After the war the demobbed Schlesinger went to Oxford University. Here he continued to make films, having now moved up from his childhood 9.5mm camera to 16mm.

He also started acting with the Oxford Players. On his graduation in 1950 he worked as a character actor in repertory theatre, film and television. On stage he appeared in a production of *Mourning Becomes Electra* directed by Peter Hall. In films he appeared in the Boulting Brothers' *Brothers in Law*, as well as Michael Powell's *Oh! Rosalinda* and *Battle of the River Plate*. On television he appeared in episodes of *Ivanhoe* and *Robin Hood*. For the latter he was directed by a man who came to be seen as part of the same movement in British film, Lindsay Anderson.

It is important to see this stage in the development of any craftsman in film, television or theatre. His experiences as an actor fed much of what was positive in the way he worked over the rest of his career. (He continued to make acting appearances, too, right up to the end of his working life). He worked during this period, too, with many of the most influential directors in British film and theatre. It is unlikely that Schlesinger did not assimilate some of Powell or Hall's craft in their respective fields.

Filmmaking was still his ambition, though, and he continued to make films independently. He was rejected from a course for television producers. Instead, a short film he had made about an afternoon in Hyde Park drew him to the attention of the BBC's documentary film unit.

Schlesinger started on the *Tonight* programme, before moving on to *Monitor*, under Huw Wheldon. It is difficult, looking at the BBC today, to realise the influence the documentary unit had, particularly under Wheldon's leadership. Where recent BBC administrations have sought largely to buy in programmes from freelance production companies, *Monitor* (in particular) nurtured a diverse range of filmmakers.

Schlesinger directed pieces on the Cannes Film Festival, Italian opera, comparative studies of painters, and Benjamin Britten at Aldeburgh. (Later, Ken Russell was to be similarly encouraged by Wheldon in his pieces on Elgar and Mahler).

Out of this experience, which served as a solid technical foundation for his subsequent work, Schlesinger was offered a 30-minute piece about Waterloo Station by the veteran documentarist Edgar Anstey. *Terminus*, which won a Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival and a British Academy Award, made his name as a director. As a result he was offered *A Kind of Loving*, his debut feature.

A Kind of Loving (1962) fitted perfectly—if perhaps fortuitously—into the regional realism of British cinema of the time. Schlesinger, although not particularly allied to them in any formal sense, found himself alongside Tony Richardson, Lindsay Anderson and Karel Reisz as part of a wave of urban filmmaking dealing with hard-edged stories of working class life.

Whatever else Schlesinger had in mind, he was keen on the frankness of the story about a young man who finds himself trapped by marriage to his pregnant girlfriend. This frankness brought him up against the censor. Referring to a scene in which characters attempt to buy condoms, Schlesinger was told, "You could be opening the floodgates. Soon everybody will be doing it".

A Kind of Loving also marked the beginning of what was to become one of Schlesinger's more interesting themes, the development of his relationship with actors. The film gave Alan Bates his first starring role, and Bates responded with an impressive performance. Bates went on to work with him again many times over the years, through *Far From the Madding Crowd* (1967) to *An Englishman Abroad* (1983).

Similarly, Julie Christie was brought into Schlesinger's "family" for his next film. *Billy Liar* (1963) was written by Keith Waterhouse and Willis Hall (who had also adapted Stan Barstow's novel *A Kind of Loving*). Christie also starred in its follow-up *Darling* (1965), and *Far From the Madding Crowd*. The latter introduced Peter Finch to Schlesinger's films. He was to return with a magnificent performance in *Sunday, Bloody Sunday*.

Billy Liar and *Darling* showed Schlesinger moving away from the harsh realism that had typified early 1960s British filmmaking. In its place his films were becoming part of a highly fashionable "Swinging London" scene (Julie Christie was being promoted as *the* face of 1960s Britain). They were also becoming more glib and superficial, although his understanding of actors brought forth some impressive performances. Christie, for example, manages in all her appearances for Schlesinger to be more than the fashionable face that is clearly being traded on.

An enjoyment of the almost theatrical performance was to remain

constant throughout his career, and Schlesinger was a fine judge of acting talent. In *Billy Liar*, Tom Courtenay realised Billy's daydreams with panache and relish. Those daydreams also became a way for Schlesinger to break out of the constraints of realism. Courtenay's fine performance is also admirably given context by Leonard Rossiter as his fellow bored undertaker's clerk. For all the memorable qualities in the acting, the film itself is a slight piece, undermined by Billy's only opportunity for escape being to follow Christie to exotic London.

Schlesinger's move to colour came with the big-budget *Far From the Madding Crowd*, shot by Nicolas Roeg. It marked perhaps the apotheosis of the fashionable 1960s British film, starring as it did both Julie Christie and Terence Stamp, the "dream couple" for British casting directors of the time. It is a testament to both actors, and also to Schlesinger's handling of them, that their performances are so good.

Far From the Madding Crowd did not do well at the box office, but it marked his international acceptance as a director of stature, and paved the way for his move to Hollywood. It also marked his distance from the other members of the early 1960s wave of British directors. (Lindsay Anderson had moved to colour for the scabrous political satire of *If ...* and Tony Richardson's costume drama, a confused but politically-loaded *Charge of the Light Brigade*.)

On the back of the success of these early films, Schlesinger moved to Hollywood, where he made his best-known work *Midnight Cowboy* (1969). Here is the full Schlesinger experience—the powerful, slightly theatrical performances, the strong set-pieces, yet also a stylistic glibness that is a little disappointing.

The tale of a naive hick's (Jon Voight) descent into destitution in New York is certainly overwrought, but there is a great deal of trust on offer to some fine actors. The famous scene in which the ill "Ratso" Rizzo (Dustin Hoffman) avoids traffic as he walks in the gutter was in part the result of Schlesinger leaving the camera operating as Hoffman improvised.

It looks today as dated as the Swinging London material, but the film won Oscars both for Best Director and for Best Film. It was the first X-rated film to win the latter award. (The film's rating was subsequently lowered). Its success enabled Schlesinger to return to Britain and make *Sunday, Bloody Sunday* with Peter Finch.

Sunday, Bloody Sunday was perhaps the most personal of Schlesinger's films. Although flawed, the film had the great power of Finch's performance at its centre, and was pioneering in its presentation of homosexuality (in contrast to *Midnight Cowboy*, which failed to tackle the subject with anything like the same directness). *Sunday, Bloody Sunday*, said Schlesinger, marked his "coming out" in public, and represented a new stage in representations of homosexuality on screen.

Even here, though, the highs stand out from a work marred by silliness. The embrace between Finch and the young lover (Murray Head) that they are forced to share with Glenda Jackson is a striking moment. Finch's final scene, circled by the camera as he speaks of his quest for love and his future alone, is the culmination of an impressive performance. Yet all this takes place in the context of an improbable and not overly interesting love-triangle among the affluent middle class of Hampstead and their foolish children.

Repeatedly, Schlesinger seems to be saying that it is only the dignity of the individual that merits attention. The social world around them is only a vessel for those individuals. Had he worked with lesser actors than Peter Finch, Alan Bates, Tom Courtenay, Terence Stamp et al, or been less sensitive to their strengths, the weaknesses of some of his films would have quickly been more glaringly apparent.

Sunday, Bloody Sunday saw a drying up of work offers. Schlesinger started accepting strange commissions, like part of a film about the 1972 Olympics. The slowing of offers went hand in hand with some critical disasters, like his only musical *I and Albert.* When his interesting adaptation of Nathanael West's*Day of the Locust*—about young performers finding disappointment in Hollywood—was panned by the critics, he was looking desperately for another commercial success.

He found it with *Marathon Man* (1976). This mediocre thriller is best known for Laurence Olivier's demeaning pantomime Nazi dentist, and also the anecdotal dispute about acting styles between Olivier and Dustin Hoffman. The fact that sooner or later in every dentists' waiting room somebody will say "Is it safe?" is a testament to his ability to orchestrate the big moment, rather than any tribute to the quality of the film. From here on, Schlesinger's films veer between the moderately interesting (*Yanks*) and the god awful (*The Believers*).

It is an indication of how far his film work had fallen that some obituarists saw the workaday thriller *Pacific Heights* (1991)—which was a commercial success—as being in some way an assured piece of work. It features, though, a customarily theatrical performance, this time from Michael Keaton as the psychotic neighbour wreaking havoc on a middle class couple that moves into the block.

There was some more interesting work in other media. Schlesinger had directed on the stage (with varying results) throughout the 1970s. After *Honky Tonk Freeway* (1979) was such an expensive disaster that it effectively curtailed his filmmaking in Hollywood, he returned to London to direct Sam Shepherd's *True West* for the National Theatre. Out of that came a meeting with Alan Bennett, which resulted in Schlesinger agreeing to work for television.

An Englishman Abroad (1983), was a distinguished piece of work about the spy Guy Burgess (Alan Bates) and his unlikely meeting in Moscow with the actress Coral Browne (who played herself). Bates was marvellous as the homesick and self-pitying Burgess, while Browne was in imperiously watchable form. If the story was Bennett's (based on his discussions with Browne) it had clearly struck a chord with Schlesinger. Here was the outsider being in some way "rescued" by someone equally marginal, a travelling actress.

Schlesinger and Bennett would return to the theme of the Cambridge graduates spying for the Soviet Union in *A Question of Attribution* (1992). That piece focused on Anthony Blunt (James Fox), the royal art expert, in an encounter with the Queen (Prunella Scales). In a way the stories of the Cambridge spies were perfect for Schlesinger's sensibilities: their confused political hankering for "fairness", coupled with their marginalisation because of their sexuality, allowed him to "rub beneath the surface", as he put it, in a way that many of his films did not. The detached Blunt could encounter the monarch, have an interestingly fraught discussion on art history tense with the underlying differences between them, and still not be quite accepted or acceptable. The Cambridge spies were establishment figures who did not quite belong in the establishment.

The television work attained a quality that seemed beyond Schlesinger in film now. His adaptation of *Cold Comfort Farm* (1995) was a charming romp that confirmed his love of the big performance (Rufus Sewell smouldered like there was no tomorrow, and Ian McKellen ranted and roared as the old preacher in a way that suggested the entire shoot had been one big family outing). It is also, significantly, about a young woman who finds herself entirely marginalised (by her family).

He kept returning to films, but the quality was no longer there, and some of the work was just plain bad. Schlesinger fared better as an opera director, where Georg Solti and Placido Domingo invited him to direct for them. Productions of *Les Contes d'Hoffmann* and *Der Rosenkavalier* achieved success at the Royal Opera House.

Schlesinger once said, "I couldn't bear the idea of not working". He threw himself enthusiastically into adverts, and made party political broadcasts for the Conservative Party. One such broadcast for John Major's 1992 election campaign showed Major's roots in a working class suburb of south London. It highlighted the trough Schlesinger had thrown himself into. The director who had once, in even a limited way, sought to inspect the anxieties and failings of his characters, was reduced by his

own limitations of vision and his workaholism to fictionalising the populist roots of a Tory Prime Minister.

Schlesinger was proud of the populism that mars much of his work. He had criticised Lindsay Anderson for being too selective, accusing him of being reluctant to work regularly—or perhaps being incapable of it. This was fundamentally a political disagreement. For all his flaws and idiosyncrasies, it is hard to think of Anderson selling his art or craft so cheap as Schlesinger at his lowest points.

The early films, on which Schlesinger's reputation was based, all share a similar outlook. They are tales of lonely people, outsiders in some way, dependent on their illusions, adrift in a world that is bitter but not without sympathy. To some extent this must have drawn from Schlesinger's own Jewish, gay background.

The strengths and weaknesses of that view are summed up by Schlesinger's comment in 1970 that "I'm only interested in one thing—that is tolerance. I'm terribly concerned about people and the limitation of freedom. It's important to get people to care a little for someone else. That's why I'm more interested in the failures of this world than the successes".

He later reiterated this point, saying, "I don't believe in characters in films who haven't got any failings". In his weakest moments this simply became caricature, the avoidance of any real contact with the outside world. By the limitations of his understanding of the world around them, he often left his characters without any cohesive social situation to hold them together. At his strongest moments, though, he allowed his actors to produce vivid and sympathetic portrayals of people who do not quite fit comfortably into society at large.