

# British filmmaker Alan Parker (1944-2020): An establishment rebel

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The career of British film director Alan Parker, who has died aged 76, in some ways embodied a number of the major problems confronting filmmakers over the last several decades. A genuinely popular director of no small talent, he subordinated his critical instincts to a popularist slickness, with predictably damaging results. He leaves an interesting but frustrating body of work that regularly hinted at considerably more than it could or did achieve.

Parker was born in 1944 on a north London working class housing estate. His father was a painter for an electricity company and his mother was a dressmaker. He became interested in photography, and when he left school at 18 took a post room job at an advertising agency.

Many in the British film industry came out of advertising. Here Parker first met David Puttnam and Alan Marshall, who produced many of his films. Other directors followed the same route, including Ridley and Tony Scott and Adrian Lyne.

Aside from hands-on involvement in some kind of creative endeavour, Parker saw advertising's main strength as being "very egalitarian," lacking the "kind of class distinction ... other jobs had."

He said, "Advertising didn't care where you came from," but if "you were half bright, they gave you a chance." He moved from office boy to copywriter.

Parker's progress through the "egalitarian" advertising structures coincided with the emergence of a new realist school of British film and television-making. Films like Karel Reisz's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960) and Lindsay Anderson's *This Sporting Life* (1963), and television dramas like Ken Loach's *Cathy Come Home* (1966) turned towards the working class.

This had a wider impact. Working class actors, with regional accents, were becoming major stars.

Parker's development makes clear this success was two-edged. Advertising's "egalitarianism" was based on being able to sell products, which shaped Parker's approach to filmmaking. For all its edginess, its embrace of other voices, it was an establishment vehicle.

It did, however, give Parker the chance to become a director. Attempting to overcome the poor quality of English television commercials, there was "a lot of experimenting in the basement

of the agency."

Jobs were distributed roughly according to expertise. Without a real role, Parker was left "to say 'Action!' which any idiot can do. Then I realised I could also say 'Cut!' And one day I shouted at an actor, 'No, no, that's not what's wanted!' and everybody looked at me, and suddenly I was a director."

He began testing his skills. When Puttnam bought the rights to some Bee Gees songs, Parker wrote an accompanying screenplay about two friends at a comprehensive school, *Melody* (1971). Parker did some second-unit directing and shot the montage sequences.

He directed shorts for his own company, and an award-winning BBC television drama *The Evacuees* (1975). Scripted by Jack Rosenthal, this work portrayed two Jewish boys evacuated from Manchester to Blackpool during the blitz. Parker directed children well, as his debut feature confirmed.

*Bugsy Malone* (1976) was a musical parody/pastiche of 1920s gangster films, starring children. Energetic fun, it demonstrated a considerable knowledge of cinema history. Parker described it as "not so much an homage as a collection of fond memories of double bills that I had devoured as a kid."

Parker showed a certain flair for musicals, as he would again with *Fame* (1980) and, above all, *The Commitments* (1991).

This flair however, also allowed him to unleash a tendency for well-made effect over more critical content. He once described working on *Pink Floyd: The Wall* (1982) as "one of the most miserable experiences of my creative life," but its overblown extended pop promo feel was efficiently done by the former advertising director.

His sound visual instincts allowed him often to create something watchable even with thin material, like the voodoo private eye thriller *Angel Heart* (1987).

Much better was the still powerful *Birdy* (1984), where he turned William Wharton's account of post-Second World War trauma into a post-Vietnam study of physical and psychological damage, with Nicolas Cage and Matthew Modine both excellent.

One of Parker's better qualities was a refusal to make the same film repeatedly. He said he thought it would be "incredibly boring to do the same kind of subject 20 times, or even to make films in the same place, when you've got the

whole world to explore. Right from the beginning, I didn't want to be pigeonholed."

The instinct was healthy, although it could not always overcome his inclination to showboat. After *Bugsy Malone* came *Midnight Express* (1978) a graphic and overwrought account of the imprisonment of American Billy Hayes (Brad Davis) in Istanbul for drug smuggling. Oliver Stone later apologised for "over-dramatising" the screenplay.

Despite its shortcomings, the film pointed to one of Parker's stronger characteristics throughout his work. There is always some kind of sympathy with the underdog. This is positive enough, but not quite enough.

It is at its strongest in *The Commitments*, contributing to this being generally Parker's strongest film. Working largely with unknown performers, his adaptation of Roddy Doyle's novel about a working class band in Dublin was passionate and convincing. Parker said he wanted to make it "because I identified with the kids in the film." Comparing their life with his own background, he said, "I suppose deep down that the dreams and aspirations I had when I was a kid are very close to theirs."

This only gets you so far. The later *Angela's Ashes* (1999) did not go much beyond a rather sentimentalised presentation of Frank McCourt's memoir of his poverty-stricken Irish childhood, despite excellent performances. As the WSWs noted at the time, Parker appealed to his own background "as proof that he can recreate social relations as they are, but is unable to achieve this with any depth due to his philosophy of simply giving the audience what he supposes it wants!"

The limitations were even more apparent with *Mississippi Burning* (1988), a decade earlier. Again, there was something healthy in the instinct. The film portrays an investigation into the disappearance of three civil rights workers in 1964, echoing the actual murder of James Chaney, Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman. It took the unpardonable form, however, of portraying the FBI, the brutal instrument of class rule in America, as the champion of civil rights.

Parker defended the film on the basis that "It's fiction in the same way that *Platoon* and *Apocalypse Now* are fictions of the Vietnam War," but admitted the viewpoint was his own. "I think all films in a way are manipulative. You have a point of view, you know what you want to say."

His next film *Come See the Paradise* (1990) offered a more plausible picture of the FBI, presenting them rounding up Japanese-Americans for internment during World War Two. This was not the result of any political epiphany after the criticism he had received for *Mississippi Burning*, however, and did not signal any great change in his outlook.

Parker's political nadir came with *The Life of David Gale* (2003), his last feature. In the production notes he spoke of quickly becoming "inured to the function" of the death chamber that supposedly formed the critical content of the movie. As we noted, "Obviously, such a person cannot be

entrusted to produce a work that offers a compelling argument against capital punishment or any other social ill."

Too often his healthy resistance to parochialism led him away from deeper engagement with the conditions underlying what he was showing. He admired British film director Ken Loach but said he could not be so outspoken.

This in effect meant a rejection of any anti-establishment stance. Refused permission to film at the Argentinian presidential palace for *Evita* (1996), he invited the film's star, Madonna, to meetings with President Carlos Menem to clinch the deal.

Although commenting that he was "not making movies for 14 intellectuals at the Cinematheque in Paris [but] films that have to find a wide audience," he did turn down the opportunity to direct several blockbusters. He argued that this was further evidence of him going "against the grain," saying "I've spent my whole life walking in the opposite direction of everybody else."

That, too, operated only within certain limits. He was a very establishment rebel. A chairman of the British Film Institute, he was knighted in 2002. That year he became the first chairman of the UK Film Council, a funding body established by Tony Blair's Labour government to reinvigorate the British film industry.

Typically enough, Parker saw his documentary *A Turnip Head's Guide to the British Cinema* (1985) as an "impolite and anarchic" satirical provocation against "the pomposity, stupidity, pretension and avarice of the film industry—especially the people who comment on and critique it," while still boasting that it "went on to win the Press Guild award for best documentary."

Yet his films' visual qualities, their exuberance, assured touch, even their sometimes-misplaced social instinct, point to something worthwhile and interesting that did not find adequate expression, or rarely. Much of his work is an attempt to make good choices. Yet if Parker is rarely completely satisfying, he remains one of the more entertaining directors to emerge from that difficult period.



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