

12/68

Reel Lives: Biographical Drama on Television at BFI Southbank

With Julia Davis and Charles Dance onstage



During January **BFI Southbank** will take a look at the **Reel Lives** of historical figures and famous personalities who have been the subject of television biographies. From recent Oscar winning films such as **The King's Speech** and **The Iron Lady** to highly anticipated forthcoming releases **Hitchcock** and **Diana**, biographies continue to entertain and intrigue audiences around the world. This season will feature television biographies which take a variety of different approaches in their depiction of 'real lives', embracing people as diverse as composer **George Friedrich Handel** and founder of the NHS **Aneurin Bevan** to James Bond scribe **Ian Fleming** and TV chef **Fanny Craddock**. A season highlight will be a panel discussion **The Biopic Revival** with **Ben Evans** (Executive Producer, ITV), writer **Brian Fillis** (**Fear of Fanny**, *An Englishman in New York*), actress **Julia Davis** (**Fear of Fanny**, *Nighty Night*) and director **Tony Palmer** (**God Rot Tunbridge Wells!** *England, my England*, *The Killing of John Lennon*). We also hope to welcome Director **Don Boyd** and Actor, **Charles Dance** to introduce the biopic of the life of Ian Fleming – **Goldeneye** (Anglia Television, 1989).

Television has always sought to tell the story of real lives. In doing so it has embraced a number of different techniques which are evident in the biographies in this season. One of director Tony Palmer's finest works for television, **God Rot Tunbridge Wells!** (Channel 4, 1985) is an expressionistic version of a life - this biography sees Handel as a now blind and old man looking back and raging against

the injustices of the world. Trevor Griffiths' **Food For Ravens** (BBC 1997) is a beautifully poetic and dreamlike eulogy to the founder of the NHS **Aneurin Bevan**.

Michael Darlow's reimagining of the meeting of **Wilfred Owen** and **Siegfried Sassoon** in hospital during the First World War – **The Fatal Spring** (BBC, 1990) – employs a series of dreamlike visions to reveal images of the poets' innermost feelings and thoughts. This approach contrasts with the more traditional drama-documentary style of the same director's ode to **J.M.W. Turner** **The Sun Is God** (Thames TV, 1974) with its narrative voice-over imparting facts over a series of Turner-esque visuals and dramatic reconstructions.

Also screening will be the inside story of **Alexander Fleming** (BBC, 1970) after his discovery of penicillin – this is a fine example of how drama can be used to humanise and contextualise a great scientific discovery. **Goldeneye** (Anglia Television, 1989) tells the story of the life of *James Bond* scribe **Ian Fleming** in a tremendously informative and entertaining way, with some of the more outrageous exploits of Fleming's life mirroring his most famous creation – 007 himself. We hope to welcome Director **Don Boyd** and Actor, **Charles Dance** to introduce the screening and discuss Fleming the man in relation to his 007 persona.

A recent revival in television biographies can be attributed to the success of BBC Four biopics such as **Fear of Fanny** (BBC, 2006). After this depiction of the life of acerbic TV chef **Fanny Craddock** burst onto our screens in 2006, a series of other biopics swiftly followed including *Enid* (BBC, 2009), *Gracie* (BBC, 2009) and *Frankie Howerd: Rather You Than Me* (BBC, 2008). Following the screening of *Fear of Fanny* there will be a panel discussion **The Biopic Revival** which will look at the many approaches taken to biographical drama on television. The panel will include **Ben Evans** (Executive Producer, ITV), Director **Coky Giedroyc**, writer **Brian Fillis**, and lead actress **Julia Davis**, as well as **God Rot Tunbridge Wells** director **Tony Palmer**.

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Screenings taking place in the season:

God Rot Tunbridge Wells!

Channel Four 1985. Dir Tony Palmer. With Trevor Howard, Dave Griffiths, Christopher Bramwell. 119min

Trevor Howard gives a bravura performance as the now old and blind Handel, looking back at his life and work and raging against the injustices of the world. John Osborne's script takes us on an epic, expressionistic journey from Handel's early life in Germany, his travels in Italy and his triumphs and failures in his beloved adopted country, England. Palmer provides just the right visuals to convey the poetic essence of Handel's life, perhaps best summed up in the line: 'I always drifted towards theatricality, but not at the expense of the truth.' Essential viewing for 'Handelians' everywhere.

Wed 2 Jan 18:00 NFT2

The Fatal Spring

Playhouse. BBC 1980. Dir Michael Darlow. With Charles Dance, David Sibley, Michael Troughton. 76min

Assembling a televisual poem, director Michael Darlow finds the perfect visual metaphors to express writer George Baker's attempts to reach into the souls of the war poets Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon. Set as they recuperate together in an institution, the play clearly defines how their war experiences and friendship shaped their work. It demonstrates just how imaginative the biographical drama can be when freed from a purely linear narrative.

+ The Sun Is God: The Life of J.M.W. Turner

Thames TV 1974. Dir Michael Darlow. With Leo McKern, Roger Chinery, Vivienne Martin. 60min

This more traditional drama-documentary blends voice-over with dramatised scenes to construct an impressionistic view of Turner's life that echoes the style of his paintings. An intelligent script by Darlow and McKern's splendid performance unite to provide an insightful film that reveals the emotional state of the painter.

Fri 4 Jan 18:00 NFT2

Alexander Fleming

Biography. BBC 1970. Dir John Glennister. With Bill Gavin, Rupert Davies, Nancie Jackson, Robert Hartley. 90min

A highlight of the series *Biography*, this is the inside story of Alexander Fleming's discovery of penicillin and the search to refine it into a stable substance that could be used to cure humans. Ian Curteis' script nicely balances the need to impart the facts with creating fully rounded characters out of Fleming, and friend and colleague Sir Almroth Wright, played to perfection by Rupert Davies. A fine example of how drama can be used to humanise and contextualise a great scientific discovery.

Wed 30 Jan 20:40 NFT2

Food For Ravens

BBC 1997. Dir Trevor Griffiths. With Brian Cox, Sinead Cusack, Dean Carey Davies. 85min

Commemorating the centenary of Aneurin Bevan's birth, Trevor Griffiths both wrote and directed this tender and poetic eulogy to the founder of the NHS. As ill-health catches up with him, Bevan re-examines his life, his great speeches in the House and above all his unshakable belief in 'The People'. Griffiths' unsentimental script builds a picture of a complex and great man, while Brian Cox's magnificent performance beautifully conjures the ghosts of the past. A masterclass in the depth the biographical drama can achieve through evoking the memories of one life

Sat 26 Jan 16:10 NFT2

Goldeneye

Anglia Television 1989. Dir Don Boyd. With Charles Dance, Phyllis Logan, Patrick Ryecart, Richard Griffiths. 103min

Based on John Pearson's book *The Life of Ian Fleming*, Reg Gadney's screenplay manages to be both immensely informative and tremendously entertaining, with some of the more outrageous exploits of Fleming's life mirroring his most famous creation – Bond. A darker side to the author emerges – he called his mother 'M' and it was she who noted that he could never fully commit to anyone. The film effortlessly balances the adventurer lifestyle with the deeper intricacies of the man himself, thanks to Boyd's direction and Dance's nuanced performance.

Introduction by Don Boyd and Charles Dance (work permitting)

Mon 14 Jan 17:50 NFT2

Fear of Fanny

BBC 2006. Dir Coky Giedroyc. With Julia Davis, Mark Gatiss, Jason Watkins. 78min

One of the two main productions that marked the revival of the biopic genre on BBC Four (the other being *Kenneth Williams Fantabulosa*) this is a slick and unsentimental look behind the public persona of Fanny Cradock. Adapting from his own stage play, Brian Fillis uses

both humour and acute psychological observation to reveal a complicated figure, riddled with insecurity and ultimately the perpetrator of her own downfall. Julia Davis gives a pitch-perfect performance, catching every acid intent behind those famously barbed comments.

+ Panel Discussion: The Biopic Revival

We hope to welcome **Ben Evans** (Executive Producer, ITV Studios), *Fear of Fanny* writer **Brian Fillis** and lead actor **Julia Davis**, and a director famed for many biographical portraits, **Tony Palmer** (all work permitting – please check BFI website for final panel confirmation) to discuss the many approaches taken to the biographical drama on television.

Fri 11 Jan 18:10 NFT3

NOTES TO EDITORS:

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- Championing emerging and world class film makers in the UK
- Investing in creative, distinctive and entertaining work
- Promoting British film and talent to the world
- Growing the next generation of film makers and audiences

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***** PICTURE DESK *****

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