

## The Boy Friend

Twelve reels are too long to tell such a slim tale, and Sandy Wilson's music, however tuneful, has diminishing returns... Despite the big Busby Berkeley routines, the novelty value of the stage show, the great singing and dancing by the cast...the film was a flop. The acting was too broad, the gags too laboured and the pacing too slow.<sup>1</sup>

This is Ken Russell's own harsh retrospective verdict on his 1972 musical, *The Boy Friend*, coloured perhaps by memories of a fraught production process and subsequent re-edits imposed by the studio. Though generally well received by critics at the time, the film performed poorly at the box office and has had little serious attention since. It has certainly been marginalised in much consideration of the director's work, an incongruity even amongst the output of such a maverick filmmaker, and overshadowed by his more controversial work, a situation exacerbated by its non-availability for many years. However it is a significant film, first within Russell's oeuvre, where it demonstrates many of his skills and enduring preoccupations, touching as it does on issues of authorship and creativity, ideas of performance, and early 20<sup>th</sup> century modernist culture and style. Secondly, in genre terms it is an authentically British musical, rooted in national cultural tropes, and playing on the contrast between Hollywood gloss and British amateurism.

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<sup>1</sup> Ken Russell, *Fire Over England: The British Cinema Comes Under Friendly Fire* (London: Hutchinson, 1993), p.134.

The film was produced in the middle of Russell's most prolific period as a filmmaker: he made ten features from 1967's *Billion Dollar Brain* to *Valentino* a decade later. On its British release in February 1972, *The Boy Friend* joined two other Russell films still running in the West End, *The Music Lovers* and *The Devils*. Beyond the exceptional commercial success that this indicates, and fuelled by the controversy that surrounded his work, Russell also held a high public profile at the time that few British directors have ever equalled.

*The Boy Friend* is based on Sandy Wilson's stage musical of the same name, a small-scale entertainment which became a surprise success in the West End in 1954 and then the following year, on Broadway, where it introduced Julie Andrews to American audiences. Inspired by, and affectionately mocking, the musical comedies of the 1920s, the show concerns the romantic adventures of a group of young English girls at a finishing school in the south of France. Wilson described it as 'a loving salute to those far-off days of the cloche hat and the short skirt, a valentine from one post-war period to another'.<sup>2</sup> Significantly then, the source of Russell's period film is itself a pastiche: a 1950s evocation of the 1920s, re-imagined by him in the 1970s. Nearly 40 years later, the film can perhaps more easily be seen in relation both to its own period, and to contemporaneous ideas of the era it evokes.

MGM had acquired the screen rights to Wilson's show during its Broadway run, then resisted many attempts to film the property, the first, in the 1950s, from the producer Joseph Janni, later a key figure of the British New Wave. The highly successful 1920s-themed musical *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, produced by Universal in 1967 and starring Andrews, was conceived by producer Ross Hunter when MGM refused to

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<sup>2</sup> Sandy Wilson, 'Author's Note', *The Boy Friend: A Play in Three Acts* (Penguin: London, 1959), p.12.

release the property. Russell's production seems to have been initiated by the film's star, the model Twiggy, and her then partner and manager Justin DeVilleneuve, after they saw a West End revival of the show. Greatly influenced by 1920s fashion at the time, Twiggy records in her autobiography that she saw the show with Erté, the Art Deco artist and designer whose work was enjoying a revival in the 1960s and whose stylistic influence can clearly be seen in the film.

As part of the general retreat from Hollywood investment in the UK film industry, MGM had closed its UK production operation Borehamwood in 1970. In March the following year the studio formed a partnership with EMI, EMI-MGM, with *The Boy Friend* among the initial production programme announced. The was budgeted at \$1.7 million, and made for under \$2 million at a time when major studio musicals were costing between \$15 and \$20 million.

Russell retained much of his key creative team from *The Devils*, cinematographer David Watkin, composer Peter Maxwell Davies, and his wife Shirley Russell, the costume designer for all his films of the period. Tony Walton, known for his work on Broadway musicals, was employed as production designer. Many of the director's unofficial repertory of actors were also engaged, including Murray Melvin, Georgina Hale and Vladek Sheybal. In the role of the injured leading lady who Polly (Twiggy) must replace, Russell cast his signature female star of the time, Glenda Jackson, after apparently offering the role to Julie Andrews.

The film was conceived as a diversion after the tortuous production of *The Devils*: 'I thought I would try making a musical film just for fun.' Russell has written. 'But *The Boy Friend* turned out to be the most complicated project that I had ever

attempted...'<sup>3</sup> Twelve weeks were spent filming at the Theatre Royal Portsmouth, later used for *Tommy*, and a further six at Borehamwood Studios. The theatre, which was derelict at the time, provided an atmospheric but challenging location, with rain and birds entering through a hole in the stage roof. Studio production was then hampered by technical limitations, as Russell found the facilities inadequate for the ambitious and spectacular sequences filmed there. There were continuing problems and renegotiations over the budget, the final 'Riviera' number was eventually staged as if being filmed in a movie studio when the planned set could not be built. On the film's completion, there were protracted arguments between director and studio over the final cut. Russell finally acquiesced to a US - release version of 109 minutes (the only cut in circulation for many years), which lost 3 musical sequences and jumbled some subplots, on the guarantee of a longer British cut at 123 minutes.

With the exception of Alexander Walker and Pauline Kael, who shared a deep-seated antipathy to Russell's work, critical response in Britain and America was generally positive. After a considerable publicity build-up promising a major new star, there was much emphasis on Twiggy's performance, which was generally praised. The film was also seen as an unexpectedly successful change of direction for its director after his recent work., with George Melly in *The Observer* declaring that 'the surprising thing is that on almost every level he has succeeded'. Gavin Millar, in *The Listener*, noting the begrudging nature of the praise for the film, felt that 'what has been too little said is that - at moments - *The Boy Friend* does not merely imitate or affectionately parody so much as recapture the brilliance of the originals. There are two or three things here which rival in audacious bezazz the great moments in movie musical history'. The *New Statesman's* John Coleman felt that 'Ken Russell has found

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<sup>3</sup> Ken Russell, quoted in Gene D. Phillips, *Ken Russell* (Boston: Twayne, 1979), p.152.

the perfect objective correlative for his extravagant turn of image'. Among the few real dissenters, Dilys Powell concluded her review with the phrase which would provide John Baxter with the title for his book on Russell: 'the talent is there all right. But somehow it is an appalling talent.'

Often emphasising performance and its construction – 'putting on a show' - the musical form is inherently self-reflexive, and the film emphasises this aspect of the genre, with Wilson's show being staged by a provincial repertory company around 1930, with backstage antagonisms and rivalries sabotaging the production. Much of the tension is triggered by the presence in the audience of Mr De Thrill, a visiting Hollywood director, played by Vladek Sheybal, who had previously played the director of the film-within-a-film in Russell's *Debussy Film*. De Thrill, and various company members, also envision more spectacular versions of some of the show's musical numbers, adding further diegetic layers to the film. The action of the film takes place in real time, beginning at the theatre entrance just before a matinee performance begins, with a brief coda at the stage door after the curtain falls.

The onstage and offstage worlds are skilfully balanced throughout the film, with parallel stories of romantic longing and impersonation. Wilson's pastiche is parodied by Russell, with an arch performance style adopted for the stage scenes which is punctured by moments of low comedy as the failure of the company's aspirations is repeatedly underscored. Twiggy's awkward naturalism and lack of artifice work to critique the pretensions of the players, but also highlight the elitist nostalgia of the original source.

De Thrill's role is of course that of a Russell-stand-in, a director re-imagining and re-staging the performance before him, and an explicitly comic variation of Russell's

tortured creative visionaries. He is mirrored by Max (Max Adrian), the company director, who is rewriting and redirecting the 'live' performance to accommodate his substitute star. Both Max and Polly also enjoy their own reveries, opening up multiple points-of-view of the material and the performance.

Music has been central to most of Russell's work, but he has made only two real musicals, *The Boy Friend* and *Tommy*. In this film, in Barry Keith Grant's words, he 'employs camp as a double-edged sword that simultaneously mocks and celebrates the classic Hollywood musical',<sup>4</sup> and the film is steeped in largely 1930s musical references. The plot device of the understudy forced to replace an injured leading lady, and some of the dialogue, such as Max's exhortation to Polly: 'you're going to go out there as a youngster, you've got to come back a star', are taken from *42<sup>nd</sup> Street*. Two additional songs, are from *Singin' in the Rain*, and most of the fantasy numbers refer to various Busby Berkeley routines of the 1930s, and one by Dave Gould for *Flying Down to Rio*. In generic terms, the film broadly follows backstage musical conventions, though there are 3 'integrated' songs. However the key theme of community is rejected. For Thomas Schatz, the backstage musical resolves 'the tensions between object and illusion, between social reality and utopia' in two ways: 'through the overall plot structure, when the various complications resolve themselves in the production of a flawless show...', and 'when the characters transcend their interpersonal conflicts and express themselves in music and movement.'<sup>5</sup> In this example, the onstage show remains defiantly ragged and tawdry, and animosity and personal ambition override any communal ethos. Only the fantasy sequences suggest

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4 Barry Keith Grant, 'The Body Politic: Ken Russell in the 1980s', in Lester D. Friedman (ed.), *Fires Were Started: British Cinema and Thatcherism* (London: Wallflower Press, 2006), p.184.

5 Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1981), p. 188.

the qualities of transcendence and abundance characteristic of the musical form, and the tone of these numbers shifts between homage and parody.

The film repeatedly underlines the gulf between stage reality and screen artifice, and between British mundanity and Hollywood sheen. The camera often observes the action from the auditorium, emphasising distance, with the awkwardness of the stage action underlined by the clump of footsteps, or, in characteristic Russell framing, moves in close, with harsh underlighting enhancing the grotesquerie of the stage makeup. The evocation of the downmarket theatrical milieu draws on Russell's own early experiences as a dance student and later actor, when he joined the No.3 touring company of *Annie Get Your Gun* and supported Jack Buchanan in *When Knights Were Bold* at Newton Poppleford. An avid filmgoer in his youth, born, he has said with a silver screen in his mouth, Russell's reminiscences of this time show a devotion to Hollywood entertainment and a distaste for most British cinema, which is characterised as dull and bloodless. Just as *The Boy Friend* acknowledges the vigour and inventiveness of Warner Bros musicals of the 1930s, it may also be seen as a rebuke to the more staid world of *The Good Companions*. The perfected world of the Hollywood musical hovers over every British attempt at the genre, and the comedy of the gulf between the two is adroitly built into this film.

The film's period setting is characteristic of Russell's work, his two favoured cultural reference points being 19<sup>th</sup> century Romanticism and 20<sup>th</sup> century modernism. It also accords with a wider revival of interest in 1920s culture at the time of production.

However what we have in this film is a clearly constructed and contradictory sense of the past: we see a show written in the 1950s apparently produced in the 1920s. The presence of a director of film musicals, and the Berkeley references suggest the 30s,

but costuming, design and other details (like a Valentino pin-up) largely point to the earlier decade.

The early 1970s was the era of 'retrochic', a term originating in France to describe film and fashion trends for romanticised evocations of the recent past. In Britain there had been a great revival of interest in Art Nouveau in the 1960s, fostered by hugely successful exhibitions at the Victoria and Albert Museum; one on Aubrey Beardsley in 1966 was the Museum's most attended show to that time. The style was not only rehabilitated by cultural tastemakers, but also appropriated by the young and merged with the aesthetics of psychedelia by the end of the decade, by which time a revival of Art Deco was underway (the term itself was coined at this time). This fusion was perfectly encapsulated by Barbara Hulanicki's Biba brand, which Twiggy was closely identified with at the time of *The Boy Friend*. Phil Baker aptly describes Biba's ideology as 'fraught with contradictions, making elitist tastes and reactionary escapism more democratically accessible than ever before'.<sup>6</sup>

Also evident in this nostalgia was a paradoxical desire to embrace the modernity of the past. Retro, as Elizabeth E Guffy argues 'is suffused with an ambivalent view of Modernity and challenges positivist views of technology, industry and, most of all, progress itself.'<sup>7</sup>

Shirley Russell's contribution to the film's sense of period, and to Ken Russell's work throughout this time, is crucial in rejecting many conventions of retro 1920s styling.

Certainly, the grubby realism of Russell's mise-en-scène, with its suggestions of *Neue*

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<sup>6</sup> Phil Baker, 'Welcome to Big Biba', *The Art Book*, Vol.14, Issue 4, November 2007, p.65.

<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth E. Guffy, *Retro: The Culture of Revival* (London: Reaktion, 2006), p. 13.

*Sachlikeit* painting, owes much to the distinctive use of costume. Sandy Wilson's sketches for the play text suggest the characteristic tone of airy femininity which is conveyed in Twiggy's styling for the film, but Russell's typical costuming, reliant on original clothing and deliberately aged designs, lends a weight and authenticity to the characters.

An interest in 1920s and 1930s styles was expressed in many cultural forms during this time. Film examples include Russell's own *Women in Love* and *Valentino*, and another Lawrence adaptation, *The Virgin and the Gypsy*, as well as *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* and *Murder on the Orient Express*, and from Hollywood, such high-profile films as *The Great Gatsby*, *Cabaret* and *The Sting*. It is the period Fredric Jameson, citing *Chinatown* and *The Conformist*, identifies with the 'nostalgia film' cycle, which 'approached the past through stylistic connotation conveying pastness by the glossy qualities of the image and "1930s-ness" or "1950s-ness" by the attributes of fashion.'<sup>8</sup> Russell's more ambiguous approach, in this film and elsewhere, is to re-present the past in complex way which both foregrounds its construction and ironises ideas of nostalgia and period styling.

This is an underexamined and undervalued film from Russell's heyday, notable especially for the ways in which it contributes to and comments on British musical culture, and for how it reveals both the 1920s and the 1970s to us in striking ways.

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<sup>8</sup> Fredric Jameson, 'The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), p.19.