

Jane Arden and the 1970s

The subject of this paper is Jane Arden. It would be interesting if this session were being held in the studio where 'Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?' is staged so that I could 'ask the audience' to press their buttons if they know who Jane Arden is, or rather was. There was an American actress with this name whose most notable credit was to appear with Al Jolson in 'The Jazz Singer' in 1927, and there is a contemporary British actress called Jane Arden who seems to work mainly in the theatre. If you 'Wikipedia' the name what appears first is an American comic strip which began in the late 1920s and which also became a radio programme until 1939.

The Jane Arden of this paper is, as far as I have been able to discover, the only British woman to direct a feature film in the 1970s. In some ways I'm hoping for a few howls of protest now, because I would happily be wrong. I am aware that in the decades preceding the one we are looking at closely that Wendy Toye and Muriel Box were both successful directors, but both ceased directing for the cinema in the early 1960s. Similarly, the successful Hollywood career of the London born actress Ida Lupino included, from the late 1940s onwards, many feature films as director, but by the time her directing career ended in 1968 she had been working in television for many years.

I am also aware that Laura Mulvey directed features in the 1970s, but she always seems to have co-directed with Peter Woollen. And Sally Potter's directing career began in the late 1970s with shorts but I don't think that she made any feature length films until the following decade. So I come back to my point that Jane Arden's 1972 credit for direction is the only solo credit for a British female film director in the 1970s. So, if Arden's film had been 'Confessions of a Window Cleaner Part 2' it would be of some historical and cultural significance, and no doubt worthy of a chapter in a book by Matthew Sweet. But it wasn't. It was a two and a quarter hour drama starring the distinguished British actress Sheila Allen called 'The Other Side of the Underneath' which explored the harrowing breakdown and subsequent rehabilitation of a woman in contemporary society. It caused a considerable stir at both the Edinburgh and London Film Festivals of 1972, and subsequently in independent cinemas, and was described by the BBC journalist David Will as 'a major breakthrough in British Cinema'.

He went on, 'It is certainly not inconceivable that the ideological struggles of women's liberation will be reflected in a rejection of the traditional modes of cinematic expression. Be that as it may, 'The Other Side of the Underneath' is a shattering experience'.

Michael Billington described it as 'much the most ambitious, challenging British experimental film since 'Herostratus'' (which I'm afraid I'm not familiar with) and George Melly called it 'a most illuminating season in hell'. Perhaps most promising of all, the Guardian film critic Derek Malcolm hated it, but he did say at the end of his review, 'at least you sit up and take notice while clenching your teeth'.

It sounds, for a number of reasons, very much like what we would now call a 'landmark movie', and I really wish I could show some of it to you; I will come back to it later.

Jane Arden made two more films in the 1970s, 'Vibration' (1974), and 'Anti-Clock', which opened the 1979 London Film Festival, but both of these were co-directed with her close associate Jack Bond. Her story does not have a happy ending: she was found dead at the remote North Yorkshire farmhouse Hindlethwaite Hall on December 20th 1982.

I need to be a bit anecdotal for a while here. As a student in the late 1970s I could seldom afford to travel from Lincoln to London, but one of the great pleasures in life was browsing the National Film Theatre monthly programme, looking at stills from films that I had little chance of seeing at the time. A few of them were shown at Lincoln Film Society, which was great, and at that time BBC 2 was doing a good job introducing us to, amongst others, Tarkovsky and Herzog, and they even showed John Boorman's great lost '70s masterpiece 'Leo the Last'. But the NFT Programme was an education in itself, and there, amongst the stills from Eisenstein, Antonioni, Bunuel, and Cocteau, were intriguing and often disturbing images from films by Jane Arden. As these films failed to turn up locally or on TV they were filed under 'must-see-sometime', preferably soon.

So I was dismayed by the July 1983 NFT programme which gave notice of a tribute to Jane Arden. I somehow knew that one of the stills I had been fascinated by was of Jane Arden herself, and I now know that it was from the 1967 film 'Separation' which she wrote and starred in, so it was sad to discover that this striking, intense-looking woman was now dead.

Subsequent attempts to find out more about Jane Arden and her films proved to be extremely difficult, and this continued for many years (and I need to shorten this part of the story drastically). In view of its radical and challenging brief I naively expected the newly established Channel 4 to come up with a Jane Arden season sooner or later, particularly after they had screened an excellent documentary about Maya Deren, but I'm still waiting. Endless searchings through the indexes of books on the cinema revealed nothing. I found no reference books on British Cinema which mentioned her and nobody who I asked seemed to know anything about her. My search gained added impetus in the early 1990s when the A. Level syllabus I was teaching added the topic of 'Women and Film' to its options, but even when I got the chance to speak to the person who I believe had initiated this topic I got the same blank look; she clearly didn't have a clue who I was talking about. This was particularly painful as I'd had to sit through a long presentation on Jane Campion's 'The Piano' to get a chance to speak to her. So, until approximately two years ago I was left with three theories:

- 1) Jane Arden had never existed and I had merely imagined her. I know that this sounds plainly silly but I honestly did wonder about that occasionally. I felt a bit like Margaret Lockwood in 'The Lady Vanishes' in her search for Miss Froy.
- 2) Jane Arden had upset a lot of people, particularly those whose are variously in charge of the preservation and evaluation of our cultural history and there was a general dislike and disregard for her which had led to her being airbrushed from the national memory banks. This too seemed rather unlikely, but I was clutching at straws.
- 3) Jane Arden was a rather insignificant, obscure artist who had somehow managed to scratch together enough money to make a couple of low-budget independent features and had quickly faded from view.

Of course, the last of these does sound vaguely feasible, and it was the only explanation which seemed likely for a long time, but I now know that it is as wide of the mark as the others. But I do have to say here that the mystery of Jane Arden's invisibility deepened significantly when I at last began to find out more about her approximately two years ago. Her story, and in particular the neglect her work has endured, would indeed

make more sense if she had done very little and made a negligible impact during her lifetime. But this is significantly not the case as even a brief account of her career will show.

Before I do that I must acknowledge a debt. Just under two years ago, in the Arnolfini Bookshop in Bristol, I picked up the then new reference work 'Film Directors in Britain and Ireland' edited by Robert Murphy, turned as usual to the 'A' section (normally the index but here, because of the structure of the book, in the body of the text), expecting to find the usual nothing at all, and yet there was a two page entry on Jane Arden written by Robert Murphy and Geoff Brown. It was quite a shock after years of finding virtually nothing, although even here Ms Arden's entry had to be shared with her associate Jack Bond. There was even a picture of her which seemed to cement the notion that she was, after all, a real person. With this in mind, and in the light of subsequent research, here are the biographical and career details which will lead back to Jane Arden in the 1970s.

Jane Arden was born in Pontypool in South Wales in 1927. She moved to London in her teens and trained as an actor at RADA. She appeared in a television production of 'Romeo and Juliet' in 1947 and then appeared in two British crime thrillers, firstly, again in 1947, in Oswald Morris's 'Black Memory' – which was also Sid James's first screen credit as 'Sydney James' – and then in the following year 'A Gunman Has Escaped', directed by Richard M. Grey. Both films are in the National Film Archive but the copy of the latter is incomplete.

This potential starlet career gave way to Arden's ambition to write, and in the early 1950s she made the first of a number of inspirational visits to America. She also found the time to marry the actor Philip Saville, who soon morphed into the distinguished television writer and director Philip Saville, and to write the play 'Conscience and Desire, and Dear Liz'. During the 1950s she became the mother of two sons.

In October 1955 her TV comedy 'Curtains For Harry', starring Bobby Howes, Sidney Tafler and Joan Simms and co-written with Philip Saville and Richard Lester, was one of the first programmes to be broadcast by the newly formed ITV network.

Her 1958 play 'The Party' was directed by Charles Laughton in his last appearance on the London stage; co-incidentally this production was Albert Finney's first London stage appearance. In the following year her television drama 'The Thug' provided Alan Bates with his first screen

role. (Although it is possible that he appeared earlier but uncredited in a now lost television Shakespeare production).

It seems that Arden's trips to America led to friendships with emerging iconic figures like Bob Dylan and, later, Leonard Cohen, and contact with the former seems to have led to Dylan's first British television appearance in the now-lost cult drama 'Madhouse on Castle Street' directed by Philip Saville.

In addition to her writing Arden herself continued to act on stage and screen. A notable performance was alongside Harold Pinter in a 1964 BBC production of Sartre's 'In Camera'. On a personal note, when I emailed my oldest sister in Australia with a draft of my first article on Arden she emailed me back saying, 'I remember Jane Arden as an actress but I had no idea that she had done all this other stuff'.

The first real example of Arden's more radical preoccupations are in evidence in her 1965 television play 'The Logic Game' which examines the game-playing at work within a troubled marriage. It was the first BBC drama to be shot on film. Similar themes were explored much further in the 1967 film 'Separation', directed by Jack Bond, which, like 'The Logic Game', Arden wrote and starred in, alongside the British actor David de Keyser. The setting was so-called 'Swinging London' and the music was by Procol Harum.

Between these two films Arden appeared in a fascinating 50 minute arts documentary called 'Dali in New York', also directed by Jack Bond, in which she wanders around New York bravely trying to hold a serious conversation with the Spanish surrealist painter while he takes an ocelot on a lead for a walk, amongst other things. Interestingly, the executive producer of the film was Melvin Bragg, and it was a welcome revival at last year's Dali Exhibition at Tate Modern.

Around this time Arden also made several appearances on the ground-breaking satirical programme 'That Was The Week That Was' where she provided witty commentaries on various contemporary issues.

On the eve of the 1970s Arden's increasingly radical feminist style and preoccupations found expression in her darkly carnivalesque play 'Vagina Rex and the Gas Oven' which ran to packed houses for six weeks at the Arts Lab on Drury Lane. The production, which starred Victor Spinetti and Sheila Allen, featured strobe lights, back projection and other multimedia effects in the style of a rock concert. In the section

on the Arts Lab in his mammoth study 'The Sixties', the late Arthur Marwick says,

'Perhaps the most important single production there was 'Vagina Rex and the Gas Oven' by the writer, director and actress Jane Arden...this alternatively surreal and mystical montage explored a woman's attempt to come to terms with her own sense of inferiority imposed on her by society'.

The 1970s for Jane Arden should have begun at the Roundhouse with a production of her play 'The Illusionist', starring, allegedly, Peter Sellars; but apparently it didn't. I have not yet found out why. Instead Arden founded the radical women's theatre group 'Holocaust' and wrote a play with the same name. By this time she was well and truly versed in the ideas of the anti-psychiatry movement and particularly the works of R.D. Laing and Thomas Szasz. It was this play which Arden herself adapted for the cinema in 1972 as 'The Other Side of the Underneath'. In keeping with the anti-psychiatry perspective it dramatises, partly through startling fantasy scenes, the mental life of a woman labelled schizophrenic, placing the blame squarely on society's repressions and taboos.

After the play but before the film, in 1971, the Holocaust group found time to stage another Arden play 'The New Communion For Freaks, Prophets and Witches'. There are reports around this time of the beginnings of Arden's frustration at being misunderstood by critics and audiences, and after 'The Other Side of the Underneath', which failed to find widespread distribution, there are clear signs that she controversially moves on from the feminist movement. Her position evolves into the view that it isn't just women who need liberating but everyone, as this statement on the Women's Movement from an interview in the Guardian suggests,

'It's been no more than a tiny squeak when you look at the results. Women have been fighting for a piece of the male cake when in fact it is a terrible, bum, cake which nobody should have to eat anyway...my advice to people (is) to explore all possibilities for mobilising your energy.'

Jane Arden, like the comparable figure of Maya Deren in the Americas, had a lifelong interest in other cultures and belief systems and travelled widely, and by the mid 1970s her spiritual questing had gained renewed impetus. In Morocco in 1974 she and Jack Bond made the film 'Vibration' which Geoff Brown and Robert Murphy have described as

‘an exercise on meditation utilising experimental film and video techniques’. She then published an extraordinary book of prose poetry called ‘You Don’t Know What You Want, Do You?’ which she supported with public readings and discussions. (Here is a copy). Her clear target by this time was the tyranny of the rational mind which she calls simply ‘Rat’. The book has been compared to R.D. Laing’s ‘Knots’, and it is arguably more a provocative theatrical monologue than a poetry book.

Some of the ideas from the book are explored in her last completed film, again co-directed with Jack Bond, called ‘Anti-Clock’, which, as was said earlier, opened the 1979 London Film Festival. The film again mixes film and video to dramatise a young man’s attempt to break free of the conditioning which has inhibited his thoughts and perceptions. It dispenses with normal narrative techniques and the original version featured soundtrack songs written and performed by Arden herself. If it had to be placed in a genre it would fit most comfortably on the science fiction shelf, but definitely Ballard or Lem rather than Asimov.

As we move into the next decade, and beyond the focus of this conference, the next three years ultimately lead to the tragic events in the isolated farm house in Coverdale in December 1982. Jane Arden’s quest for fulfilment seems to have hit some major obstacles and, sadly, the verdict was suicide.

The 1970s blessed us with some wild, radical and visionary art, as this conference is admirably demonstrating. Listening to some of the extraordinary early 70s music of, for example, the Edgar Broughton Band it seems amazing now that they were contracted to a major record label like EMI. And in the cinema we have some extraordinary British films being rightfully celebrated here like ‘The Devils’ and ‘O Lucky Man’, and others which are not, like Sidney Lumet’s powerful ‘The Offence’, ‘Zardoz’ (what can I say?) and Chris Petit’s brilliant ‘Radio On’, which seems to me to bring the 70s to an atmospheric, black and white ending; but everything obviously can’t be included. But in the light of these and many more, we might easily have borrowed, and altered slightly, Matthew Sweet’s title for the opening chapter of his excellent book ‘Shepperton Babylon’ and subtitled this conference not ‘Strange England’ but ‘Strange Britain’. I don’t think the 70s fascination for ley lines and ancient sites has been addressed at this conference but we might equally have borrowed the title of Janet and Colin Bord’s seminal book, which at one time, everyone seemed to have a copy of, ‘Mysterious Britain’.

Frustratingly, Jane Arden is at present far more mysterious than she should be, and there is an urgent need to rewrite our cultural histories to include her; she is an important figure in this decade, and preceding ones, and yet she has somehow got lost. In connection with Chris Petit, in his book 'Rodinsky's Room', Iain Sinclair said,

'(He) shared my belief that any official map of the culture, at any time, would always fail to include vital features'.

Exactly.

And in connection with their film 'The Perimeter Fence' Sinclair went on,

'The idea is that there's an official enclosure of culture, and certain figures have drifted off into the badlands beyond, and we're going into the territory to get them back'.

That, humbly, is what I'm trying to do here, and no doubt this aim is at least partly shared by other delegates at this conference in connection with their own topics.

I could conclude by saying where Jane Arden's films actually are, or, in some cases, where they PROBABLY are, and who may or may not be in charge of them, but that would be another talk rather than a conclusion; the situation, I have discovered, is very complicated and, at present, delicately balanced, alarmingly so in some ways – you may have noticed that I referred earlier to the 'original' version of 'Anti-Clock'. Ultimately, the aim would be to enable anyone to walk into their local megastore to buy the Jane Arden DVD box set and then afterwards to call at Waterstones to buy her complete poetry and plays, but unfortunately we are a long way from that at present. If you do a search on Amazon it will reveal just how difficult things currently are. In the meantime, if you have been interested in my talk you'll be pleased to know that last year the film editor Tracy Granger, who has a family connection to Ms Arden, set up an excellent My Space site dedicated to her life and work. It can be found at www.myspace.com/janeardendotcom. I can't recommend this enough, even if your interest at present is only vague; if a My Space site can be a masterpiece then this emphatically is one.

Mr. Jack Bond is, apparently, currently in the process of writing the autobiography of his film and television career, and I'm looking forward

to that immensely. I'm also looking forward to making a trip later in the year to Darlington West Cemetery in Teeside to pay my respects at the grave of the remarkable Jane Arden. Having seen a photograph of the grave I can confirm that it says, simply, 'Jane Arden: 1927-82: Poet'.

Thankyou.