



THE ARBOR

Spring
Season
2011

Dir: Clio Barnard; starring: Christine Bottomley, Neil Dudgeon, Robert Emms, Natalie Gavin, Manjinder Virk
By Sukhdev Sandhu, *The Telegraph*:

The Arbor, by Clio Barnard, is a remarkable film: conceptually acute, brilliantly realised, impossibly sad. It explores the life and legacy of Andrea Dunbar, a hard-drinking working-class Bradfordian who died in 1990 at the age of 29, by which time she had written three plays which, in their bareknuckle social settings, caustic intelligence, and grimy vitality, were the link between Shelagh Delaney's *A Taste of Honey* (1958) and Paul Abbott's TV series *Shameless*. They were performed at the Royal Court Theatre and in 1986 one of them, the autobiographical *Rita, Sue and Bob Too*, was made into a film by Alan Clarke.

Dunbar's upbringing, like those of many other residents on the Buttershaw Estate where she grew up, was difficult. Her environment nourished her art, but it didn't equip her to deal with life. It turns out that her eldest daughter, Lorraine, whose father was an errant Pakistani, and who recalls that as a young child she overheard her mother say that she wished she'd never given birth to her, has also struggled.

Bleak episodes darken her testimony here: of becoming a heroin addict, turning to prostitution, being beaten up by a psychotic boyfriend, of being sent to jail after her young child overdosed on methadone.



Lorraine's words, like those of her younger sister Lisa, as well as other people who knew Andrea Dunbar, are lip-synched by professional actors. This helps to protect their identities, but it also serves, usefully I think, to distinguish Barnard's film from the emotional pornography peddled by many modern-day reality television shows. Painful stories are interlaced with archival footage of Dunbar, as well as documentation of an outdoor restaging of her first play, *The Arbor*, on the Butterworth Estate to an audience of its residents.

The performers, especially Manjinder Virk as Lorraine, far from coming across as puppets, powerfully convey the pummelled humanity of their real-life characters. There's no attempt to offer consolation: "If mum wrote the play now," Lorraine observes, "Rita and Sue would be

smackheads."

In recent times only Michael Apter's ongoing *7-Up* series has depicted the ongoing genealogies of social exclusion with such rigour and subtle tenderness.

Peter Bradshaw, *The Guardian*:

Verbatim theatre is a new form of contemporary political drama, in which the proceedings of some hearing or trial are reconstituted word-for-word on stage, acted out by performers. Now artist and film-maker Clio Barnard has experimentally and rather brilliantly applied this technique to the big screen, ventriloquising the past with a new kind of "verbatim cinema". She has journeyed back 30 years with a movie about the late Andrea Dunbar – dramatist and author of *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* – who, physically weakened by alcoholism, died in 1990 of a brain haemorrhage aged 29.

Dunbar came from that part of Bradford's tough Buttershaw estate known as "the Arbor". Barnard has interviewed Dunbar's family, friends and grownup children and then got actors to lip-synch to the resulting audio soundtrack, talking about their memories. Passages of Dunbar's autobiographical plays are acted out in the open spaces of the very estates where she grew up, surrounded by the (presumably real) residents looking on. The effect is eerie and compelling: it merges the texture of fact and fiction. Her technique produces a hyper-real intensification of the pain in Dunbar's work and in her life, and the tragic story of how this pain was replicated, almost genetically, in the life of her daughter Lorraine, who suffered parental neglect as a child and domestic violence and racism in adult life, taking refuge in drugs in almost the same way that Andrea took refuge in alcohol. The story of Lorraine's own child is almost unbearably sad, and the experience of this child's temporary foster-parents – who were fatefully persuaded to release the child back into Lorraine's care – is very moving.

Dunbar's story, and her success as a teenage playwright in Max Stafford-Clark's Royal Court, challenges a lot of what we assume about gritty realist theatre or literature from the tough north. In many cases, it is produced by men whose gender privileges are reinforced by university, and who have acquired the means and connections to forge a stable career in writing. However grim their plays or novels, there is a kind of unacknowledged, extra-textual optimism: the author, at least, has got out, has made it. Dunbar hadn't got out; she did not have the aspirational infrastructure of upward mobility. In the end, she was left with precisely those problems she depicted. Barnard has created a modernist, compassionate biopic: a tribute to her memory and her embattled community.

Dave Calhoun, Time Out:

I hesitate to call this fascinating, slippery film an 'experimental documentary' in case it sends people who would otherwise enjoy its storytelling trickery and moving subject running for *Paranormal Activity 2*. It's true that Clio Barnard revisits the life of the late playwright Andrea Dunbar, who wrote *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* in the mid-'80s, by going back, journalistically, to her old Bradford stomping-ground, the hard-as-nails Buttershaw Estate.

But once she gets there, Barnard re-enacts scenes from Dunbar's first play with actors, and instead of filming interviewees (Dunbar's relatives, mainly) she records their voices and asks actors to play them in locations that suggest varying degrees of realism and – this is the interesting bit – lip-synch to their words. We see archive footage from Dunbar's spell in the media spotlight, but, even then, Barnard sometimes frames that footage fictionally, such as beaming it through a modern television.

Dunbar wrote her first play, 'The Arbor', in the late 1970s when she was just 15, and three years later Max Stafford-Clark, another of Barnard's interviewees, staged it at the Royal Court. Dunbar's writing reflected the intrigues and hardships of the estate around her, and a mixed-race relationship in 'The Arbor' reflected her relationship with the father of her eldest daughter, Lorraine. Of all her interviewees, it's Lorraine in whom Barnard takes the most interest as the young woman relates her saddening experiences as a junkie, prostitute and single mother.

Barnard likes to explore connections over time, both biographical and literary, so while she identifies an unbroken line between Lorraine and her mother when it comes to their plain speaking, she also draws links between Dunbar's work and her own by restaging scenes from 'The Arbor' on Brafferton Arbor, the square that gave the play its name. She also acknowledges the influence of another play on her film: in 2000, Stafford-Clark commissioned *A State Affair*, a play about the Buttershaw and Dunbar's legacy. Not only does Barnard pick up where *A State Affair* left off, but her lip-synching technique bears comparison to the play's method of actors speaking the words of real interviewees.

The effect of the lip-synching scenes is like watching a subversive spin on the domesticity of Aardman's *Creature Comforts*, for which cosy kitchen or living room scenes take on an air of mystery, an aura compounded by some of the tragic turns of Dunbar's life. The actors are puppets of sorts, reminders of the hands behind the film, and the impossibility of miming perfectly reminds us that they're reporting, not reconstructing.

It's all very crafty, suggestive and enthralling. Best of all, Barnard's strange method manages to be both questioning and coherent: the very fabric of the film admits that Barnard can only offer us versions of 'the truth', but those versions are still convincing and often staggeringly moving.