

## Lindsay Anderson

The Changing Room

17<sup>th</sup> February – 31<sup>st</sup> March 2007

Bullish, arrogant, self-styled outsider, all should add up to make some pretty hateful personality traits and stop us looking to look at letters and other ephemera as part of an exhibition. But in the great tradition of brawling British boundary breakers Lindsay Anderson always seems to have pulled it off. This is attributable, at least in part, to his relentlessly impassioned voice as filmmaker, critic and theatre director. His demanding nature and slightly unbelievable self-confidence reminds me a lot of the endlessly astounding and contradictory writer B.S. Johnson. Both sought new forms for their work with something bordering on mania, the results both startlingly new and disarmingly flawed. It makes you wonder what Johnson would have made of the eighties that Anderson lived to see and lived, in part, to hate; the Falklands folly and the questioning and self-loathing of every thinker who had previously felt comfortable with the tag 'British'.

When he committed himself to his *Britannia Hospital* project in the early part of that decade he could already anticipate the reception, 'it is a stubborn repetition of ideas which have already proved unpopular, unwelcome to all except an increasingly shrinking minority'. This year, when British cinema is experiencing one of its supposed revivals (more like another hearty coughing fit from a terminal patient than a revival), we would do well to look back to people like Anderson. At a lecture at the Edinburgh Film Festival in 1993 he pointed to the pull of big production budgets when discussing *This Sporting Life*. As a result of the perceived 'swinging London' the, 'Americans, God bless them, put up a lot of money and the British made a lot of bad films'. Sound familiar?

If this all seems a little exclusive, it probably is. What cannot be taken away from is that Anderson made some seriously good films. What this exhibition allows is a view into the workings of the relationships Anderson had with other notables and his work as editor on his respected *Sequence* magazine. His relationships with playwrights seemed to be some of the most life affirming. In a letter of 1969 Harold Pinter spoke fondly of *IF*.... when he said, 'it really is a magnificent f\*\*\*ing film'. It makes you wonder if this kind of letter writing still happens, carefully typewritten sheets composed as if the author had posterity in mind for their searching and often argumentative commentary.

The curatorial scheme at work throws in some contrary touches of its own, again fitting in some distant way. On entering the gallery there is, behind glass, a number of bookshelves crammed with books. They are all from Anderson's collection and are apparently annotated and apparently particularly when he disagreed with the writer. Closed and in disorderly ranks you can only imagine what these comments might be but the books do concur with the general autodidact shtick of the 'great man'. To follow there is a fairly conventional room worth of ephemera, so far so normal, but the lower level space has a rationale all of its own. Here we get material related to one scene from *O! Lucky Man*. The man (Malcolm McDowell, familiar to most from *A Clockwork Orange*) retrieves his 'lucky' suit from a car shortly before it explodes. This shot is looped on a monitor so we have this slightly obscure act replayed in the background as you look at some production shots of the movie. Among them are a trance-like image of a film crew on a smouldering hillside and, that staple of British film and television, a muddy quarry.

There is something admirable and ludicrous at once in that scene and it seems as good a scene as any to make an example of. The pace, environment and weird narrative non

sequitur are all good pointers to an understanding of Anderson. The necessarily compact show is a glimpse into what must be an enormous mountain of material in the University of Stirling's Lindsay Anderson Collection (to give it its official title). As much as Anderson courted fierce debate he also seemed endlessly surprised by his brushes with the mainstream, encounters that were reason enough to stick to his guns. As he said of his ill-fated Wham! Documentary (yes that Wham!), 'I was not prepared for the incredible waste, silliness, lack of conscience, ignorance, lack of grace, lack of scruple, egoism, weakness, duplicity and hypocrisy which have characterised the whole operation'. If George Michael ever lightens up on the rights to this project we may get another glimpse of Anderson at his most compromised, a valuable indicator of what made his freer works so good.