

The Complete Dennis Potter: Messages for Posterity

Part 3: Faith & Redemption (June)

Part 4: Sex & Death (July)



With onstage appearances from: actors Brian Blessed, Alison Steadman, Janet Suzman, Kika Markham, directors Gareth Davies, Renny Rye, Jon Amiel and Robert Knights, producers Kenith Trodd, Jonathan Powell and Betty Willingale, Reverend Giles Fraser, critic Philip Purser, writer Ian Greaves

Friday 15 May 2015, London

Following two months of screenings in 2014, the BFI's definitive complete canon of **Dennis Potter** commemorating 20 years since the writer's death, concludes at BFI Southbank with screenings on the theme of '**Faith & Redemption**' in June and '**Sex & Death**' in July, featuring screenings of some of his most famous works including *Blackeyes* (BBC, 1989), *Son of Man* (BBC, 1969) and his masterpiece *The Singing Detective* (BBC, 1986), which will be screened in its entirety. **Dennis Potter** (17 May 1935 – 7 June 1994) is generally acknowledged as Britain's greatest and most innovative TV writer. He produced a body of work specifically for television that redefined TV drama, daring to challenge both commissioners' and viewers' perceptions of the format. **Ken Trodd**, who was Potter's producer for most of his career and who is co-curator of the *Messages for Posterity* season - says '*what Dennis left is an enormous, daunting, inviting and revealing feast of brilliance. I'm still astonished by the freshness and originality of it all. Tune in, watch, and feel yourself grow!*'

These screenings build a picture of a complex man of great conviction, a man who passionately believed in the power of TV drama.

PART 3 – FAITH & REDEMPTION

The plays chosen for Part 3 of the season in June – on the theme of faith and redemption – indicate Potter's very personal and particular faith, something which he addresses in the candid *Anno Domini Interview* (BBC, 1977). Potter's *Son of Man* (BBC, 1969) humanises the figure of Jesus and provides dialogue that is direct and modern; this screening will be followed by a discussion on the wider issue of faith within Potter's writing with actor **Brian Blessed** (Peter in *Son of Man*) director **Gareth Davies**, producer **Ken Trodd**, critic **Philip Purser**, writer **Ian Greaves** and **Reverend Giles Fraser**. Potter also displayed an affinity with the stories of Thomas Hardy and F Scott Fitzgerald and we will

explore his often neglected skill as an adaptor. Following a screening of Fitzgerald's *Tender Is the Night* (BBC, Showtime Entertainment, Seven Network Australia, 1985) Exec Producer **Jonathan Powell** and producer **Betty Willingale**, director **Robert Knights** will discuss Potter's skill as an adaptor. Further adaptations being screened include Hardy's *Wessex Tales: A Tragedy of Two Ambitions* (BBC, 1973) and *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (BBC, 1978) and *Christabel* (BBC, 1988), based on *The Past is Myself* by Christabel Bielenberg, and depicting the marriage of a privileged Englishwoman to a German in 1934 amid disapproval from her family and the rise of Nazism.

Film adaptations of Potter's work will include *Gorky Park* (1983) starring William Hurt and Lee Marvin, Alain Renais' *Same Old Song* (1997) and biography *Mesmer* (1993) starring Alan Rickman as the 18th-century Viennese physician Franz Anton Mesmer. The season will also screen a number of illuminating documentaries including *The Southbank Show: Dennis Potter: Man of Television* (ITV, 1978), *Dennis Potter: A Life in Television* (BBC, 1994) and *Between Two Rivers* (BBC, 1960), a fascinating documentary which sees Potter return to his home town – Berry Hill in the Forest of Dean – voicing his fears for the loss of individuality and community spirit in the face of bland commercialism.

PART 4 – SEX & DEATH

The final part of the complete canon of Dennis Potter will examine his complex attitudes towards sex and women, and his relationship with death. Work screening in July includes plays which occasionally courted controversy - such as the sensational ending in *Double Dare* (BBC, 1976) or the depiction of women in *Blackeyes* (BBC, 1989) – but they were always dazzling in their originality and execution. Screening in full will be Potter's masterpiece *The Singing Detective* (BBC, 1986): elements of psychological thriller and film noir are brought together with familiar themes of sexual guilt and writer's block in this incredible journey into the inner psyche of Philip Marlow (Michael Gambon) as he lies stricken by extreme psoriasis, a debilitating condition that Potter himself suffered. In entering Marlow's feverish mind, Potter creates some of the most memorable images and routines ever realised in TV drama. The screening will be followed by a panel with actors **Alison Steadman**, **Janet Suzman** and **Jon Amiel** (via Skype) and producer **Ken Trodd**. Also screening will be the Hollywood remake of *The Singing Detective* (2003) starring Robert Downey Jr, in which the British setting is replaced by 50s LA. Also in the programme is *Midnight Movie* (Screen Two BBC, 1993), starring Jim Carter as a provincial lawyer obsessed with an old B-movie sex symbol, and *Casanova* (BBC, 1971), starring Frank Finlay – Potters finely nuanced Casanova is a complex mix of sexual philanderer and philosopher, searching for salvation as he grows old.

Death is understandably ever-present in a number of Potter's works – by the time of writing *Karaoke* (BBC-Channel 4, 1996) and *Cold Lazarus* (Channel 4-BBC, 1996) Potter knew he had just months to live. He was also remarkably frank in his last ever interview *Without Walls Special: An Interview with Dennis Potter* (Channel 4, 1994). In the interview he revealed much about his life and fears, and pleaded for the protection of something he believed in so passionately: the power of the television play. It's a testament to his stature as a writer that the BBC and Channel Four made an agreement with Potter to work together to produce *Karaoke* and *Cold Lazarus* after his death, and recognition that Potter had changed TV drama (a form that mattered to him so deeply) irrevocably.

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NOTES TO EDITORS

Press Contacts:

Liz Parkinson – Press Officer, BFI Southbank
liz.parkinson@bfi.org.uk / 020 7957 8918

SCREENING IN THE SEASON:

Son of Man

BBC 1969. Dir Gareth Davies. With Colin Blakely, Robert Hardy, Bernard Hepton, Brian Blessed. 90min

Potter's great achievement is to humanise the figure of Jesus and provide dialogue that's earthy, direct and modern, allowing Colin Blakely to bring an immediacy to Potter's Christ – a man riven with self doubt and possible delusion. The question 'Is this the messiah?' is left hanging in the air even as Jesus the man hangs on the cross.

+ Discussion with actor Brian Blessed, director Gareth Davies, the Reverend Giles Fraser, critic Philip Purser, writer Ian Greaves and producer Kenith Trodd

TRT 50min

Our distinguished panel will discuss *Son of Man* and the wider issue of faith within Potter's writing alongside a clip from Potter's 1977 *Anno Domini Interview*.

TUE 2 JUN 18:10 NFT3

Insights into Potter: The Southbank Show: Dennis Potter: Man of Television + intro by producer Kenith Trodd

ITV 1978. With Melvyn Bragg, Dennis Potter. 30min

In this revealing interview with Melvyn Bragg, Potter discusses his belief in what television drama should achieve and his desire for his work to reflect the 'structure, shape and responses to people's lives.'

+ Thirty-Minute Theatre: Emergency Ward 9

BBC 1966. Director Gareth Davies. With Terence de Marney, Tenniel Evans, Dan Jackson. 30min

Long thought lost and only recently rediscovered, this is an ironic riff on programmes like *Emergency Ward 10*. Potter's live play for TV displays so many of the themes that were to later blossom in his work – from a questioning of faith, the nature of death and the afterlife, to the British obsession with class – with banter that pre-echoes his later masterpiece *The Singing Detective*.

+ Dennis Potter: A Life in Television

BBC 1994. Producer Roger Parsons. Reporter Kevin Jackson. 60min

Transmitted as a tribute on the night of his death, this detailed documentary features those who knew and worked with Potter (Alan Yentob, Melvyn Bragg, Trevor Griffiths, Alan Plater, Michael Grade, Kenith Trodd), building a highly nuanced picture of a complex man and the significance of his work.

THU 4 JUN 20:10 NFT2

The Mayor of Casterbridge

BBC 1978. Dir David Giles. With Alan Bates, Anne Stallybrass, Janet Maw, Anna Massey, Jack Galloway. Eps 1-3 (155min), interval (15min), Eps 4-5 (105min), interval (40min), Eps 6-7 (105min)

Potter brilliantly elucidates the dark fatalism of Hardy's classic novel and displays his great skill in adaptation by remaking the literary work as an excellent TV drama series. Alan Bates is superb as the man who drunkenly sells his wife and eventually becomes Mayor, only for his past to destroy him, and Anne Stallybrass imbues the long-suffering wife with a great dignity that's very moving. This was one of the first period dramas to be shot entirely on location on videotape, which lends it an intimacy and a sense of authenticity.

Tickets £16, concs £12 (Members pay £1.70 less)

SAT 6 JUN 13:15 NFT2

Between Two Rivers

BBC 1960. Dirs Anthony de Lotbiniere, Dennis Potter. 30min

Potter often drew inspiration from his childhood and in this documentary, from early on in his career, he pays homage to his home town – Berry Hill in the Forest of Dean. He voices fears for the loss of individuality and community spirit in the face of ever-encroaching bland commercialism and an apathy spread by consumerism.

+ A Beast With Two Backs

BBC 1968. Dir Lionel Harris. With Patrick Barr, Terence Sowards, Roger Gartland, Anthony Andrews. 71min

A travelling entertainer and his tame dancing bear arrive in town the same night as the local prostitute is murdered in the woods. Suspicion and gossip begin to tear the community apart through a toxic combination of religious zeal and hysteria – with Potter implying that the beast within man is to be feared far more than a hapless dancing bear.

TUE 9 JUN 20:40 NFT2

Tender Is the Night

BBC-Showtime Entertainment-Seven Network Australia. By arrangement with Twentieth Century Fox. Dir Robert Knights. With Peter Strauss, Mary Steenbergen, Sean Young. Eps 1-3 (165min), interval (45min), Eps 4-5 (110min), interval (15min), Ep6 (55min)

Brilliant, young and handsome psychiatrist Dick Diver (Strauss) falls for his mysterious patient Nicole (Steenbergen) who's haunted by memories of sexual abuse. In doing so, he sacrifices his own career, and the marriage that follows becomes his prison but an essential part of her cure. Potter's adaptation captures the tone of Fitzgerald's novel perfectly and conveys the sense of waste in lavish lives lived with no sense of purpose.

+ Discussion with director Robert Knights, exec producer Jonathan Powell, producer Betty Wellingale and producer Kenith Trodd

TRT 50min

Join us for a discussion on Potter's great talent in adapting other authors' work, alongside a fine selection of clips.

Tickets £16, concs £12 (Members pay £1.70 less)

SAT 13 JUN 13:00 NFT3

Follow the Yellow Brick Road

BBC 1972. Dir Alan Bridges. With Denholm Elliott, Billie Whitelaw, Michele Dotrice, Dennis Waterman. 69min

Potter described this as 'essentially and passionately, a religious play.' Denholm Elliott gives a riveting performance as an actor with creeping paranoia, convinced that his life is a play and the dialogue preordained by God – a device which allows Potter to be audacious with the very conventions of the TV drama. The tension Potter feels between the spiritual and the banality of everyday life is reflected in the use of ironic advertising within the play.

+ Play for Today: Joe's Ark

BBC 1974. Dir Alan Bridges. With Freddie Jones, Angharad Rees, Dennis Waterman, Christopher Guard 66min

A father struggles with his faith as his daughter lies upstairs dying of cancer. Potter unflinchingly turns the spotlight on death and the social and religious rituals we use to cope with it, and Angharad Rees gives an astonishing performance as the young girl facing death with dignity.

THU 18 JUN 20:20 NFT3

Christabel + intro by producer Kenith Trodd

BBC 1988. Dir Adrian Shergold. With Stephen Dillane, Elizabeth Hurley, Geoffrey Palmer, Nigel Le Vaillant. 4 x 60min eps (plus interval)

Based on *The Past is Myself* by Christabel Bielenberg, this series charts the marriage of a privileged Englishwoman to a German in 1934 amid disapproval from her family and the rise of Nazism. Two things attracted Potter to adapt the story – 'one: it's a celebration of married love, and two: it's the perfect answer to the idea of collective guilt. They were confronted with this raving maniac and yet managed to emerge without doing anything degrading.'

+ Lifetimes: Christabel Bielenberg

BBC 1989. Dir Robin Wylie. 29min

In this revealing interview Christabel Bielenberg discusses witnessing the rise of National Socialism in Germany from 1934, and the wartime experiences that changed her and left her with an enduring hatred of racial and religious intolerance.

SAT 27 JUN 15:00 NFT2

Gorky Park

USA 1983. Dir Michael Apted. With William Hurt, Lee Marvin, Brian Dennehy. 128min. Film. 15

An officer in the Moscow police force relentlessly investigates a triple homicide that occurred in Gorky Park, not knowing that it leads to a complex conspiracy involving the highest levels of government. Potter had always been attracted to the concept of the spy (*Blade on the Feather, Traitor*) and in this adaptation from the

novel by Martin Cruz Smith he's able to turn his fascination into a taut and well-constructed thriller with superb performances.

TUE 16 JUN 20:25 NFT2

SUN 21 JUN 17:20 NFT2

Same Old Song On connaît la chanson

France-Switzerland-UK-Italy 1997. Dir Alain Resnais. With Pierre Arditi, Sabine Azéma, Jean-Pierre Bacri. 122min. Film. EST. PG

Camille is giving group lecture tours of Paris when Simon, a regular on these tours, falls for her. She however, embarks on an affair with her sister's estate agent. Described in the opening credits as 'Un film en hommage au dramaturge Anglais Dennis Potter,' this is Resnais' affectionate tribute to Potter, and in particular to the dramatic technique he often employed of having characters lip-syncing to popular songs.

WED 24 JUN 18:15 NFT2

FRI 26 JUN 20:30 NFT2

Mesmer

Canada-USA-Germany 1993. Dir Roger Spottiswoode. With Alan Rickman, Amanda Ooms, Gillian Barge, Simon McBurney. 107min. Film. 15. Unconfirmed

A biography of the 18th-century Viennese physician Franz Anton Mesmer, who used unorthodox healing practices based on his theory of animal magnetism. Although modern hypnosis can trace its roots back to Mesmer, he was also responsible for giving it a somewhat scandalous reputation. Potter wasn't able to resist penning this story of eroticism and control, and it proved a gift for the talents of Alan Rickman.

FRI 26 JUN 18:00 NFT2

TUE 30 JUN 18:30 NFT2

Casanova

BBC 1971. Dirs John Glenister, Mark Cullingham. With Frank Finlay, Norman Rossington, Patrick Newell, Christine Noonan. Eps 1 – 2 (110min), interval, Eps 3 – 4 (105min), interval, Eps 5 – 6 (110min)

Potter was keen to stress the relevance of this series' themes for a contemporary audience: 'Casanova was concerned with religious and sexual freedom, and these are things we have to address ourselves to now.' His Casanova (a superb Frank Finlay) is a complex mix of sexual philanderer and philosopher. The dazzlingly clever use of flashbacks to tell Casanova's life from the confinement of his prison cell is designed to emphasise the power of memory and conscience, and the search for salvation as he becomes imprisoned by the greatest of all jailors – old age.

SUN 5 JUL 13:00 NFT3

Play for Today: Double Dare + intro by Kika Markham

BBC 1976. Dir John MacKenzie. With Alan Dobie, Kika Markham, Malcolm Terris. 70min

In this controversial play Potter uses the device of a man with writer's block (as he had done in *Only Make Believe* and was to return to in *The Singing Detective*) to explore the boundaries between the writer's imagined world and his own sexual fantasies. Brilliantly constructed, edited and directed, this is TV drama at its audacious best.

+ Where Adam Stood

BBC 1976. Dir Brian Gibson. With Alan Badel, Max Harris, Ronald Hines, Jean Boht. 75min

Potter's adaptation of *Father & Son*, the 1907 autobiography of the naturalist and fundamental Christian Edmond Gosse, resulted in a film that he held in high regard. What no doubt attracted him to the story was Gosse's father's struggle to reconcile his Old Testament beliefs with the newly emerging work of Charles Darwin. As the father retreats further into a world of religious prejudices, he's unaware of the effect his turmoil is having on his young son.

TUE 7 JUL 20:00 NFT2

Blackeyes

BBC 1989. Dir Dennis Potter. With Gina Bellman, Michael Gough, Carol Royle, Nigel Planer. Eps 1 – 2 (95min), interval, Eps 3 – 4 (102min)

Described on its opening night as 'the tragic story of a beautiful fashion model who falls victim to male exploitation,' this mini-series was Potter's directorial debut. Controversy raged as to whether it was exploitative of women, or actually – as Potter had intended – a complex exposé of male sexual guilt.

Whichever way you read it, this work remains a fascinating and brave achievement that's not easily categorised.

+The Late Show

BBC 1989. 6min

Shown on the night that *Blackeyes* first aired, this is the six-minute introduction that Potter made to contextualise the series and lay out what he was trying to achieve with it.

+The Media Show

Channel 4 1989. 15min

Germaine Greer, Fay Weldon, Jo Brand and other women express their divergent views on *Blackeyes* (and Potter's attitude to women across his work) in the week that his new drama aired.

SUN 12 JUL 15:20 NFT3

Karaoke + intro by director Renny Rye

BBC-Channel 4 1996. Dir Renny Rye. With Albert Finney, Richard E Grant, Anna Chancellor, Julie Christie. Eps 1 – 2 (100min), interval, Eps 3 – 4 (125min)

Daniel (Potter's alter ego), on being told he has only months to live, replies 'I'm back in charge of my own story, I can take control of it now.' And in his final work, commissioned with its sequel *Cold Lazarus*, that's precisely what Potter does. Daniel is driven to the edge of insanity when he starts to hear the dialogue from the film he's just written, but salvation comes in finding the girl of his dreams. Once again playing with ideas of identity, and reality versus fantasy, Potter faces his own impending death in a way that's both enlightening and moving.

TUE 14 JUL 18:15 NFT2

Cold Lazarus + intro by producer Kenith Trodd

Channel 4-BBC 1996. Dir Renny Rye. With Albert Finney, Frances de la Tour, Ciarán Hinds, Henry Goodman. Eps 1 – 2 (105min), interval, Eps 3 – 4 (125min)

Potter's last work, written during the final weeks of his life, is a sequel to *Karaoke* and a dire warning about the power of unfettered capitalism. The year is 2368 and Daniel's cryogenically frozen head is now being used in an experiment to retrieve snippets of his life. On hearing of this, the Siltz Media Corporation plan to publish his memories worldwide. In his thinly veiled attack on the Murdoch empire, Potter brilliantly conjures a nightmare world in which even our most private thoughts are exploited for profit.

THU 23 JUL 18:15 NFT2

The Singing Detective

BBC 1986. Dir Jon Amiel. With Michael Gambon, Alison Steadman, Patrick Malahide, Janet Suzman, Jim Carter. Eps 1 – 2 (140min), interval (20min), Ep 3 (65min), interval (45min), Eps 4 – 5 (130min), interval (30min), Ep 6 (80min). 15

This is your chance to experience the series that's widely regarded as Potter's finest achievement, screened over the course of one day. *The Singing Detective* blends elements of psychological thriller and film noir with familiar Potter themes of sexual guilt and writer's block as we're taken on the most incredible journey of the inner psyche of Philip Marlow (Gambon) as he lies stricken by extreme psoriasis, a debilitating condition that Potter himself suffered. In entering Marlow's feverish mind, Potter creates some of the most memorable images and routines ever realised in TV drama.

+ Q&A with Alison Steadman, Janet Suzman, Jon Amiel (via Skype) and Kenith Trodd, chaired by Samira Ahmed

TRT 60min

Our distinguished panel will discuss *The Singing Detective* and the importance of Dennis Potter in taking TV drama to new heights and creating a dramatic form unique to television.

SUN 26 JUL 11:00 NFT1

Blue Remembered Hills

Play for Today BBC 1979. Dir Brian Gibson. With Helen Mirren, Janine Duvitski, Michael Elphick, Colin Welland. 72min

As he had done with *Stand Up Nigel Barton* in 1965, Potter returned to the idea of adults playing children to explore the strange dramatic power and chemistry that ensues. Without the sentimentality that real children would bring, the actors were able to highlight the cruelty of a child's world devoid of any moral compass, as an idyllic day at play turns into a catastrophic tragedy.

+ Without Walls Special: An Interview with Dennis Potter

Channel 4 1994. 70min

This remarkably frank interview with Melvyn Bragg was to be Potter's last. Knowing this, he used it to set out his stall, reveal much about his life and his innermost fears, and to plead for the protection of something he believed in so passionately: the power of the television play.

WED 29 JUL 20:00 NFT2

Secret Friends

UK 1991. Dir Dennis Potter. With Alan Bates, Gina Bellman, Frances Barber, Tony Doyle. 97min. Film. 15

During a train journey John (Bates) can't distinguish his married life from his fantasy life that involves prostitutes, and in a delusional state he recreates his secret friend from childhood – a self he's kept hidden for many years. Potter said of his film (inspired by his 1986 novel *A Ticket to Ride*): 'fantasy should be one of the registered sexually transmitted diseases – which in John's case, it is.'

MON 13 JUL 20:30 NFT3

FRI 17 JUL 20:30 NFT3

Midnight Movie

Screen Two BBC 1993. Dir Renny Rye. With Jim Carter, Louise Germaine, Brian Dennehy, Colin Salmon. 96min. Video. 15

A provincial lawyer obsessed with an old B-movie sex symbol, becomes equally obsessed with her daughter, but he fails to realise the psychological damage her mother's reputation as a nymphomaniac has done to this young girl. Willingly, he lets his mundane life slip out of control as his sexual fantasies take over, but what is real and what is imagined?

TUE 21 JUL 20:40 NFT2

The Singing Detective

USA 2003. Dir Keith Gordon. With Robert Downey Jr, Robin Wright, Mel Gibson. 108min. Film. 15

Pre-war Britain becomes 50s LA in this Hollywood remake of the TV series. While the movie's tone and atmosphere differs, the essential dramatic device of a man in pain seeking an escape through the pulp fiction fantasies of the novel he wrote remains the same. At one point, protagonist Dan Dark (Downey Jr) even exclaims 'I'm gonna go back to my bed, it's vivid and exciting there.'

MON 27 JUL 18:20 NFT2

FRI 31 JUL 20:45 NFT2

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