

Messages for Posterity: The Complete Dennis Potter



**June – July 2014 & June – July 2015
at BFI Southbank**

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 the 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 assisting the BFI on the 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!'*

This June **BFI Southbank** is proud to launch the definitive guide to Dennis Potter when, for the first time ever, we begin to screen the entire surviving canon of his work, from **6 June**, marking the 20th anniversary of his death. The catalogue of work is so vast that it will be screened in four parts, over two years, each focusing on a pertinent theme: *'Politics and Betrayal'*, in June, followed by *'The Outsider Inside'* in July, then *'Faith and Redemption'* and *'Sex & Death'* in June and July next year.

There will also be a number of events and introductions when those who worked closely with Potter will offer their insight. Beginning with *Dennis Potter in Edinburgh + Panel Discussion on The Politics of Potter* on **Thursday 12 June**, we bring together producer **Ken Trodd** and **Peter Flannery**, amongst others, with broadcaster **Mark Lawson** to host and discuss the seminal MacTaggart Lecture titled *'Occupying Powers'*, that saw the writer vocalise damning views on Thatcher, Broadcasters and the Murdoch Empire. On **Thursday 26 June** playwright **Mark Ravenhill** will offer his own personal response to Potter following the documentary: *Close Up: Dennis Potter: Under the Skin* (BBC, 1998). The screening of *Dreamchild* (1986), on **9 July**, will be followed by a Q&A featuring director **Gavin Millar** and **Jane Asher**; while the use of music in Potter's work will be addressed in *Echo of a Song* on **19 July**, with director **Piers Haggard**, **Ken Trodd**, producer **John Wyver** and actors **Cheryl Campbell** and **Kenneth Colley**

Politics and Betrayal

Dennis Potter was merciless in exposing his own demons – including those from his childhood. He grew up in the Forest of Dean (a key location used in his plays) in the rural mining area between Gloucester and Wales, and was the son of a miner. He went on to win a place at Oxford University. It was after this that he was first published as a non-fiction writer before pursuing a

career as a Labour politician; an unsuccessful Conservative defeat left him with inspiration for ***Stand Up, Nigel Barton*** and ***Vote, Vote, Vote for Nigel Barton*** (both BBC, 1965), the title character and alter-ego for Potter. These early plays of his radical youth painfully expose the very personal betrayal he felt of his own class by his attending Oxford University.

From his own experiences Potter was able to create universal stories and his mantra to 'only connect' can be seen in the immediate and powerful impact his work had on the viewing public. For ***Paper Roses*** (ITV, 1971), Potter drew on his experiences as a Fleet Street journalist, tackling the tabloids, settling old scores and addressing the manufacturing of headlines. Also screening will be ***Saturday Night Theatre: Lay Down Your Arms*** (ITV, 1980), in which a Private recruited for British Intelligence battles with the Establishment and challenges patriotism which ultimately leads to betrayal. The subject of betrayal fascinated him and can be seen explored in great depth across ***Play For Today: Traitor*** (BBC, 1971) and ***Blade on the Feather*** (ITV, 1980).

The Outsider Inside

All of the works chosen for part two of this season reflect Potter's fascination with those feeling excluded from mainstream society or living on the margins of reality. The most famous of them may be Arthur – as played by the late **Bob Hoskins** in his breakthrough role - from Potter's masterpiece ***Pennies from Heaven*** (the complete series, BBC, 1978), which was a totally original, innovative and unique form of television drama, adapted in 1981 for cinema audiences starring **Steve Martin** and **Bernadette Peters**. In this now seminal format, Potter used popular music of the 1930s to articulate the dreams and aspirations of his characters, and act as a bittersweet counterpoint to the crushing reality of their everyday lives. This template was also revisited with ***Lipstick on Your Collar*** (the complete series, Channel 4, 1993).

The outsider provides the narrative crux in his plays ***Angels Are So Few*** (BBC, 1970) and ***Only Make Believe*** (BBC, 1973). In the first, **Tom Bell** plays Michael, a vagrant who claims to be an angel – though one as a seeming harbinger of death. As the "angel" is confronted by the lonely housewife intent on a sexual encounter this conflict allows Potter to explore his own religious beliefs, alongside notions of guilt and sin.

Tim Curry gives an early performance portraying the outsider as an oedipal cuckoo playing psycho-sexual games with the woman he claims to be his mother in ***Schmoedipus*** (BBC, 1974). Perhaps Potter's most infamous *outsider* starred **Michael Kitchen** as the devil incarnate in ***Brimstone and Treacle*** (BBC, 1976), where evil masquerades as good. So dangerous was the play considered that it was banned in 1976 and was not to be transmitted until over ten years later in 1987. Across these plays Reality conflicts with the imagination, allowing Potter to examine everyday ambiguities and reveal humanity's weaknesses - and the guilt he feels about his own. The feature films that were inspired by the latter titles will screen with **Nicolas Roeg's *Track 29*** (1987), starring **Gary Oldman** and **Teresa Russell**, and ***Brimstone & Treacle*** (1982) starring **Sting**, **Joan Plowright** and **Denholm Elliot**.

Perhaps because Potter himself was the ultimate outsider – and obsessed by his own demons – he was able to show us the truth about ourselves. Such truths and revelations will be explored further, next Summer, with parts three and four of this retrospective, when we also celebrate what would've been Dennis Potter's 80th birthday and screen such masterpieces as ***The Singing Detective*** and ***Blue Remembered Hills***.

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BFI SOUTHBANK EVENT & SCREENING PROGRAMME:

June: Politics and Betrayal

Dennis Potter in Edinburgh + Panel discussion on The Politics of Potter

Ch4 1994. Editor Julie Hall. 70min In 1993 Dennis Potter was invited to give the centrepiece address at the Edinburgh International Television Festival – the MacTaggart Lecture. He chose the title ‘Occupying Powers’ and used the opportunity to speak his mind about the state of broadcasting. This being Potter, he relates this subject to the wider malaise he sees in society, from Thatcherism to his damning views on the Murdoch empire. It results in one of the most influential lectures of modern times.

Panel to include: producer Ken Trodd, writer Peter Flannery, script editor Roger Smith and actor Pheobe Nicholls (work permitting), chaired by Mark Lawson

Thu 12 June 18:00 NFT3

Close Up: Dennis Potter: Under the Skin + Talk with Mark Ravenhill

BBC 1998. Dir Julian Birkett. 45min

This candid documentary looks at how Potter’s psychological make up and background fed into his plays. By interviewing actors, producers and directors who worked with him, the film builds a complex picture of a troubled but remarkable man. Followed by a talk given by Mark Ravenhill, a highly successful contemporary playwright (*The Cut*, Donmar Warehouse 2006, Terry Pratchett’s *Nation*, NT 2009) and writer in residence with the RSC, who will be offering his personal response to the work of Dennis Potter.

Thu 26 June 18:10 NFT3 Tickets £6.50

Stand Up, Nigel Barton

BBC 1965. Dir Gareth Davies. With Keith Barron, Jack Woolgar, Katherine Parr. 72min

Displaying a breathtaking mastery of the possibilities of the TV play, Potter explores his own past to shine a forensic light on class. His school days are portrayed using adults to play children (a technique he returned to in *Blue Remembered Hills*), while asides to camera and flashbacks mix seamlessly to evoke his home life and its painful contrast with Oxford University. It’s a clash of cultures that leaves Nigel Barton, Potter’s alter-ego, driven with guilt, and which was to inform so much of Potter’s drama.

Fri 6 June 18:20 NFT2

Joint ticket available with *Vote, Vote, Vote for Nigel Barton* £16.50, concs £12 (Members pay £1.50 less)

Vote, Vote, Vote for Nigel Barton

BBC 1965. With Keith Barron, Valerie Gearon, John Bailey. 77min

We now find Nigel standing as a Labour candidate in a solidly Tory seat. Once more, Potter drew on his own experience of standing in the 1964 elections to create a searing indictment of the democratic system, as Nigel is mauled by a cynical party agent and has his principles tested to the limit. Keith Barron gives the performance of his career as the play moves towards its brilliant climax, and Potter gives voice to an inner anger that was never to leave him.

Fri 6 June 20:40 NFT2

Late Call

BBC 1975. Dir Philip Dudley. With Dandy Nichols, Michael Bryant, Leslie Dwyer. 4 x 50min + interval

Late Call is a fine example of Potter’s great skill at adapting a novel for television. This four-part Production of Angus Wilson’s 1964 book deals with an elderly couple adjusting to retirement and the problems of living with their fastidious son. Typical Potter themes such as class division emerge, as well as the notion of time and the distance between generations. Potter also employs a series of flashbacks to denote the psychological state of the mother and, another vital Potter theme, how the past influences who we are in the present.

Sun 8 June 18:45 NFT2

Performance: Message for Posterity

BBC 1997. Dir David Jones. With Eric Porter, John Neville, Sophie Thompson. 90min

Message for Posterity was first written in 1967 and the original production was sadly lost, allowing the BBC to revisit it in this excellent 1997 remake. Radical painter James Player (Porter) is commissioned to

paint the portrait of the recently deposed Tory Prime Minister (Neville). For Potter this is an opportunity to settle old scores with the British Establishment. A relationship develops between the two men which oscillates between deep mutual respect and ill-disguised loathing for what the other stands for, and this gives the chance for Potter to lay bare political tensions in a deeply moving way.

Tue 10 June 20:30 NFT3

Playhouse: The Bonegrinder

ITV 1968. Dir Joan Kemp-Welch. With George Baker, Margaret Tyzak, Weston Gavin. 75min

When American seaman Sam meets respectable British banker George in a pub renowned for prostitution, George's whole culture and way of life is threatened. Concentrating on the depressing minutiae of English suburbia, Potter skilfully creates an effective allegory on the cultural differences between the UK and the US, exposing both British hypocrisy and US imperialism through a dark domestic tale of domination and Blackmail. Margaret Tyzak is magnificent as the wife shackled to a husband she utterly despises.

+ Cream In My Coffee

ITV 1980. Dir Gavin Millar. With Peggy Ashcroft, Lionel Jeffries, Shelagh McLeod, Martin Shaw. 93min

Cream In My Coffee also deals with unhappiness in a marriage that has a betrayal at its core. This Prix Italia-winning production stars Peggy Ashcroft, who received the BAFTA for best actress. The production lavishly recreates the world of 1930s music, and Gavin Millar's direction beautifully serves Potter's collision of past with present and the ominous feeling of impending tragedy.

Sun 15 June 15:00 NFT2

Paper Roses

ITV 1971. Dir Barry Davis. With Bill Maynard, John Carson, Aimee Delamain, Desmond Parry. 51min

Drawing on his own brief time working for Fleet Street, Potter takes the opportunity to settle a few scores with this witty and highly inventive take on the insidious headline culture of our tabloid press. Hubbard (Maynard) is about to retire from the paper, but as he reflects on a lifetime of manufacturing the headlines, the futility he sees causes him to take strange and drastic action. The scenario is cleverly framed by a TV critic reviewing the play in vintage 70s style, phoning it in as he watches it transmit.

+ Saturday Night Theatre: Lay Down Your Arms

ITV 1980. Dir Christopher Morahan. With Nikolas Simmonds, Leonard Trolley, Julia Jones. 73min

Dennis Potter's secondment to the linguistics division to learn Russian during his national service directly influences this clever play. Private Hawk is conscripted, by virtue of his high IQ and ability to speak fluent Russian, to work for British Intelligence. Yet Hawk's lowly background clashes with the British Establishment around him, tempting him to tell ever bigger lies, and to start interrogating their unquestioning patriotism. Potter brilliantly shows how the seeds of betrayal are sown.

Tue 17 June 20:30 NFT2

Play for Today: Traitor

BBC 1971. Dir Alan Bridges. With John Le Mesurier, Jack Hedley, Vincent Ball. 58min

Defector Adrian Harris (Le Mesurier) sits alone in a utilitarian Moscow apartment awaiting the arrival of a UK press delegation, and the chance to explain his motives for 'betraying' his country. In a series of flashbacks we witness the ritual humiliations Harris suffered at public school. Potter's fascinating exploration of the innermost psychology of the 'traitor' exposes the links between his childhood and the man he himself was to become.

+ Blade on the Feather

ITV 1980. Dir Richard Loncraine. With Donald Pleasence, Denholm Elliott, Kika Markham, Phoebe Nicholls, Tom Conti. 81min

Potter returns to the subject of betraying one's country, and the link with 'the playing fields of Eton,' in this stylish production boasting an incredible cast. When Professor Jason Cavendish (Pleasence) is visited by a strange young man (Conti) who is clearly interested in his past, it quickly becomes apparent that Cavendish has troubling secrets that, in old age, are pricking at his conscience. Richard Loncraine's direction drips with a brooding menace, and perfectly elucidates this neurotic and morally-bankrupt world.

Fri 20 June 17:50 NFT2

July: The Outsider Inside. The Wednesday Play: Where the Buffalo Roam

BBC 1966. Dir Gareth Davies. With Hywel Bennett, Megs Jenkins, Aubrey Richards. 73min

This play has an eerie resonance in an age when apparently unmotivated shootings are so prevalent, and here Potter explores how easily the psychologically damaged can be tipped over the edge with tragic

consequences. Willy fantasises about being a cowboy, but gradually we begin to see how this is an escape from a darker past. As he loses his grip on reality he's overwhelmed by events.

+ Moonlight on the Highway

ITV 1969. Dir James MacTaggart. With Ian Holm, Anthony Bate, Deborah Grant. 52min

David Peters, brilliantly portrayed here by Ian Holm, is obsessed with the songs of Al Bowlly and wishes that the sentimentality they convey was like reality. He is the genesis of Arthur in the later play *Pennies from Heaven*; Peters, however, is a much darker character – for him these tunes are an escape from childhood sexual abuse and crushing feelings of guilt. It's in *Moonlight on the Highway* that Potter discovers the dramatic power in the counterpoint of sweet music and bitter torment.

Tue 1 July 18:00 NFT3 Introduced by producer Kenith Trodd

Brimstone & Treacle

UK 1982. Dir Richard Loncraine. With Sting, Joan Plowright, Denholm Elliot. 87min. 18

Based closely on the (at the time untransmitted and banned) television play of 1976, this film version brought the glamour of Sting to the lead role, while retaining Denholm Elliot from the play in the role of the father. Struggling to match the intense intimacy of the original, director Richard Loncraine maintains that 'old black magic' to create a disturbing film dripping with irony. An apparently nice young man ingratiates himself into the home of a suburban couple and their disabled daughter, with evil on his mind.

Tue 1 July 20:50 NFT3, Sat 5 July 20:45 NFT3

Company of Five: Shaggy Dog

ITV 1968. Dir Gareth Davies. With John Neville, Gwen Watford, Ann Bell, Cyril Luckham. 52min

There's something very contemporary about this riff on the nature of capitalism and the loss of individuality within an all-conquering system. Wilkie (Neville) is attending an important job interview, but it soon becomes obvious that the pressures of modern life have unhinged him. Surreal and Kafkaesque, this clever play has dialogue that sings.

+ **Potter Pieces** (30min). Excerpts from interviews with Potter, and a chance to showcase some of the rarest and most unusual material, including the sketches that he wrote for *TW3*, *Does Class Matter* (1958), *Russell Harty Plus* (1979), and *Opinions* (1993).

Fri 4 July 20:40 NFT2

Alice

BBC 1965. Dir Gareth Davies. With George Baker, Deborah Watling, Rosalie Crutchley. 72min

Potter cleverly weaves dramatized excerpts from 'Alice in Wonderland' with the perceived reality of CL Dodgson's obsession with Alice Liddell, his inspiration for the work. Potter is able to examine Dodgson's (Lewis Carroll's) feelings of guilt to draw connections between the complexity of the Reverend's many neuroses and his most famous fantasy. The play is directed by Gareth Davies with a beguiling simplicity that brings Carroll's famous creations to life, and draws fine performances from a distinguished cast.

Wed 9 July 18:10 NFT3

Dreamchild + Q&A

UK 1986. Director Gavin Millar. With Coral Browne, Ian Holm, Jane Asher. 94min. PG

When Potter adapted *Alice* into a feature film he seized the opportunity to extend and amplify some of the play's original themes. This time we see the effects of age on Alice (Brown) as she's overtaken by memories of her relationship with Dodgson (Holm) as a young girl, and begins to realise the value of the gift he bestowed in creating 'Alice in Wonderland' for her. As these memories unfold she comes to realise that she may have betrayed his affection.

Wed 9 July 20:15 NFT3*, Sun 13 July 20:40 NFT2

* Followed by a discussion and Q&A with director Gavin Millar, cinematographer Billy Williams and Jane Asher (work permitting)

Track 29

UK 1987. Dir Nicolas Roeg. With Theresa Russell, Gary Oldman, Colleen Camp. 90min. 18

Nicolas Roeg was always going to be attracted to this fiendish black comedy – based on Potter's 1974 TV play *Schmoedipus* – with its acerbic wit and dangerous fantasies. An English stranger (Oldman) enters the home of an American couple to play his malign and subtle games, allowing Potter to add an additional layer to this adaptation and exploit a clash of cultures. Roeg and Oldman clearly revelled in a highly intelligent script, and produced a film that is both disturbing and funny in equal measure.

Sun 13 July 18:20 NFT2, Thu 17 July 20:30 NFT3

Play for Today: Angels Are So Few

BBC 1970. Dir Gareth Davies. With Tom Bell, Christine Hargreaves, Susan Richards, Erik Chitty. 63min
Angels Are So Few begins with the words 'Be not forgetful to entertain strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares' (Hebrews 13.i). Michael is an attractive vagrant who inveigles himself into ordinary suburban homes claiming to be an angel, yet wherever he goes death is not far away. For lonely housewife Cynthia, Michael (played with great charisma by Tom Bell) represents a chance for a sexual encounter but how can Michael square sex with his status as an angel? Classic Potter themes emerge from the destabilising effects of the outsider, to his own guilt and shame about sex.

+ Play for Today: Only Make Believe

BBC 1973. Dir Robert Knights. With Keith Barron, Georgina Hale, Alun Armstrong. 74min
This play is directly about the process of writing *Angels Are So Few*, and once again stars Keith Barron as Potter's alter ego – a writer dealing with the emotional fallout of his wife having just left him. When an attractive temp (Hale) is sent to type out the writer's latest play she stirs in him all the feelings of guilt and disgust that are to motivate his writing. *Only Make Believe* is a complex meditation on Potter's creative process as well as his inner-most psychology, and a must see for anyone who wants to fully understand the man and his work.

Tue 15 July 20:15 NFT2

Play for Today: Schmoedipus

BBC 1974. Dir Barry Davis. With Anna Cropper, Tim Curry, John Carson, Bob Hoskins. 67min
Elizabeth's husband is away at the office when Glen turns up on her doorstep, purporting to be her long lost child. Glen simply wants to relive the lost childhood his real mother denied him, and what follows is a fascinating, Oedipal exploration of the sexual games and power play prevalent within relationships. Anna Cropper and Tim Curry have a magical chemistry, and there's an unexpected early cameo from the late Bob Hoskins. There's also a twist in the tale that leaves us questioning everything, with that unique Potter ambiguity towards what is real and what is imagined.

+ Play for Today: Brimstone and Treacle

BBC 1976. Dir Barry Davis. With Denholm Elliott, Michael Kitchen, Patricia Lawrence. 73min
Brimstone and Treacle was famously banned in 1976 for depicting the rape of a disabled girl by the devil, and it was over ten years before the play was finally transmitted in 1987. Ironically, it was the very act of violation that brings salvation as Patsy is healed. Faith and redemption and man's powerlessness in the face of evil are the themes that lie at the heart of this play, and the brilliance of the writing and performances now shines through, unencumbered by the controversy that surrounded the play at the time.

Fri 18 July 18:00 NFT3

Pennies from Heaven

BBC 1978. Dir Piers Haggard. With Bob Hoskins, Cheryl Campbell, Kenneth Colley, Gemma Craven.
Eps 1 & 2: 73 + 80min. Interval. Ep3: 80min. Interval. Eps 4 & 5: 75 + 80min
All of the themes that Potter had developed in earlier works seem to mature and deepen in *Pennies from Heaven*. Finding a creative confidence in the unique, dramatic juxtaposing of drama and music, he discovered a new form for the TV series. With a heartbreaking performance from Bob Hoskins as Arthur, the character became an everyman figure that captured something universal in the human experience, while Piers Haggard's superb direction brought the musical sequences vividly to life.

Sat 19 July 12:10 NFT3

Episode 6 (85min) + Panel Discussion: Echo of a Song

Join our distinguished panel as we examine the unique use of popular music in Potter's work from *Pennies from Heaven* to *The Singing Detective* and *Lipstick on Your Collar*. Panel to include director Piers Haggard, producer Kenith Trodd, producer John Wyver, and actors Cheryl Campbell and Kenneth Colley (work permitting – please check bfi.org.uk for final confirmation).

Sat 19 July 20:20 NFT3 Joint ticket available £16, concs £12 (Members pay £1.50 less)

Rain on the Roof

LWT–*Pennies from Heaven* Ltd 1980. Dir Alan Bridges. With Cheryl Campbell, Malcolm Stoddard, Michael Culver, Ewan Stewart. 74min

Potter's search for innocence unsullied by cynicism and sex is explored through the character of young Billy (Stewart), who is unable to read or write and is struggling to cope with the recent death of his father. When he's confronted with the cruelty surrounding Janet's (Campbell) failing marriage, Billy

takes refuge in a radical form of religion and is pushed to extreme actions. Cheryl Campbell makes palpable the pain of her character and the terrible consequences of her need for Billy's purity as a substitute for the perceived grime of her own life.

Tue 22 July 18:30 NFT2

Pennies from Heaven

USA 1981. Dir Herbert Ross. With Steve Martin, Bernadette Peters, Christopher Walken. 108min. 15
What this film version lacks in depth and irony compared to the television original, it makes up for with the production values of a major Hollywood musical in the Busby Berkeley vein, while also providing some fascinating insights into the need for fantasy as an escape from the depths of the Depression in 1930s Chicago. From straight pastiche to sensuous innovation – plus a few surprises, such as Christopher Walken's highly-sexed shimmy – each number is a sheer delight.

Wed 23 July 20:30 NFT3, Fri 25 July 20:30 NFT2

Lipstick on Your Collar (the Complete Series)

Ch4 1993. Dir Renny Rye. With Ewan McGregor, Bernard Hill, Douglas Henshall, Maggie Steed.

Eps 1 & 2: 116min. Interval. Eps 3 & 4: 120min. Interval. Eps 5 & 6: 124min

Returning to the semi-autobiographical subject he had used for *Lay Down Your Arms* in 1970, Potter once more explores the world of the army, this time from the viewpoint of two young privates entering the establishment world of 'Army Majors and Empire' in 1956. This is a period that fascinated Potter, and he explores the conflicts between generations through the use of rock'n'roll music. He also uses this popular form of music to comment on the action and reveal his characters inner lives, as he had done in *Pennies from Heaven*. A young Ewan McGregor brings just the right mix of cockiness and deep insecurity to the role of Private Hopper.

Sun 27 July 14:00 NFT3

Screen Two: Visitors

BBC 1987. Dir Piers Haggard. With John Standing, Nicola Pagett, Michael Brandon, Glynis Barber. 90min
In *Visitors*, based on his stage play *Sufficient Carbohydrate*, Potter writes some sparkingly acidic dialogue in what is for him a surprisingly naturalistic piece, but the theme of the outsider as a destructive force is ever-present. When two couples go on holiday to an idyllic Italian villa, sexual tensions boil over into a series of catastrophic events. John Standing is magnificent as the urbane Englishman driven to distraction by his wife's infidelity. As one couple's psychologically damaged son watches the grown-ups' moral turpitude, he longs for avenging furies to arrive...

Wed 30 July 18:20 NFT2

NOTES TO EDITORS:

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