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Natural Pursuits – The Screen Dramas of Simon Gray Television Season at BFI Southbank in August 2011



BFI Southbank celebrates the tragi-comic screen dramas of the late **Simon Gray**. A writer of immense wit and intellectual charm whose razor-sharp dialogue is unsurpassed. The month long season features some of Gray's most celebrated work including screenings of **Unnatural Pursuits** (1992), **After Pilkington** (1987) and **They Never Slept** (1991) which feature performances by British acting elite including **Alan Bates**, **Edward Fox** and **Miranda Richardson**.

Following the screening of **They Never Slept**, a panel of guests including producer **Kenith Trodd**, and directors **Udayan Prasad** and **Christopher Morahan** will discuss his great contribution to television drama and the theatre illustrated with clips of some of his early and rare television plays to be chaired by Broadcaster **Matthew Sweet**. After the screening of **Butley** on **Sunday 14 Aug**, **Lindsay Posner**, director of the 40th anniversary revival of the play currently running at the Duchess Theatre will also be welcomed to the BFI stage for a Q&A.

Gray wrote prolifically from the mid-60s onwards for both the West End stage (*Otherwise Engaged*, *Quartermaine's Terms*, *The Late Middle Classes*, *Butley*) and for television, where such important early successes such as **Death of a Teddy Bear**, **Man in a Sidecar** and **The Caramel Crisis** were carelessly wiped. His most fertile period writing specifically for TV occurred between 1975 and 1993 during a close collaboration with producer Kenith Trodd and four major directors, Michael Lindsay-Hogg, Christopher Morahan, Udayan Prasad and Pat O'Connor. They encouraged Simon to move away from a theatrical style into a more filmic idiom and to capture more intensely the ironic and often cruel tone demanded by his work – light witty comedy but with a very dark undertone. Perhaps this was one quality that attracted Harold Pinter to direct much of his friend Gray's stage work (and the movie of *Butley*), because it is so different from his own in its outpouring of dialogue, and yet at the same time so carefully formed and controlled.

Often concerned with the writer's plight, as in the International Emmy-winning **Unnatural Pursuits** (1992), his screenplays were deeply unfashionable in their lack of any overt political content. Ironically, it is

precisely this lack of political edge that gives the works their abiding relevance. By using the universal language of humour they speak to us all. Gray once told Trodd that to succeed in the West End he had only to charm an audience for a couple of hours with a single idea, but for the 90 minutes of a film or TV drama, 'the turns, jokes and surprises had to keep coming all the way through'. As this season demonstrates, on this credo he more than delivers.

- Ends -

Press Contacts:

Tim Mosley tim.mosley@bfi.org.uk 020 7957 8918

Ilona Cheshire ilona.cheshire@bfi.org.uk 020 7957 8986

They Never Slept

Screen Two. BBC 1991. Dir Udayan Prasad. With Edward Fox, Harriet Walter, James Fleet, Emily Morgan. 75min

Possessing the charm of an Ealing comedy and Simon Gray's feel for irony, this tale of derring-do amongst the murky world of World War II agents is by turns farcical and deeply tragic. A delicate balancing act, with the superb cast managing to keep all the balls in the air. As with all Gray's comedies, the lightness of touch conceals a darker underbelly, raising questions about propaganda and the price of life in wartime.

+ Discussion with producer Kenith Trodd, and directors Udayan Prasad & Christopher Morahan

Our distinguished panel, all of whom worked with Simon Gray extensively, discuss his contribution to television drama and the theatre. Illustrated with clips of his works, including some rare and early material.

Tue 9 Aug 18:00 NFT3

Plaintiffs & Defendants

Play for Today. BBC 1975. Dir Michael Lindsay-Hogg. With Alan Bates, Dinsdale Landen, Georgina Hale 65min

These two plays were written as a pair, the one commenting on the other. Gray deftly captures a sense of mid-life crisis overwhelming our central character, brilliantly portrayed by Alan Bates. As an affair turns sour, he is forced to examine his life and does not like what he sees. What is the significance of childhood memories to the man he has become?

+ Two Sundays

Play for Today. BBC 1975. Dir Michael Lindsay-Hogg. With Alan Bates, Dinsdale Landen, Georgina Hale. 57min

Cleverly inverting the lives of the two central characters from Plaintiffs, Gray plays with how different their lives could have been, exploring in greater depth the complex nature of their friendship at public school. But which boy becomes which man? Bates and Landen seem made for Gray's searingly intelligent insight into the complexities of male friendship

Fri 12 Aug 18:10 NFT2

After Pilkington

Screen Two. BBC-Polymuse-WW Entertainment Wales 1987. Dir Christopher Morahan. With Bob Peck, Miranda Richardson, Barry Foster 95min

A darkly comic thriller set amongst the academic community of Oxford. When Professor Pilkington disappears, rumours of his murder abound. Meeting a childhood sweetheart (Richardson) by chance, James (Peck) finds he is obsessed with her again, but little does he realise how fatal the attraction may prove. A recurrent theme in Gray's work – the power of childhood experiences to determine our adult lives – is once more explored in this beautifully performed Prix Italia winner in which Miranda Richardson gives what many regard as still her most memorable performance.

Fri 19 Aug 18:20 NFT2

Old Flames

Screen Two. BBC 1990. Dir Christopher Morahan. With Simon Callow, Stephen Fry, Miriam Margolyes. 85min

Daniel Davenport (Fry) is a self assured barrister, but when an old acquaintance from schooldays (Callow) turns up, both find their lives turned upside down and both prove to have their secrets. One of Gray's constant themes, the consequences of the past, here examines the murkier recesses of the public school system. Great performances from Fry, Callow and Margolyes combine with an assured tone from Christopher Morahan's direction that catches just the right level of menace and black humour in this dark comedy of manners with a daring and surprising climax.

Tue 23 Aug 18:10 NFT2

Unnatural Pursuits

Part 1: I'm the Author

Part 2 I Don't Do Cuddles

BBC-Arts & Entertainment Network 1992. Dir Christopher Morahan. With Alan Bates, Richard Wilson, Nigel Planer, Bob Balaban, John Mahoney. 83min + 57min + short interval

This International Emmy-winner was prompted by one of the diaries that became Gray's best known work. It's a classic account of a writer's obsession as he crosses the world to perfect and protect his latest play. Receiving lukewarm reviews in London, writer Hamish Partt (Bates)

is tempted by an offer to remount his play in the US. Cue a wonderful clash of cultures between the chainsmoking anti-hero and America. Gray pulls out all the stops with an imaginative use of dream sequences and parody musical numbers, including a nightmarish portrayal by Wilson of a fellow playwright who dogs his every move.

Fri 26 Aug 20:00 NFT3

Running Late

Screen One. BBC-Cinema Verity-Peter Bowles Productions 1992. Dir Udayan Prasad. With Peter Bowles, Michael Byrne, Adrian Rawlins. 75min + short interval

George Grant (Bowles) is a highly successful television personality renowned for destroying reputations on air. Until the day his wife leaves him... A beautifully constructed day of reckoning with a twist in the tale.

+ Femme Fatale

Screen Two. BBC 1993. Dir Udayan Prasad. With Colin Welland, Sophia Diaz, Simon Callow. 75min

In this, Gray's final film for television, Callow's marvellous vicar watches helplessly as the fates intervene in a fantastical tale of lust and death occasioned by the arrival of a fatally attractive young Italian woman into a closed Devon village community. Callow's narrator ironically comments on the action as the death toll mounts – in a film by turns immensely funny and surprisingly uncomfortable.

Sat 27 Aug 15:00 NFT2

Butley + Q&A

UK-USA-Canada 1973. Dir Harold Pinter. With Alan Bates, Michael Byrne, Richard O'Callaghan. 130min. 15

Pinter originally produced this for the West End and then redirected his cast for this powerful film version. Although its stage roots are very evident, the visceral nature of Bates' performance is terrible to behold as his self-loathing leads him to torment all those closest to him, and push friendship to the limits. Using the unities of time, place and action, over the course of one day, Butley loses his wife and his hold over his past star pupil as his jealousy mounts amid a torrent of homosexual tension.

Sun 14 Aug 15:20 NFT3*

Tue 16 Aug 20:20 NFT2

***Followed by a Q&A with Lindsay Posner, director of the 40th anniversary revival of Butley at the Duchess Theatre**

A Month In The Country

UK 1987. Dir Pat O'Connor. With Colin Firth, Kenneth Branagh, Natasha Richardson, Patrick Malahide. 96min. PG

A Month in the Country, based on the Booker-nominated novel by JL Carr, is memorably directed by Pat O'Connor, and the film has acquired something of a cult status. The story, gentle and moving, is of two young men recovering from the horrors of World War I during an idyllic summer in the Yorkshire countryside. Variety presciently opined that 'Colin Firth and Kenneth Branagh are talented young actors to watch for.'

Sat 27 Aug 18:40 NFT1

Wed 31 Aug 20:45 NFT2

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- Preserving and restoring the most significant film collection in the world for today and future generations
- Championing emerging and world class film makers in the UK
- Investing in creative, distinctive and entertaining work
- Promoting British film and talent to the world
- Growing the next generation of film makers and audiences

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***** PICTURE DESK *** A selection of images for journalistic use in promoting BFI Southbank screenings can be found at www.image.net under BFI / BFI Southbank**

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