

A BUMPY RIDE ON *THE WHITE BUS*

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Lindsay Anderson himself is the main source of information about this film for the simple reason that few people have seen it. The project had its roots in an agreement reached at Woodfall Films that Oscar Lewenstein should produce a trilogy based on short stories by Shelagh Delaney. Three directors would be responsible for one part each, the other two being Tony Richardson (Woodfall's stock director) and Peter Brook (*Lord of the Flies*, 1963).

The first we learn about the project from Anderson's journal comes in a June 1964 entry. He mentions that he has seen Lewenstein about an idea for his part of the trilogy – but this entry amounts to no more than two lines in a prolonged sequence of pages in which Anderson reflects on the difficulties of his relationship with Richard Harris.¹ The project lay for some time at the periphery, beyond his immediate concerns.

Privately, he was adrift on violent tides of emotion aroused by the inconstant and erratic Harris while they considered projects on which they might work together. Meanwhile, family problems proved painfully intractable: he attempted to calm matters in the break up of his brother's marriage despite feeling at odds not only with the couple but also his strident mother.

Professionally he was occupied by numerous ventures:

- directing *Julius Caesar* for the Royal Court;
- travels to Moscow and Leningrad;
- to India as juror in the first Delhi film festival;
- television commercials;
- and attempts to set up other film projects (among them *Wuthering Heights*, which was to be scripted by David Storey and star Harris).

After expending much time and effort, Anderson called the last project off in February 1965 blaming endless difficulties raised by Harris and lack of commitment from most parties to the proposed deal.ⁱⁱ

In the first week of May 1965, Anderson and Delaney got together, and the film version of her story began to take shape.ⁱⁱⁱ Anderson gave this account of the film's provenance:

Shelagh and I worked closely together to produce a script which derived closely from the original story, but which went a good way beyond it. Shelagh's story had been essentially personal and subjective. When her play, *A Taste Of Honey*, had been produced in London, she found herself reviled and attacked in her home town, the North Country city of Salford. Puritanical tradition was still strong in the North, and Shelagh's frankness with speech and emotion shocked the local dignitaries, who also felt that she had presented an unworthy picture of the city to the world. Outraged statements were made in speeches and in newspapers, and the local Council even went so far as to sponsor tours of Salford in special buses, to show off the beauties and advantages of the locality.

Looking back from 1979, Anderson distinguished in greater detail between the print and screen versions:

[The] fantastic elements [of the published story] were preserved in our treatment, but I think that the objective or satirical side of the story was probably strengthened. In its eventual form in fact, *The White Bus* is more of a mini-Epic than a fantasy, and looking back on it in this way I can see clearly how it lay at the beginning of an artistic journey which was to lead me forward to *If...* and to *O Lucky Man!*^{iv}

His 1979 retrospective comment on the film's register reflects what we have seen the two writers trying to achieve:

The non-naturalism of *The White Bus* is to me one its most attractive qualities: the freedom to experiment in terms of sound and of image. While we were working on the script the idea came of injecting short bursts of colour into an otherwise black-and-white narrative – the obverse of *If...*, where a colour film was interspersed with sequences in monochrome. I have always felt that the degrees to which people reacted to such devices, or professed themselves mystified by them, shows how much we have become prisoners of naturalism. I was groping towards a style that would be poetically expressive rather than naturalistically faithful to ‘real life’ [while being] subtle rather than sensational or attention-grabbing.^v



Patricia Healy in a scene from The White Bus.

Indeed, it was to secure a ‘poetically expressive rather than naturalistic’ style that he recruited Miroslav Ondricek as director of cinematography. Anderson had admired Ondricek’s methods on set for Milos Forman’s *A Blonde in Love* and the results. Getting permission from Czech authorities to recruit the cameraman took a great deal of effort, but Anderson (another mark of forward continuity) was to use him again for *If....* and *O Lucky Man!*

In August the Berliner ensemble visited London^{vi} and presented a season of Brecht's plays. Anderson, fascinated and inspired by their work, spent much time seeing their productions and talking with the players and directors, whom he found very sympathetic.^{vii} In referring years later to *The White Bus* as a 'mini-epic' he meant the finished film rather than the script. The paper version has fantasy, realism and the pompous character of the mayor but nothing of the epic underpinning its structure.^{viii} It seems that after the visit of the Ensemble, Anderson's ideas for the production took a significant turn toward satire and Brecht.



Anderson and Ondricek on location during the shooting of The White Bus.

This can be sensed in his record of location searches. Together with Delaney and producer Michael Deeley he began touring Salford and Manchester a week after the theatre company had departed. They reconnoitred (and eventually used) so many locations as to suggest he was already preparing to extend the characters' tour of industrial sites well beyond the script. His journal reveals excitement at the potential as they 'sally out: usual stimulating awful marvellous Northern urban landscape. Feel the White Bus in these surroundings can be funny & poetic.'^{ix} They found it necessary to

dupe people whose properties they wanted to film, concealing their true intent behind the pretence that they were shooting a documentary. Having, for example, ‘investigated the Town Hall – the most superb neo-Gothic building you can imagine,’ they sought permission for shooting, ‘sitting there with the butter melting in our mouths, lying like dogs, and feeling like assassins with knives under our cloaks.’^x This melodramatic evocation of scheming resounds with Anderson’s satirical intent.

Evidence for the adoption of Brechtian principles is more than merely circumstantial. Constant, disorienting changes of register (not all of them planned in the script) distance the audience from the predictable comforts of enjoying mainstream, naturalistic storytelling. There is time for two examples only.

The Girl (Patricia Healey) works at her desk in a London clerical office long after everyone but the cleaners have gone. Cut to her body dangling, hanged, above the desks. The cleaners continue their labours, observing nothing. Cut to the Girl who takes her coat and leaves. Three shots. Without establishing narrative motivation the film leaves us to deduce that she has fantasised herself as dead. Lewenstein for one did not get it^{xi} – and given that the register changes as soon as she leaves the building, that is not surprising. It is not the middle of the night but Saturday afternoon and on the street the Girl’s attention is drawn to a young man listening to live football commentary on a transistor set. This is where Delaney’s short story starts.^{xii}

The sharpening of Anderson’s satirical focus is confirmed in the second example. It’s a scene which pays homage to the Berliner Ensemble. After viewing industrial processes and boring catering facilities without number, the passengers on the bus, bemused tourists, are shepherded into the Council’s Community Centre. The mayor delivers his PR puff, describes the amenity as essential for ‘corporate relaxation and refreshment’ with no understanding of what a community might be. A young man (it’s Anthony Hopkins) commands the stage, a rifle slung under his arm, and sings one of Brecht’s songs in German. No connection is made for the English-speaking audience with anything that precedes or follows, but Erik Hedling identified the song as ‘Resolution’ from *Days of*

the Commune. Anderson had seen the play twice during the Ensemble's London season^{xiii} and had taken Hopkins with him, delighted that the actor 'responded with the understanding and sensitive appreciation of that art, that I'd expected.'^{xiv}



Anthony Hopkins on stage in The White Bus.

The first verse gives the tenor of the fragment that is sung directly facing the mayor.

Realising that it is our weakness
 That enables you to pass your laws
 We resolve in future to abandon meekness
 And the law hereon will justify our cause^{xv}

Although Anderson had directed plays using Brecht's dramatic methods this was the first time he adapted them for the screen. He shared Brecht's purpose of casting fresh light on contemporary society but did not subscribe to the dramatist's Marxist principles. There is evidence for this in Anderson's dispute with Kevin Brownlow who wanted to edit the film in accordance with Eisenstein's dialectical pattern of 'intellectual montage' which the editor regarded as a cinematic tool essential to the expression of Marxist ideology. Anderson dismissed the result as 'a meaningless wreck',^{xvi} and asked John Fletcher (an old friend who was making *About the White Bus*) to re-edit while Brownlow was in the USA.

Despite this, Anderson's purpose with *The White Bus* ran deeper than interrupting the storyline to keep the audience aware that they are watching an artefact – though he did that too. Hopkins's brief performance perfectly illustrates Brecht's concept of the 'epic actor' which can be described as a player who does not seek to project a single, unchanging personality but a character who changes all the time by leaps and starts (Gordon, 2006: 231). Thus characters no less than plot are constructed in defiance of conventions guiding the creation of naturalistic, invisibly constructed and rounded personalities.

As Robert Gordon notes,

...epic theatre had to use every device of dramaturgy, acting and production to prevent the flow of empathy between spectator and performer. To achieve this, the actor had to avoid becoming identified with the character she was representing, but had to use her own personality as the basis for a dramatic role that involved her as both storyteller and character.^{xvii}

The quality and style of epic performance is succinctly captured in Brecht's injunction to actors to perform "consciously, suggestively, descriptively." The epic actor consciously *describes* character and *suggests* salient details to evoke the situation in a style appropriate to a street-singer or stand-up comic rather than a naturalistic actor.^{xviii}

Alan Lovell argued that a dilemma of which Anderson was aware typified the liberal position. It had characterised his writing for *Sequence* and was inherent in the Free Cinema movement.

If the critic is to trust his own responses and be flexible and tolerant in his outlook, alert for quality in any kind of film, isn't there an inevitable drift towards relative values where everybody's critical views are given the same weight? ... The

obvious answer to the dilemma is the development of fixed principles, which both Lambert and Anderson suggest. But such a development leads in the direction of theory and doctrine, which Anderson and Lambert as good liberals are suspicious of. 'It is a matter of fact not of opinion that the cinema is an art. *This does not call for theoretical discussion – unless, of course, you enjoy that kind of intellectual exercise.*'^{xix}

Lovell argues that the two men tried to resolve the dilemma by reaffirming the value of personal response and a belief in humanism – in short they failed to resolve it. In Lovell's opinion, the same ideological dilemma underlay Free Cinema. Anderson's work on *The White Bus* suggests that in Brechtian satire he found a means, without abandoning liberal values, to escape the dilemma.



A scene from The White Bus.

Satire has to be intensely focused. It targets and excoriates those things that its makers find ridiculous, inequitable or just plain wrong. It seems to avoid the weakness of liberal criticism alleged by Lovell, namely a philosophical obligation to allow all voices to have equal value. Furthermore, it does not require its makers to demonstrate how to rectify the iniquities it focuses on. For this reason, it allowed Anderson to hide his personal values and thereby sidestep the issue Lovell identified. His values are concealed by irony in *The White Bus* and rising anger in the trilogy. In addition, satire allowed him to avoid taking on the 'sociological' (the theorised understanding of society, culture and films that he so despised). Since wit and anger were two powerfully energised outlets for the director's emotionally charged intelligence, it seems reasonable to speculate that the adaptation of an ancient literary form into a vivid (and at least superficially anti-British) screen cycle

may have been psychologically satisfying to him, perhaps in some way allowing him to find in satirical fantasy a home for his many frustrated yearnings as they metamorphosed into disillusion.

Soon his frustrations were to be multiplied by *The White Bus* itself or rather, the loss of it.

Prior to that Kevin Brownlow returned from the USA early in 1966 and helped tidy some of the editing that John Fletcher had found difficult in his absence.^{xx} Over the six weeks to 17th February, Anderson notes progress and reversals in the dubbing and mixing of voices and effects, the recording of Misha Donat's music, and the transfer and rebalancing of sound from magnetic to optical, together with some re-editing of the picture. His diary reports doubts and anxieties, often projected onto his associates in a pattern of incremental depression that became the norm with his work for the screen. These depressive doubts intensified in tandem with his exhaustion as each film came closer to completion while opportunities for improving the work in post-production were being tied off by budget limitations and deadlines.

So only a month after praising John Fletcher's loyal and effective work, he seems to Anderson to lack efficiency, control and creative imagination.^{xxi} The director doubts the input of a conductor he refers to disparagingly as 'an efficient hack'.^{xxii}

Music O.K. but honestly I don't really know. Would it be better without?

Sneakingly I think so, but no time or leeway to try. Actually Mischa [sic] is good, intelligent & v. capable: though he could be better on timing and fitting to cuts.^{xxiii}

He plumbs the nadir early in February. After running the sound tracks at Elstree, he finds it 'intensely depressing – the picture seems meaningless, the sound uninventive, lacking in spark and finesse...'^{xxiv}

Meanwhile, some promotional work commenced. Tony Snowdon photographed him with Delaney. 'We played the game – crouching low and absurdly close to the Moviola.' An

‘affable ignoramus’ interviewed them for *Life*, Anderson allowing himself to be pushed into being controversial and ‘outrageous’, then feeling ashamed of it.^{xxv}

In February 1966 he received his fee of £2,000 from Woodfall.^{xxvi} Then the completed film was screened privately in April (Prague),^{xxvii} June (London) and September (Venice) – and the history all but grinds to a halt. The other directors had abandoned plans to shoot other stories by Delaney. In October Anderson saw Peter Brook’s contribution, then titled ‘Ride Of The Valkyries’. With withering scorn he noted its ‘utterly disastrous amateurism’ and told Lewenstein ‘that the only hope for it is to give it to a good professional editor: and devise a consistent, blanket music-track. But God knows really what the ultimate fate of the Trilogy will be.’^{xxviii}

In the first week of January 1967, Anderson attended

the long awaited screening of the TRILOGY... my view of the recut of Peter Brook’s Ride of Valkyries [sic] and first glimpse of Tony’s Red & Blue. The first remains amateurish and confused; the second has Tony’s usual virtuosity, combined with a very flashy, commercial-style colour, and a phoney, masturbatory sensuality, exploiting to an uncomfortable degree the monstrous narcissism of Vanessa...^{xxix}

Three days later, Anderson records ‘a preposterous meeting’ at Woodfall in which Brook seemed ‘totally complacent about his botch’. All Anderson’s suggestions were shot down and he came under pressure to cut his film’s first ten minutes.^{xxx} He was no readier to make that sacrifice than when Lewenstein had expressed his bewilderment at them in September 1965.^{xxxi} In the spring of 1967, Anderson worked, with Brook’s approval, on redubbing the Valkyries^{xxxii} (later retitled *Zero*), but in effect the trilogy was dead.

Over the next fifteen years whenever he saw an opening, Anderson explored the possibility of independent release for *The White Bus*. Writing in 1980 to John Tilley of United Artists in New York he recalled how he had tried to ‘detach [it] from Peter Brook’s abortive Keaton-style comedy (and may Buster forgive him!), and from Tony

Richardson's limp attempt at a musical.' He 'deplored the way they changed the original conception of that trilogy-film, and [...] produce[d] a film which made no composite sense and which I could not blame United Artists for shelving.'^{xxxiii} As the correspondence continued, he suggested linking it in a double bill with Kubrick's *Killer's Kiss* (in which UA possessed the rights) or alternatively with his own *Every Day Except Christmas* and *Thursday's Children*.^{xxxiv} This, like his previous efforts, came to nothing and, apart from a brief release in the Paris Pullman cinema in London July 1968(?), a late night transmission by BBC Television in 1981 and occasional film society screenings it remained unseen.^{xxxv}

i LA 6/1/46 (4 June 1964).

ii LA 6/1/48 (24 February 1965). Although Robin Fox tried to keep the project alive, it did not come to fruition (LA 6/1/48, 3 March 1965).

iii LA 6/1/48 (6 May 1965); Shelagh Delaney, 'The White Bus' (1964) in *Sweetly Sings the Donkey* (Harmondsworth, Penguin: 1968) 121-38.

iv Lindsay Anderson, Programme Notes for Gary Sweet's showing of *The White Bus*. LA 1/4/5/1 (3 December 1979).

v Lindsay Anderson, Programme Notes for Gary Sweet's showing of *The White Bus*. LA 1/4/5/1 (3 December 1979). (Edited by presenter)

vi Some of the actors went to visit the dying man.

vii LA 6/1/48 (29 August 1965).

viii Shelagh Delaney, 'The White Bus' (typescript, n.d.) (LA 1/4/1/1).

ix LA 6/1/48 (6 September 1965).

x LA 6/1/48 (9 September 1965).

xi LA 6/1/48 (28 September 1965).

xii Shelagh Delaney, 'The White Bus' (1964) in *Sweetly Sings the Donkey* (Harmondsworth, Penguin: 1968) 121-38.

xiii Erik Hedling, *Lindsay Anderson: Maverick Film-maker* (London: Cassell, 1998)

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xiv LA 6/1/48 (29 August 1965).

xv Bertolt Brecht, *The Days of the Commune* (1955) tr. Clive Barker and Arno Reinfrank (London, Eyre Methuen: 1978) 33.

xvi LA 6/1/48 (10 December 1965).

xvii Robert Gordon, *The Purpose of Playing: Modern Acting Theories in Perspective* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 2006) 231.

xviii Robert Gordon, *The Purpose of Playing*, 232.

xix Alan Lovell, 'Free Cinema' in Alan Lovell and Jim Hiller, *Studies in Documentary* (London, Secker and Warburg/ bfi:1972) 154-5 citing Lindsay Anderson, 'Stand Up! Stand Up!' (Lovell's italics).

xx LA 6/1/50 (10, 11, 13 January 1966).

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- xxi LA 6/1/50 (2, 5 February 1966).
xxii LA 6/1/50 (28 January 1966).
xxiii *Ibid.*
xxiv LA 6/1/50 (2 February 1966).
xxv LA 6/1/50 (12 January 1966).
xxvi LA 1/4/3/1/1-3 (February 1966).
xxvii LA 6/1/50 (28-30 April 1966); LA 6/1/50 (19-22 June 1966); LA 6/1/50 (2 September 1966).
xxviii LA 6/1/50 (7 October 1966).
xxix LA 6/1/54 (6 January 1967).
xxx LA 6/1/54 (9 January 1967).
xxxi LA 6/1/48 (28 September 1965).
xxxii LA 6/1/54 (18-20 May 1967).
xxxiii Lindsay Anderson, letter to John Tilley, United Artists, New York (LA 1/4/3/5/1, 2 January 1980).
xxxiv Lindsay Anderson, Letter to John Tilley, United Artists, New York (LA 1/4/3/5/3, 30 January 1980).
xxxv See Lindsay Anderson, *Never Apologise* (ed. Paul Ryan) London: Plexus, 2004) 107; Paul Sutton, 'Lindsay Anderson's Lost Masterpieces Part One – *The White Bus*,' in *Camera: Cambridge University Film Quarterly* 1 (Winter 2002) 43.