

An unwelcome trend in British filmmaking

Last Orders, written and directed by Fred Schepisi

By David Walsh
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Last Orders, *written and directed by Fred Schepisi, based on the novel by Graham Swift*

In Fred Schepisi's *Last Orders* four men travel by car from south London to the Kent coast to scatter the ashes of a dead friend (and in one case, adoptive father) in the sea. In the course of the journey the four recollect the man, Jack Dodds (Michael Caine), and their relations with him, extending back to the Second World War. Dodds's widow, Amy (Helen Mirren), has chosen to spend the day, as she has done once a week for decades, visiting her brain-damaged daughter, whom Jack has always refused to acknowledge. She too remembers the past, with its pleasures and pains.

The tone of the piece is vaguely elegiac. The owner of a butcher shop, Jack always wanted Vince (Ray Winstone), the adopted son, to go into business with him. Instead Vince has become a successful hustler of a car dealer. Ray (Bob Hoskins), a racing tipster, has always had a passion for Amy, and we learn, once carried on a brief affair with her. Vic (Tom Courtenay), an undertaker, found out about that relationship, but kept his tongue. The other passenger in the car, Lenny (David Hemmings), a one-time boxer and retired fruit and vegetable man, has a bone to pick with Vince, because the latter got his daughter pregnant years before.

And so it goes, in a fairly routine fashion. A few stops for drinks, some quarreling, some reminiscing. While the film never entirely collapses into sentimentality and nostalgia, it certainly teeters on the brink of doing so.

Last Orders celebrates or memorializes, almost without criticism, a way of life associated with postwar Britain, "the dying tremors of a generation," in the words of one commentator. Another critic, approvingly, describes the film's subject as "the ordinary bravery of carrying on." A third observes, again approvingly, that the film "suggests that Britain has remained ... a nation of shopkeepers." Schepisi's film has generated the sort of commentary and

praise that one might have expected to encounter in a discussion, let's say, of the Noel Coward-David Lean production, *In Which We Serve* (1942), the canny propaganda vehicle of the British war effort. A film critic wrote about that work: "Aboard Coward's fictional *HMS Torrin* there existed forties British society in microcosm. Here everybody knew his place.... The one thing they all had in common was the knowledge that each of them, high or low, was expected to show unswerving loyalty and devotion to duty."

The most remarkable feature of *Last Orders*, 60 years later, is the virtual absence of anti-establishment sentiment. The difficulties or disappointments the characters have experienced are nearly all of their own making: Jack has been obstinate with his son and insensitive to his daughter; Lenny failed as a boxer because of laziness and a drinking habit; Vince, perhaps because he was adopted, developed an aggressive, violent side to his character; Ray has been too accommodating and suppressed his real feelings and desires, and so on. Amy, of course, is a saint.

I can't recall another British film, ostensibly surveying the entire postwar period, which made so little reference to institutions, parties, class realities. *Last Orders* portrays a snug and complacent, if emotionally turbulent, little world. And something of a fantasy. Not only do none of the phenomena that one might expect to chance upon, no matter how obliquely, in such a work—for example, the Labour Party, Thatcherism, the trade unions, the welfare state, the end of the British empire—come in for a single reference, there is no sign whatsoever of their socio-psychological impact. The only serious financial crisis that arises in the film is resolved by the happy outcome of a horse race.

One's astonishment at the general tone of the piece reaches a peak in scenes in which the characters make reverent stops at the Royal Naval Memorial in Chatham

and Canterbury cathedral on their way to Margate. Vic smiles fondly as he recalls his happy wartime days, and the warm memories (of wrapping the bodies of dead sailors!) are not disrupted by the disrespectful remarks of the obviously disoriented Lenny. The critic in the *Guardian* took note of the sequences and observed sympathetically that all the characters are “moved in different ways and made to feel an affinity with the nation’s past.” Indeed, and the implied social subservience and patriotism are rather sickening. Such scenes would have been unthinkable in British “art” films of another day.

Some unhealthy social and intellectual process, bound up with the effort to defend “British national identity” in a time of political and social turmoil, is at work here.

British social realism of the past 40 years—whether in novels, plays, films or on television—has hardly been immune from criticism; on the contrary, it has on occasion appeared to beg for criticism. Nonetheless, this trend represented as a whole an effort to confront the truth that the postwar reformist scheme of British capitalism had failed, that class difference and social inequality persisted, and that the psychic wounds left by this social failure remained and were festering. This school of realism communicated, at the very least, the genuine anguish and pain experienced by wide layers of the population victimized by schools, factories, reformatories, prisons, the military, government bureaucracy and the other institutions of official Britain. All this vanishes in *Last Orders* in the hazy glow of a neighborhood pub.

This falsity inevitably finds expression in the texture of the film, which is labored, lacking in spontaneity, forced. The humor is not terribly humorous, the dramatic confrontations largely predictable, the situations trite. There are truthful and human moments, but they are few and far between. And, frankly, even of the best moments one is inclined to think one has seen them before, in other films, only done more artfully and with more depth. The actors do their best, but they are defeated by the essentially shabby and conventional material.

It was not always thus. The histories of the performers point to the transformation that has taken place within significant layers of the British artistic milieu.

Courtenay, a wonderful actor, first came to attention in Alan Sillitoe-Tony Richardson’s *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1962), as a rebellious youth at odds with a repressive reformatory governor. He appeared two years later in Joseph Losey’s *King and Country*, an indictment of the military high command in World War I

and war generally.

Hemmings is best known as the callow and amoral fashion photographer in Michelangelo Antonioni’s *Blowup* (1966), which, whatever else it might have been, provided a scathing picture of “swinging” London. The actor also appeared in Richardson’s *The Charge of the Light Brigade* (1968), an attack on British imperialism and the military.

The remarkable Helen Mirren had a career with the Royal Shakespeare Company, when that troupe was associated with artistic and ideological adventure, and in 1972 joined radical stage director Peter Brook’s International Centre of Theatre Research. She also had a role in Lindsay Anderson’s *O Lucky Man!* (1973), “an allegory for the pitfalls of capitalism,” in the words of one commentator.

Caine, a talented and engaging performer, has had a more mainstream character to his career even from the beginning, but his persona in his early work was the angry, alienated Cockney, in *Alfie* (1966), and even as Harry Palmer in *The Ipcress File* (1965) and *Funeral in Berlin* (1966)

(Hoskins’s career has had a different trajectory, as he did not really become a leading performer in films until the 1980s, a period of general decline.)

It is not that all the rebelliousness has necessarily been knocked out of the performers. One doesn’t know. They may remain very much themselves. But a great deal of rebelliousness has been knocked out of the writers and directors currently dominating the British cinema. (Or, for that matter, the Australian cinema. Schepisi was a member of the Australian “New Wave” of the 1970s; he is principally remembered as the director of *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* [1978]. Most of his subsequent films, such as *Mr. Baseball* and *I.Q.*, are not to his credit.) The patriotic nostalgia in *Last Orders* is the other side of the coin to the mindless violence of that other popular British trend, the London gangster film. Both currents are set within a distinctly nationalist and conformist framework that obscures critical social truths.

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