

Reframing *Billy*



Reviving Alan Clarke's long disregarded gangster snooker musical

The primary mission of *Lost Films UK* is “to bring forgotten, lost, or unavailable films to the public through research, curation, and screening events.” A straightforward objective, though each “lost film” has its own set of circumstances, and each revival its unique challenges. *Billy the Kid and the Green Baize Vampire* (1985), a bizarre British musical featuring gangsters, opera, comedy, and a climactic snooker game “shoot-out”, is a case in point. Having failed to find an audience upon its original release, it fared little better in the four decades since, and with few positive reviews, the tiniest of cult followings and virtually no home media footprint, a resurrection might seem to be tricky proposition.

I first learned of this “strangest of strange” films as a student at the National Film and Television School (NFTS) when I was asked to plan a season of alternative film musicals. During my research, a BFI article brought the film to my attention describing it as, “an expressionistic gothic odyssey shot entirely on studio sets and spiked with hard-edged musical numbers and bone-dry humour.” Proud of my cult movie knowledge I was immediately embarrassed to never have heard of the film, let alone seen it, but more importantly I was intrigued by the description, and sought to locate a copy of the film right away. I quickly found a low-quality upload on *YouTube*, and although the picture was stretched from academy ratio to widescreen making everyone unnaturally wide, and so dim I had to watch it in a pitch-dark room, I was indeed in thrall of it. The bizarre tone, the purposeful theatricality, the symmetrical compositions, the moving camera, the stylised performances, the brilliant songs (a toss-up between *I Bite Back* and *Cosmic Café* on first watch), and the truly gripping snooker game climax. Where had this film been all my life? *Billy* became a private obsession and when the idea of a public screening took hold it quickly became a public one: wouldn't it be great to bring this bold,

one-of-a-kind film back to UK cinema audiences?

Questionable *YouTube* uploads aside the film is not easy to see in the UK, or anywhere else for that matter. It's rarely broadcast on television, the DVD has been out of print for almost two decades, and it's only intermittently available on more niche streaming services such as *BFI Player*. *Billy* is for the most part, out of circulation, but

finest directors Britain has ever produced. Renowned for his gritty social realist films such as *Scum* (1979) and *Made in Britain* (1982), his collaboration with writer Trevor Preston – also known for hard-hitting dramas such as TV's *The Sweeney* – was expected to yield anything but the surreal, theatrical *Billy*. In contemporary reviews the most empathetic critics praised it as an interesting, if flawed experiment, but many took



this is not a result of the problems that typically plague “lost films” such as tangled rights issues or the lack of suitable screening materials. In fact when I began to research *Billy*'s availability I found it alive, if not exactly kicking, at my very first stop – the ubiquitous UK distributor, Park Circus. No tales of complex rights negotiations or lost print discoveries here, *Billy* can be booked for cinema exhibition virtually any time. Hiding in plain sight, the film isn't “lost” in any conventional sense at all, it's simply been ignored, discarded, and abandoned – so completely it was even absent from the BFI's Alan Clarke retrospective at the Southbank in 2016. The last UK screening was in 2002. What could account for the film being so utterly disregarded?

Alan Clarke is arguably one of the

delight in ridiculing the film. For example, Nigel Andrew of the *Financial Times* suggested the film had “something to displease everyone” and that the songs were “a trial for aural masochists”. It is fair to say audiences were largely unprepared for the stage-bound, surreal Brechtian experience *Billy* provides, but that doesn't make it



bereft of admirable qualities. Film-maker and critic Peter Wollen suggested this was due to an unfortunate paradox: “for many, the weirdness of

of the film proved too much. But it is precisely its quality of wild eccentricity that makes it great". Whether one agrees with that or not, the film *is* quirky, even alienating, and to propose a screening in 2022 is to face a crucial and unavoidable question: what is the audience for the film *now*? I had no sure answer when I first decided to screen *Billy*, but my inner voice urged me to find one - or be proven wrong trying. One speculation was that audiences have evolved since 1986. Only last year, Leos Carax's *Annette* (2021), a film arguably as bizarre as *Billy*, was praised for its the bold hybridity, pop-opera surrealism, and theatrical absurdity; and *Absolute Beginners* (Julien Temple, 1986), *Billy*'s musical sibling from the mid-1980s, had in recent years returned, been reappraised, and bolstered its cinematic legacy. Although a characteristic of one-of-a-kind films is that there *are* no real comparisons, these theories seemed attractive. At the same time I tried to disregard some of the less reassuring data points. For example an *IMDb* comment from an attendee at *Billy*'s 2002 screening who noted, "there were maybe twenty people there". Ouch. It was clear that the 2022 response to *Billy* would be unpredictable, but as a curator keen to establish a reputation for commercial reliability, it was equally clear this was not the safest programming choice. If you excuse the pun - not by a long shot.

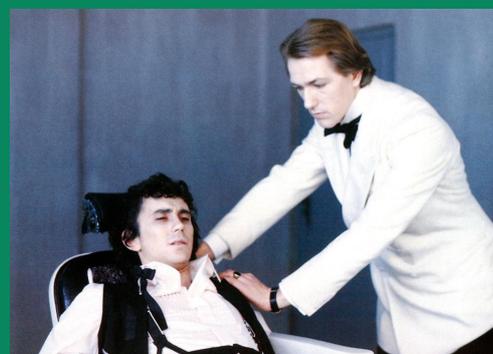
To pitch *Billy* to a venue I needed promotional materials, so I searched for collateral from the original release, only to find items that were unusable, of poor quality, or non-existent. For example, unable to locate a UK quad poster I discovered a quad-formatted newspaper advertisement and a portrait-formatted poster using the same artwork. Uninformative and unengaging, this original design features star Phil Daniels but depicts him oddly out of focus rendering him barely recognisable, and he isn't named or headlined, apart from in the detailed credit lines at the footer. No theatrical trailer seems to ever have been made, and of the few high-quality stills available, most of them - at least to my eyes - fail to capture the spirit of the film. I'd acquired a second-hand copy of the 2006 DVD published by Network Distributing and to solve the issue of the poster I took the decision to use frame captures for two completely redesigned posters with more colourful images, additional characters and quotes that emphasised the uniqueness of the film. I

also created a trailer from the DVD, and with no existing sample to guide me, wrestled with the task of encapsulating the narrative conceit and key qualities of the film in a less than two-minute sequence. Lastly I needed to assess the likelihood of talent participation at any screening event. Director Alan Clarke and screenwriter/lyricist Trevor Preston have both passed away, but musical director George Fenton is still active and almost all the cast are still working. In addition to leads Phil Daniels, Alun Armstrong and Bruce Payne, there's Louise Gold (Miss Sullivan) an accomplished singer, actress and puppeteer with a long string of Jim Henson credits, and Eve Ferret (Mrs. Randall) who had also appeared in *Absolute Beginners* and can sometimes be found performing cabaret in Piccadilly. I reached out to Phil Daniels first and he responded quickly and positively. An upcoming run of Mike Bartlett's play *Cock* in the West End would consume his schedule for an upcoming 12-week



period, but he was interested to participate if it could be done without impacting his professional availability. I began to reach out to the other cast members but with Phil's interest already confirmed I decided to approach the perfect venue for the resurrection of *Billy* - the Prince Charles Cinema in Leicester square. They were receptive, even encouraging, and after providing them with costs and projections they agreed to host the event, the final step to putting the film back on the big screen.

What I hope will be *Billy*'s triumphant return to the cinema is scheduled for Monday 27 June 2022, and in addition to Phil Daniels, both Louise Gold and Eve Ferret will be attending the screening. Ticket sales are going well, and



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- Peter Wollen

with some weeks to go the show has already broken even and will likely turn a profit. With my reputation for commercial reliability now secure, the film's reception has become my main concern. How will the contemporary audience respond? Will it be welcomed with open arms or will it

meet with a divided response as in the past four decades? Will it be an enjoyable one-time event or the beginning of a reassessment? These answers are at the heart of the *Lost Films UK* mission, and whatever the outcome, there will be lessons learned.

A 'typical' "lost films" project involves arduous detective work to track down rights and materials, which is thrilling and impactful, but as the case of *Billy* demonstrates, "lost films" can also be found right under our noses. Some can even be obtained without major research. A new poster, a new trailer, a more detailed audience assessment, a heavy dose of marketing - all contribute towards the same goal of bringing a previously missing film back to a contemporary audience. For a film like *Billy* there could also be a further goal. To prove that all it needed was another break.

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