

SATURDAY NIGHT AND SUNDAY MORNING

“Whatever people say I am, that’s what I’m not—because they don’t know a bloody thing about me! God knows what I am.”

Arthur Seaton (Albert Finney)

Having popped up briefly as the ill-fated son of Archie Rice in Woodfall’s previous release *The Entertainer*, fast-rising theatreland notable Albert Finney now grabbed stardom with both hands via his dynamic, charismatic, irresistible portrayal of “fighting pit-prop” Arthur Seaton, a Nottingham factory worker in his mid-twenties who drinks life to its very last drop.

A brawny, brawling boozier with an eye—make that two—for the ladies, Arthur is British cinema’s closest equivalent to the swaggering Hollywood characters who made James Cagney, John Garfield, Marlon Brando and James Dean household names in the thirties, forties and fifties. Indeed, no less an authority than the *New York Times* (critic Bosley Crowther) directly compared Finney with Cagney and Brando, despite his character speaking “with a grotesque Lancashire [sic] accent you have to keep your ears open to understand.”

All such efforts are, of course, emphatically worthwhile. Propelled from the off by Finney’s sardonic, take-no-prisoners narration, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* is, among several other achievements, an intimate character-study of a complex, thoughtful soul in the strapping body of a proletarian bruiser. Transplanted straight from Sillitoe’s pages, his blistering internal monologue—to which we are often privy—is a tempestuous stream of anti-authoritarian consciousness: “I’m a dynamite dealer waiting to blow the factory to kingdom come!” he snarls.

Czechoslovakia-born director Karel Reisz—who came to Britain as a 12-year-old refugee in 1938—conjures Arthur’s hard-knock urban milieu with the hard-knock veracity that characterised his earlier work in ‘Free Cinema’ documentaries such as *Momma Don’t Allow* (1955), co-directed with Tony Richardson. For his first feature-film, London-based Reisz headed north to a venerable industrial city unused to silver-screen exposure, Nottingham—home town of D H Lawrence, whose novels such as *Sons and Lovers* (1913) unsentimentally and unsparingly chronicled the direct ancestors of the folk Sillitoe would bring to life forty-odd years later.

Reisz struck up a particularly productive partnership with his cinematographer Freddie Francis—who was fresh from shooting Jack Cardiff’s period-piece *Sons and Lovers* in similar areas only weeks before. Seeking to capture contemporary Nottingham as accurately as possible, the pair prioritised real locations—such as the famous Raleigh bicycle factory in Lenton, where Finney plunged himself into the production-lines with rolled-sleeves gusto.

The result, subtly boosted by a smokily insinuating jazz score by Johnny Dankworth, was unapologetically—according to the sniffy verdict of Britain’s official board of censors at the time—“a film designed for the factory-worker section of society.” Reisz and Sillitoe smashed several taboos, including the use of authentically salty language and—a controversial first in British films—the relatively sympathetic depiction of extra-marital sex, as Arthur blithely seduces a colleague’s wife.

The latter is played with moving vulnerability by Rachel Roberts—whose Best Actress prize was one of three BAFTAs the picture received, including Best British Film and (a one-horse race?) Most Promising Newcomer To Leading Film Roles. Salford-lad Finney wasn’t actually making his cinema debut, of course—unlike his fellow Lancastrian Hylda Baker, a veteran of music-hall days who enjoys her belated big-screen bow at 55 as Arthur’s delightfully down-to-earth Aunt Ada.

According to Lindsay Anderson, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* “changed the face of British cinema overnight. It opened doors that had been nailed fast for fifty years.” The picture, which can in terms of radical audacity and sheer meteoric impact be compared with 1960 contemporaries Hitchcock’s *Psycho* and Godard’s *Breathless*, made back its entire budget in a fortnight—allowing Woodfall’s Harry Saltzman to buy an option on novels about another tippling, two-fisted ladies man... James Bond.