

LOOK BACK IN ANGER

"I must say it's pretty dreary living in the American age—unless you happen to be an American."

Jimmy Porter (Richard Burton)

the confines of the cramped flat he shares with his wife Alison (Mary Ure), their infant daughter, and their lodger Cliff (Gary Raymond)—another Welshman, with whom he trades wisecracks and music-hall-style patter-routines. Articulate and ambitious, Jimmy is furiously dissatisfied with his lot—and makes sure everybody around him is aware of the fact at all times...

John Osborne exploded the cosy world of post-war British drama with his 1956 play *Look Back In Anger*; the play's great success made a big-screen version inevitable. Woodfall Films was specifically created by Osborne, director Tony Richardson and producer Harry Saltzman as the engine to bring this about. The crucial job of adaptation was given to Nigel Kneale, whose 1953 transposition of George Orwell's 1984 to the small screen had, in its way, been just as transformative to the British TV—then still its earliest days as a mass medium—as *Look Back in Anger* was to the theatre. The result would earn Kneale the first of his remarkable career's two BAFTA nominations, the other being Woodfall's *The Entertainer* one year later. Burton, shortlisted for Best British Actor, would later receive the first of his six Golden Globe Best Actor nods.

The film vividly but subtly sketches the frowsy, dowdy backdrop of British society—with all its hypocrisy and sexual prurience, encapsulated by salacious headlines in the best-selling newspaper, *The News of the World*—against which Porter rails. But whereas American predecessors such as *The Wild One* and *Rebel Without A Cause* glorified its iconoclastic (but iconic) heroes played by Marlon Brando and James Dean, *Look Back In Anger* is more nuanced and ambiguous. For all Burton's charismatic machismo, Porter is a hot-headed man-child, self-obsessed and self-loathing, obnoxiously lashing out at the woman—Alison—who truly loves him.

continued

He's at his most sympathetic when removed from the confines of domesticity, especially in the wonderful, intimate scenes of conversation with aged local matriarch Ma Tanner (Edith Evans). Jimmy is hit very hard indeed when his confidant Ma Tanner is felled by a sudden stroke. But this is just one of a series of events—Alison's pregnancy and departure, the exit of Cliff, the arrival of Alison's glamorous friend Helena (Claire Bloom) which unbalances his mental equilibrium and forces him to a painfully overdue process of honest self-appraisal, a necessary step towards long-postponed maturity.

Shot in chiaroscuro, inky black and white by Oswald Morris and scored with a suitably jazz-infused score by trad great Chris Barber, *Look Back in Anger* is undeniably a pungent product of its times, but continues to burst with vitality: Burton's bravado, the verbal dexterity of his dialogue (much of it essentially monologues in disguise), the way Richardson successfully "opens out" the play with his use of real locations—in Derby and London—such as the market and the railway station where he and Alison have the climactic rapprochement that will determine the rest of their lives. The chill of the night turns each exhalation into a tiny, hot cloud: love in a cold climate, indeed.