

A TASTE OF HONEY

“Everything’s seen at its best in the dark.”

Helen (Dora Bryan)

John Osborne seeking ugly girl for ‘Taste Of Honey’ ran a headline in the Daily Express of March 2nd 1960—referring to the upcoming Woodfall adaptation of Shelagh Delaney’s groundbreaking 1958 play about a gawky Salford teenager. The Express story was spotted by a 17-year-old Liverpoolian lass working at one of the city’s theatres—first step on a breathtaking journey that would, two years later, see big-screen newcomer Rita Tushingham land a Golden Globe and become the first Briton to be named Best Actress at the Cannes Film Festival.

The Croisette was a busy place in 1962, with no fewer than 35 titles up for the awards—in a competition assessed by a 16-person jury that included a 30-year-old François Truffaut. Indeed, *A Taste of Honey*, now firmly established in the United Kingdom cinematic canon (it ranked 56th in the BFI’s 1999 poll), has sometimes been labelled a distaff, cross-channel cousin of Truffaut’s own enduringly influential *The 400 Blows* (1959).

The two films made a huge impact by adopting radical, audacious techniques to intimately dramatise the coming-of-age of a troubled teenager: Jean-Pierre Léaud as Antoine Doinel for Truffaut; for director/co-writer Richardson, Tushingham as Jo, who is forced to grow up fast after becoming pregnant following a brief affair with a sailor. Richardson collaborated on the screenplay with Delaney, who was herself only 19 when *A Taste of Honey* premiered on the London stage in 1958.

In the manner of Osborne with *Look Back In Anger*, the precocious Salfordian playwright was determined to get very far away from the genteel, upper-middle class milieu of then-fashionable figures such as Terence Rattigan. She was particularly incensed by the “insensitivity” with which Rattigan portrayed homosexuality—thus creating the figure of Geoffrey, who plays a crucial, nurturingly sympathetic role in Jo achieving independence from her blowsy, brassy force-of-nature mother, Helen.

Murray Melvin played Geoffrey opposite Frances Cuka (Jo) and Avis Bunnage (Helen) in the original stage version and retained the role in Richardson’s adaptation, stealing scenes with his feline grace, his trained-dancer’s physical self-possession and mordant wit: “My ‘usual’ self is a very unusual self,” he quips at one point. Melvin would eventually join Tushingham on that Cannes roll of honour, for a role which is generally accepted as the first openly gay major character in a mainstream British production. The fact that Jo’s seafaring paramour (played by half-Ghanaian future barrister Paul Danquah) happened to be black similarly challenged long-standing taboos.

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And if all this wasn't enough, the picture made history by being the first British feature-film to be shot entirely on location in the country—Paul Rotha's *No Resting Place* (1951) having been filmed in Ireland by Wolfgang (Get Carter) Suschitzky. Like the Vienna-born Suschitzky, *A Taste of Honey*'s cinematographer Walter Lassally (1926-2017) fled the Nazis and settled in London; there he embarked on career that began with clapper-boy duties and would see him land an Oscar for *Zorba the Greek* (1963), half a century before his sparkling thespian debut as the elderly writer in Richard Linklater's *Before Midnight*.

Taking full practical and creative advantage of the newly-available lightweight, compact Arriflex 35 BL cameras to shoot quickly in gritty exteriors and often-cramped interiors, Lassally achieves real monochrome wonders with *A Taste of Honey*. He captures the moods and flavours of the Salford, Stockport and Manchester streets where Jo's touching, often sharply humorous story unfolds. He used natural light wherever possible, including one particularly memorable scene when Jo and Geoffrey visit a cave, their faces illuminated by a single candle—the close-up shot made possible a very fast Ilford film-stock previously restricted to newsreels and documentaries.

Lassally had shot such Free Cinema landmarks as *Momma Don't Allow* (1956, Richardson and Karel Reisz) and Reisz's *We Are The Lambeth Boys* (1959), and organically transferred their documentary realism into the fictional realm with technical skill and artistic flair. He was thus a crucial component in the success of a production which landed four BAFTAs including Best British Film—Woodfall thus retaining the "crown" they had taken the year before with *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* and would triumphantly regain with *Tom Jones* two years later...