
TONY RICHARDSON



Born above his father's chemist shop in a Yorkshire industrial town, Cecil Antonio Richardson within four decades became world famous as a director of both plays and films. Although now best known for his work in the latter medium, for which he won two Oscars as producer and director of Best Picture laureate *Tom Jones* (1963), Richardson was a true polymath who achieved ground-breaking success in theatre and television in the 1950s and 1960s, and who continued to contribute with distinction across all three fronts until his untimely death aged 63.

He then achieved posthumous renown as an author, when his memoir *Long Distance Runner* was published in 1993. Two years later Jessica Lange would win the Best Actress Oscar for Richardson's final directorial outing, *Blue Sky*, which had been filmed in 1990-91 but was not released until 1994 due to studio wrangling. Richardson, a lover of life with a lively sense of humour, would surely have relished the irony.

BORN: SALTAIRE, SHIPLEY,
YORKSHIRE, 5TH JUNE 1928

DIED: WESTLAKE, LOS
ANGELES, 14TH NOVEMBER 1991

Woodfall Films, in which Richardson was joined by English playwright John Osborne and Canadian-American producer Harry Saltzman, was initially formed as a means to develop the big-screen version of Osborne's 1956 play *Look Back In Anger*. Richardson had directed the production in its now-legendary debut at London's Royal Court Theatre; he also handled the BBC's adaptation in the same year. The film of *Look Back In Anger*, starring Richard Burton as archetypal "Angry Young Man" Jimmy Porter, may not have shaken up British cinema to the extent that its stage successor did the world of theatre -- that task would be accomplished two years later by another Woodfall landmark, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, which Richardson produced.

Saturday Night was directed by Czech émigré Karel Reisz, who had shared similar duties with Richardson on the seminal 22-minute "Free Cinema" documentary *Momma Don't Allow* in 1955. This was Richardson's big-screen debut, an auspicious beginning after a notably promising earlier career as a director while studying at Oxford University. His imaginative stagings of varsity dramas led to interest from the BBC, where he would complete a training course and go on to supervise several important early broadcasts of plays such as *Othello*.

Richardson from his earliest days had borne a strong anti-authoritarian streak, and was always most comfortable being his own boss. Early ventures to Hollywood met with mixed success—from his ill-fated William Faulkner adaptation *Sanctuary* (1961) to his more warmly-received version of Evelyn Waugh's *The Loved One* (1965). The vast majority of his feature films, however, would be produced under the Woodfall banner (no other director made more than one). The global success of *Tom Jones* funding a series of ambitious, adventurous and eclectic projects for the remainder of the 1960s.

Never one to look back, in anger or otherwise, Richardson prized innovation (“people place too much value on what’s been done before and not enough on what’s not yet been done”) and didn’t attend the *Tom Jones* Oscars ceremony as he was already working on his next projects.

The films which followed *Tom Jones* provided evidence of Richardson’s preference to plough surprising new furrows: the decidedly French *Mademoiselle*, the pan-European *Laughter in the Dark* and the globe-trotting *Sailor from Gibraltar*, the latter featuring his wife from 1962-67, Vanessa Redgrave (the couple’s two children Natasha and Joely Richardson became noted, prize-winning actors in their own right). Redgrave would take a prominent supporting role in Richardson’s *Charge of the Light Brigade* (1968), a rousing revisionist epic very much in keeping with the director’s lifelong penchant for cocking a snook at authority figures.

As director and/or producer, Richardson had by this point been responsible for Albert Finney’s Arthur Seaton in *Saturday Night* and his eponymous rip-roarer in *Tom Jones*, Rita Tushingham’s Jo in the technically and thematically audacious *A Taste of Honey*, Tom Courtenay’s Colin in *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*. He was a master at getting the best out of acting talent on an individual and ensemble level - on the latter front, the very last Woodfall film, *The Hotel New Hampshire* (1984), carved a new sub-genre of film-making which Wes Anderson then went on to make his own.

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While his cinematic profile was somewhat lower in the 1980s and 1990s, he returned profitably to television and stage work in between the occasional big-screen engagement such as *The Border* (1982) and *Blue Sky*. Richardson had not always been a critical favourite, but six years after his death the prestigious Australian publication *Senses of Cinema* included him in their Great Directors series.

“Richardson, especially in the 1960s, leapt from one genre to another, sometimes creating one-of-a-kind films along the way,” wrote Sandra Koponen. “Contrary to the assertion that Tony Richardson had no style of his own, I believe that Richardson’s versatility and ability to work in many styles was an asset rather than a flaw, and perhaps an important key in his approach to filmmaking. He launched and revived many careers, visualized each project with a fresh eye, and explored the possibilities of cinema as a malleable form. As with any artist who experiments and is prolific, not all works will be successful, but in the course of his career Richardson made at least eight films that are worthy of any cinéophile’s attention.”