

THE LONELINESS OF THE LONG DISTANCE RUNNER

“Believe me, he’ll surprise us all!”

The Governor (Michael Redgrave)

Woodfall consolidated its status as the leading exponent of accessible British neo-realism with their bracingly blunt adaptation of Alan Sillitoe’s 47-page short story, published in a volume which won the 1960 Hawthornden Prize.

It starred, in only his second screen appearance—after

Caspar Wrede’s comparatively little-seen *Private Potter*—scrawny working-class Hull lad Tom Courtenay, at the dawn of what would become a notably illustrious career. Courtenay shattered all previous leading-man stereotypes with his indelible portrait of borstal inmate Colin, a nihilistic anti-authoritarian whose snarling defiance prefigured punk by more than a decade.

Sent to a relatively “progressive” young-offenders’ institution in the windswept, thickly-forested countryside after committing an opportunistic urban burglary with best pal Mike (James Bolam), Colin soon impresses the painfull well-meaning, benign Governor (Michael Redgrave) with his athletic prowess—particularly during extended cross-country runs. The Governor has his eye on an upcoming sports day in which his charges will pit their abilities against representatives of a private school; Colin craftily identifies this as a prime chance to cock a particularly sharp snook at society.

Constructed around Courtenay’s BAFTA-winning performance via a series of extended flashbacks, *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* steadily builds into a stark, compelling character-study: Colin becomes the angular prism through which his constricting, hostile social environment can be viewed. Son of a radical, strike-leading factory-worker, Colin differs from previous Woodfall (anti-)heroes such as *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*’s Arthur Seaton —another Sillitoe creation— in that he has little interest in “playing the game” at all, rejecting the consumerist banalities of a post-war, post-austerity Britain under the pernicious, television-fuelled influence of American pop-culture. “This story is blatant and very trying Communist propaganda,” notoriously sighed one advisor to the British Board of Film Censors

Bitterly cynical in his blunt articulacy, Colin has no problems at all with being firmly “out of step,” surveying everyone and everything around him with a dismissive, sardonic sneer—tinged with a very northern-English brand of caustic humour. The film, shot in dynamic monochrome by Woodfall regular Walter Lassally, was only the second British production—after *A Taste of Honey*, also the work of Lassally—to be shot entirely on location. Brisk and bracing in its evocation of the wintry landscapes, it pulls no punches in its presentation of the borstal’s stark brutality: at one point a hapless inmate, mid-beating, is hurled directly into the camera. For all the Governor’s pleasant words, at such junctures the militarised and oppressive regime under which Colin and his pals chafe is laid bare.

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In the *New Statesman*, critic John Coleman identified director Tony Richardson's experimental-inflected techniques in *Loneliness*—arguably the closest UK equivalent to François Truffaut's Antoine Doinel series—as “the clashing of British and French new waves... it is their head-on confrontation that finally rocks the boat.” More than five decades later, the aftershocks continued to reverberate. Collecting his BAFTA for *The Revenant* in 2016, Leonardo DiCaprio cited *Loneliness* as a crucial formative factor in his early career: “I have been so influenced by so many British actors throughout the years—I remember watching the Tom Courtenay in *Loneliness* of the *Long Distance Runner* when I was 15 years old with my father...”