

## A Canterbury Tale - a personal view

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How do you explain the appeal of a film about a man pouring glue on girls' hair? Where the only love stories are taking place off-screen? And how do you explain the erotic charge of a middle-aged man, Brylcreemed hair awkwardly wind-blown, lying half-concealed in long grass, with a girl old enough to know better and doing nothing more naughty than hiding from her friends?

I have a long history with *A Canterbury Tale*, a film I've loved for the best part of 40 years, and didn't dare to share with anyone until two years ago. I have to know and trust someone really well to be able to say, just absorb and love it, in all its strangeness. Sometimes they get it, sometimes they don't.

For me, seeing ACT as a teenager for the first time in the mid-80s, the shock was that it acknowledged sex at a time when a close-up of James Mason was probably the most arousing thing in British cinema. How many leading ladies of the 40s could you describe as sexy?

I fell for Eric Portman as Colpeper in a big way. Anyone who loves the films of Powell and Pressburger loves Roger Livesey, who is perfect in other Archers films, but showed understandable reluctance to take on such a potentially creepy part - but just how Portman is able to transcend the limits of the stiff-upper-lip Englishman is wonderful. And it makes sense now that we know he was a gay man, well practised at concealment.

Colpeper starts off as the kind of 'hero' most of us would frankly avoid - patronising, sexist and still living with his mother. His loneliness as he tries to communicate the value of preserving all that is his England at the slide show<sup>1</sup>, where the soldiers snooze and heckle, is transferred into a desperate kind of enthusiasm. He's too keen to lecture, too uptight to flirt.

In the scene where Alison finds him in the long grass<sup>2</sup>, we're not sure how much he's attracted to her; he avoids eye contact, gazing out at the view. And yet something about that concealing grass and her proximity relaxes and softens him, and all the 'heritage mysticism' intellectualism that beautifully suffuses the film is replaced by a simpler human need for connection.

The fact that Sheila Sim's performance is so essentially sweet makes that scene on the hill even more remarkable. Pressburger's script acknowledges that she is a girl who has spent carnal weekends unchaperoned with her boyfriend - only just over twenty years before sex was invented, according to Philip Larkin.

So much of 1940s British cinema was irritatingly perky or earnest. ACT manages to combine subtle humour (that jarring village idiot interlude notwithstanding) with deep, authentic emotion without melodrama or silliness like some kind of miracle. When Alison receives the news that her fiancé is still alive, she can barely speak. It's a moment that must have been unbearably moving in wartime for families hoping for good news, and for those who'd already had bad news; and it's still the most powerful scene in the film.



Sentiment and nostalgia is very easily attached to ACT, although that uncomplicated longing is subverted in so many ways - the bucolic sunlit countryside shattered by marauding tanks, the very non-rom-com plot device of the Glue Man, the sheer bloody labour of war as Alison hauls so many forkfuls of muck on the farm<sup>3</sup> - that it's difficult to explain in terms that legitimize the distinctly odd and disturbing basis of the story. Perhaps the only uncomplicated traditional beauty of the film is the glory of the cathedral bells.

I was born in England and moved to Scotland at the age of seven. When it came to deciding which university to go to, there was only ever one I was interested in: Canterbury. I spent most of the first term trying to work out where those gorgeous views of the cathedral, rising like a Spanish barque from the surrounding countryside in the film, were shot from.

We hadn't had a VHS or even Betamax player at home, so I could only have seen the film once before, but I was haunted by it, hearing Allan Gray's theme as I wandered around the cathedral, or trying to see past the dreary parades of late twentieth century retail outlets to the infinitely more atmospheric bombed-out ruins of Rose Lane as Alison saw them<sup>3</sup>.

As an exile from England I was so completely enraptured by the film, and by the idea of Canterbury as the personification of all that I thought was English, that it came as a terrible shock when I was hit by the most overwhelming homesickness for Scotland in that first term at university. Having spent ten years sublimating my

Englishness to avoid being teased or bullied at school, I had been so excited to live and study in Canterbury; to be back in an idealised England that I'd been holding on to for a decade. I was studying drama and film studies - all I'd ever wanted to do.

To feel such misery and not have the maturity or emotional resources to deal with it was terrifying, as was the thought of knowing I'd have to tell my parents that when I went back to Scotland for Christmas, I couldn't return to Canterbury for another term.

Perhaps if we'd actually studied ACT at university, or taken an appropriately deep dive into the work of Michael Powell in his home town, I might have found some way of pulling myself out of the depression I fell into, but instead I would fall asleep in Monday afternoon showings of *Letter From An Unknown Woman*, or (unbelievably) *Jaws*, exhausted after a weekend of loneliness and distress, amongst people I felt as compatible with as a country mouse in a tube station.

The fact that I've returned to ACT so many times since that unhappy autumn perhaps says more about how the film kept that sense of longing alive, despite the memories that were associated with it. I returned to England permanently in my late thirties and it's still a source of wonder to be surrounded by the kind of downland landscape I dreamt of after seeing the film.

ACT provides a sense of comfort, definitely, but there's something deeper in its appeal for those of us who are still trying to work out the meaning of Englishness, with all its messy, early twenty-first century nuances.

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Footnotes. <sup>1</sup> See Chapter 10 of *A Canterbury Tale; Memories of a Classic Wartime Movie* by Paul Tritton; <sup>2</sup> See Chapter 14. <sup>3</sup> See Chapter 8.



Above: *Mucking out: Alison and Prudence Honeywood at the hop farm.* Above right: *'Brylcreemed hair awkwardly wind-blown, lying half-concealed in long grass, with a girl old enough to know better'*