MOTHERS: SOME KIDS DO ’AVE ’EM

Brian McFarlane appraises the psychological insights into mother–child relationships in two recent English films

MOTHERS, generally, have done all right out of the movies. For every monstress like Gladys Cooper who put Bette Davis into unbecoming spectacles and what look like surgical stockings in Now Voyager (1942), there is an Olivia De Havilland giving up All for the sake of her ‘nameless’ son, in To Each His Own (1946), rewarded only in the last line with ‘Our dance I think, mother.’

Self-sacrifice was what mothers were into in those benighted, pre-feminist times. Think of Stella Dallas (1937), with Barbara Stanwyck striding into the night, moved on by a policeman as she watches from the rain-drenched streets as her daughter makes a socially advantageous marriage. (And think how silly this scenario seemed when Bette Midler tried it in the 1990 remake, Stella.) Or think of Irene Dunne in I Remember Mama (1948—can anyone remember Papa? It was Philip Dorn, actually), or wise-strong Beulah Bondi trying to point James Stewart in the right direction in It’s a Wonderful Life (1947). And there were
Mothers: Some Kids Do ’Ave ’Em

mothers-inspirational, like Jane Darwell, who famously intoned ‘We the people’ in *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939).

In English films, there was less idealisation but a fair share of the monstrous. To remind us of Victorian stereotypes, Mary Merrall had been only a shadowy defender of her daughters against their tyrannical father in *Pink String and Sealing Wax* (1946), and no match for some of the tough old birds who followed. ‘What curious names some of these people have,’ says Ambrosine Phillpotts, relaying a phone message to her besought daughter in *Room at the Top* (1959), thus trying to keep an unsuitable suitor at bay. Dora Bryan walks out on pregnant daughter Rita Tushingham in *A Taste of Honey* (1961) when it seems Rita’s baby may be black. Thora Hird epitomises lower-middle-class aspiration and vicious prudery when Alan Bates fecklessly gets her daughter pregnant in *A Kind of Loving* (1962). But no-one was ever quite as monstrous as Diana Rigg in the chilling TV mini-series *Mother Love* (1990): with love like hers, hate was irrelevant.

There are a few smart, sassy mothers, like Jessie Royce Landis in *North by North-West* (1959), and see how critic Peter Wollen makes psychoanalytic mincemeat of her in his analysis of that famous Hitchcock representation of motherhood, or, to come right up to date, Frances Fisher in *Laws of Attraction* (2004). But they aren’t much help to their offspring. They are too busy being smart and sassy.

It is probably true to say that Sophocles, Shakespeare and Freud knew it all. Oedipus married someone old enough to be his mother but attractive enough for him to want to sleep with; and Hamlet, who should have read his Sophocles at Wittenberg, is surely not serious about Ophelia, at least not until he has given his mother a bad time in the Closet Scene. And ‘Closet’ is of course where all these forbidden desires are hidden. Mothers are not supposed to have desires of their own, and most of them didn’t; for them, as Hamlet tells Gertrude, ‘the heyday in the blood is tame’. Where, one wonders, would Freud have been without all this background? And where would we, and film-makers, have been without the very complex Complex he invented out of the original family romance of Oedipus and Jocasta?

The spirit of Sophocles hangs ominously over *The Life and Death of Peter Sellers*. Its psychoanalytic underpinning is in Peter Sellers’ relations with his adoring and possessive mum, Peg (Miriam Margolyes), who has elbowed his gentle-mannered father out of the way. When Peg asks him at his second marriage—to Britt Ekland (Charlize Theron)—‘Why are you making the same mistake all over again?’ he replies, as if joking, ‘Because they won’t let me marry
you.’ But it’s no joke really. Peg lays it on the line when Sellers (Geoffrey Rush) comes home dispirited from an early encounter with an agent who turns him down. She won’t let him be defeated so easily and challenges him with: ‘Do you want to be a failure like your father?’ And later on, the father, commenting on Sellers’ progress, ineffectually blames Peg for pushing their son too much, claiming that ‘Good enough was never what his mother had in mind.’ Peg not merely dotes; she is living through her son’s achievements the success that has eluded her, and doesn’t see his crucial failures in human matters.

In dealing with his own son, Peter shows all the effects of being so indulged and idolised. In one of the film’s most disturbing scenes, he smashes his small son’s train set in retribution for the child’s painting a white stripe on his flash new car. Along with the philandering streak that success enables him to enjoy, there is still an element of the wilful child in him, causing him to see his son as a competitor, not as someone who should look to him for guidance. This childish response is reinforced when, trying to win over his angry wife Ann (Emily Watson), he shuts himself in a cupboard, saying with what he hopes is ingratiating little-boy charm, ‘I’ve been bad.’ Incapable of adult discussion, on personal matters at least, and echoing his earlier destructive outburst, he wrecks their posh new apartment when he finds that Ann, exhausted with his self-absorption, is having an affair with their decorator. Then, without much subtlety (though perhaps as much as is needed), the film cuts to him at home with Peg.

They are cuddling on the bed, as she croons, ‘You’re all right. You’re with Peg now.’ Peg’s continuing influence depends on Peter’s not moving into a fully adult role: instead of encouraging him to face up to his responsibilities, she persuades him to accept the fact that ‘She left you. Just let her go. Don’t you worry, my little boy. The future’s ours now.’ Now, that is, that tedious wives are out of the way. When his father dies and she is more preoccupied with Peter’s Pink Panther hit, she reminds him that ‘The reporters will want some remarks.’ That is her measure of his success, just as later she murmurs with satisfaction ‘Both channels’, when news of Sellers’ heart condition breaks. The oleaginous clairvoyant, Maurice (Stephen Fry), becomes a sort of surrogate for Peg, and, definitively, Sellers himself will stand in for Peg in a moment of awareness of how she has shaped his life. Margolyes’ Peg makes Hamlet’s Gertrude seem a model of maternal understanding. Sellers has a kind of revenge when he doesn’t go to her deathbed: ‘Your boy’s needed, Peg. I’m a star now.’

There is of course more to the film than this relationship, but it is the dominating interest. The Goon Show associates and the early British film successes with the Boulting brothers, notably as Kite the shop steward in I’m All Right,
Jack, are glossed over, in the hurry to get to Kubrick and *Dr Strangelove* (oddly omitting *Lolita*) and Blake Edwards and the ‘Panther’ films, and the international career. This is probably understandable in box-office terms, but, despite Rush’s superb impersonations of Sellers’ impersonations in these roles, they don’t carry much resonance. Rush’s is a magisterial diagnosis of a man who believes ‘I don’t really have any personality of my own’, who comes to dazzling life only in the roles he plays, and who, in a poignant scene near the end, is watching home movies as if in search of his elusive self. Director Stephen Hopkins keeps the film moving fluently between such reality as Sellers can muster and the fantasy worlds in which something more ‘real’ is revealed about him, and neither he nor Rush seeks to sentimentalise this brilliant, deeply dislikable man.

By coincidence, the shadowy Sellers father is played by the same gifted character actor, Peter Vaughan, who plays the quickly disposed-of Toots, husband of *The Mother*. This film opens on two elderly people in bed and moves through an austere little montage sequence as they get up, she helps him dress, and they make their way by train to London. The series of fades separating these early glimpses of their lives enacts a sense of modest, possibly arid ritual. They stay with their son Bobby (Steven Mackintosh) and his shrewish wife Helen (Anna Wilson-Jones) and their largely indifferent children. The whole family later has dinner with their daughter Paula (Cathryn Bradshaw), an occasion bathed in what will prove to be an ironically warm glow, with Toots, very touchingly, saying ‘You know the thing I’m most proud of—my family’, and toasting them with ‘Long life’. He dies in the night, and the film’s real drama begins. What is to become of Mother? She has a name, May, but until now it’s the role that has defined her.

Until this point, it has been unclear what May is making of her life. She seems patient with Toots, but also bored with his perhaps overeager pleasure in the family, as if it’s not something she can throw herself into unequivocally. And neither can son or daughter reciprocate, as becomes apparent after Toots’s death. Bobby can scarcely conceal his impatience with her and tells her she can’t stay there, and Mackintosh’s tense, slightly twitchy persona works very cleverly here; while all that Paula suggests is that May, or Mother, could ‘mind Jack [small son] some time’. What they haven’t counted on is that in May the heyday in the blood is not tame. It may have been subdued into quiescence but when Bobby’s hunky young carpenter Darren (Daniel Craig), who is also Paula’s boyfriend, responds to her invitation, ‘Would you come with me to the spare room?’ she knows that she still has a sexual self that wants satisfying.
May is significantly not a ‘smart’ 70-year-old. Her clothes are post-menopausal in cut and colour and neither director Roger Michell nor screenwriter Hanif Kureishi makes the mistake of having her bloom in obvious ways. It is mainly by noting what happens to the eyes and around the mouth of the actress that one is alerted to the inner liberation that has taken place. Paula is always yapping about ‘liberation’ and how it is her due; May has quietly undergone it. In films, there is still something shocking about an older woman taking a lover several decades her junior, but the casting of TV actress Anne Reid triumphantly carries the scenario through. Yes, there is something shocking: apart from anything else, Darren is involved with daughter Paula, but it is the explicitly stated sexual desire of the elderly woman that is even now rare in films. Most of those strong mothers referred to above, whether dominant or self-sacrificial, are deemed to be past such desire.

In its quiet way, and The Mother is quiet in the way that so many of the best British films have often been (think of Brief Encounter, resonant here for other reasons, too), the film forces us to think about life’s priorities. Personal gratification is only one of these—but it is one. Michell, Kureishi and Reid bring a quiet insistence to this story of a woman who refuses to settle into being a little old lady. She doesn’t want to become invisible in the city, and she is not prepared just to be at her daughter’s beck and call, or to be an irritant in her son’s fraught home. However, if there are glimmerings of Sirk’s All that Heaven Allows or Fassbinder’s Fear Eats the Soul about May’s involvement with Darren, the film-makers have sedulously avoided imbuing it and them with a sentimentally romantic glow.

There’s no suggestion even that May has been a particularly good mother. Perhaps she has always been bored with having to fulfil the limited and limiting demands of the role. The tensions between her and her children are thrown into sharp relief when the Mother becomes the Widow. Paula, who is regarded as an inspirational creative-writing teacher, blames her mother for her own low self-esteem. ‘You hardly touched me,’ accuses Paula, and this line is echoed later when May tells Darren gratefully, ‘I thought no-one would ever touch me again, apart from the undertaker.’ Bobby, perhaps in reaction to his parents’ marriage, seems unable to find contentment with his forceful wife.

May is simply ‘not ready for old age’. She submits to the sexual huffing and puffing of writing-class widower Bruce (Oliver Ford Davies), but she wants serious physical passion. She may or may not find this, post-Darren, but as she leaves her own provincial home, with sketch-pad, ticket and passport, the camera, in a rigorously held long take, watches her from inside the house, through the
ledged windows, and the implication is that this is what she has escaped. There may be no certainty ahead, but there was no future behind.

These two films—*The Mother* and *The Life and Death of Peter Sellers*—offer, *inter alia*, the spectacle of children who haven’t fully grown up. Blaming parents for where one is in middle age is a convenient alibi, but it tends not to take much account of the needs of the parents. Feminists may find the psychologising in *Sellers* simplistic but they are almost certain, and rightly so, to approve of the Mother who finally insists that she is a woman first.

**NOTES**

1. Peter Wollen, ‘North by North-West: A Morphological Analysis’, *Film Form* 1, 1976, pp. 20–34.
2. The casting of Reid, known to television followers of *Dinnerladies* and *Dalziel and Pascoe* (as Warren Clarke’s sister), was one of the last inspirations of Mary Selway, doyenne of UK casting directors who died earlier in 2004.