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ALLELUJAH



ALLELUJAH

UN FILM DE RICHARD EYRE

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international
film festival®
OFFICIAL SELECTION



2023 - UK - 99 minutes

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SYNOPSIS

Lorsque l'unité gériatrique d'un petit hôpital du Yorkshire est menacée de fermeture, ses dirigeants décident de riposter en mobilisant la communauté locale et invitent une équipe d'information à filmer les préparatifs d'un concert en l'honneur de l'infirmière en chef.



DIRECTOR: RICHARD EYRE

Richard Eyre has directed in theatre, opera, TV and film. His first feature film was THE PLOUGHMAN'S LUNCH, which won the Evening Standard Best Film Award in 1983. Since when, he has directed IRIS (which he co-wrote), STAGE BEAUTY, NOTES ON A SCANDAL, THE OTHER MAN and THE CHILDREN ACT. He was producer of Play for Today for BBC TV from 1978-1980 and has directed many films for the BBC including the BAFTA-winning TUMBLEDOWN, COUNTRY, SUDDENLY LAST SUMMER, THE INSURANCE MAN (written by Alan Bennett), THE DRESSER and KING LEAR (with Anthony Hopkins).

He was Artistic Director of the National Theatre from 1988 – 1997 and has directed many plays and musicals in the West End and on Broadway. He has directed opera at the Royal Opera House in France, Germany and at the Metropolitan Opera in New York. He has written several stage adaptations and published five books. He has won numerous awards for theatre, TV and film. He was knighted in 1997 and was made a Companion of Honour in 2017.

FILMOGRAPHY

2023	ALLELUJAH
2018	KING LEAR (TV)
2017	THE CHILDREN ACT
2015	THE DRESSER
2008	THE OTHER MAN
2006	NOTES ON A SCANDAL
2004	STAGE BEAUTY
2001	IRIS



THE PRODUCTION STORY

The stage production of Alan Bennett's ALLELUJAH premiered at the Bridge Theatre in London on 11th July 2018. Producers of the film Damian Jones and Kevin Loader invited Cameron McCracken, Executive Producer and Managing Director of Pathé UK, to see the play. They could all see its potential to form the basis for a feature film that could be both entertaining and politically urgent.

Conversations took place with Bennett about adapting his play for the big screen. He did not feel he had the time to do the adaptation himself, but he gave his blessing to the project and, says McCracken, 'suggested that we treat him as if he were deceased!'

Heidi Thomas (writer of Cranford and creator of Call the Midwife) agreed to come on board. For Jones and Loader this was a great coup, 'We all knew of her excellent writing and felt like she would be the perfect fit. She was able to reshape and focus the story whilst retaining much of Alan's brilliant character work and dialogue, making the transition from stage to screen seamless.'

Despite being a huge fan of Bennett's work, Thomas had missed seeing the play when it was first staged but fell in love with the work after reading it: 'The project was hugely appealing – I felt the world was familiar and something that I could identify with, so I was very keen to get into talks with the team to see if I could bring something to the table based on my own experience,' she recalls, 'The play was very bold, and it had certain surreal elements, but to succeed as a film, it was going to have to become more intimate and in a sense more real.'

Thomas met with the producers in late March 2020 just before COVID brought the world to a halt. She describes the writing process as a 'lockdown pandemic project – when everyone thought it was just going to be three weeks. but ended up stretching to a few months and then to a couple of years.' She also adds that it was a very strange feeling to go out every Thursday evening and clap for the NHS and then return to her desk to continue writing ALLELUJAH: 'It was very interesting to be writing a film that was about the NHS at a time when the NHS was facing an unprecedented challenge, so it certainly informed my thinking.'

When Thomas sent a draft of the script to Bennett for his thoughts, she found him to be extremely supportive. McCracken comments that Bennett had said that when he was laughing as he read the script "he didn't know if he was laughing at his original lines or Heidi's! I can think of no greater compliment!'

With the script in good enough shape to start the search for a director, everyone agreed that Richard Eyre was the perfect candidate. Aside from being a brilliant award-winning director of stage and screen, Eyre was of an age to be able to relate deeply and personally to the material and to have formed friendships over the years with many of the actors needed to populate the large ensemble cast of elderly patients. Indeed, Eyre had first directed a screenplay by Alan Bennett almost 40 years ago – THE INSURANCE MAN (1986) starring Daniel Day-Lewis. Eyre recalls being offered the job: 'It was a no-brainer – to be offered the opportunity of working on something of Alan's again was just completely irresistible, and Heidi is an extremely bright and accessible writer and a perfect complement to Alan'.

With Eyre on board, he continued to refine the script with Thomas whilst approaching the key cast. Actors did not hesitate – the combination of Eyre, Bennett and Thomas' screenplay proved a powerful draw for many of the UK's greatest (and oldest!) actors including Judi Dench, Derek Jacobi, David Bradley and Julia McKenzie. Eyre also drew on a pool of 'younger' talent for his leads: comedy legend Jennifer Saunders; and newcomer Bally Gill. Says Thomas: 'I can't believe we found somebody so perfect to play Dr. Valentine, someone who's at the beginning of his career and is able to bring all of that innocence and sincerity to the role'.

Of his actors, Eyre comments: 'They all responded to the writing of Alan and Heidi because they

all have a wit, and that is one of their most attractive characteristics. They all act with a real relish for the writing.'

McCracken adds, 'The particular alchemy achieved by Richard is remarkable. How is it possible to make a film that is both funny and moving yet also politically confrontational? Not only that, but the film also delivers an unexpected twist that totally wrongfoots the audience. Richard, with Alan and Heidi and his amazing cast, has created a darkly comic tale about surviving old age that also manages to be a clarion call for public health care. That's quite an achievement!'

'The meaning of the film is contained in the lives of the many characters portrayed, so it's a kaleidoscope of meanings. I'm thrilled I got to make this film in the company of wonderful actors and extraordinarily supportive producers,' Eyre explains.

Loader adds that when people emerge from the cinema having seen the film, he wants them 'to go out and celebrate life, to celebrate the vivacity and variety of old age, and to think about how we preserve the human spirit as we get older.'

A LOVE LETTER TO THE NHS

2023 marks the 75th anniversary of the UK's National Health Service ('NHS').

The NHS was one of the first national health services in the world. Established in 1948, the founding principles were that the NHS should be comprehensive, universal and free at the point of delivery - a health service based on clinical need, not ability to pay

For the cast and crew, the most important message of the film is gratitude to those working on the frontline of the NHS - the work that they do and the sacrifices they make. There may be terrible failings that come to light, but the idea of the NHS and everything it stands for deserves celebration and protection.

Eyre comments 'The line that Russell Tovey's character has about the NHS being the most important idea that British politics has come up with, resonates very, very strongly for me. As Thomas states: 'The thing about the NHS is if you are under the age of 75 and have lived in the UK all your life, the NHS is written into your bones: the NHS cut your umbilical cord, the NHS vaccinated you, the NHS bandaged your broken limbs, has given you a hip replacement. It is a skeleton that holds all our lives together.'

For Judi Dench, it is clear that NHS staff go above and beyond, often at the expense of their own wellbeing: 'There can never be enough congratulations and praise for what the NHS does, especially during the pandemic. They've been a wonderful safety net for people and have worked so tirelessly.'

'Being a member of society and knowing that we all have access to the same level of healthcare is so important. It's galvanising and something that we must protect. What we've been through over the past few years just shows how important it is to value our health workers and people on the front line,' continues Russell Tovey.

For Jennifer Saunders, the NHS is a huge part of our national culture and identity and should be something that we are proud of: 'When you go to other countries that do not have public healthcare and you realise how much people pay for basic medication, it's shocking. We love the NHS because we own it: it's ours.'

However, the NHS is under immense pressure and the frequent subject of criticism both justifiable (where tragic mistakes have been made) and unjustifiable where the expectations of the patients cannot be met for want of funding.

'Everybody has a story about being saved by the NHS and everybody has a story about being kept waiting by them. On balance, I know that we all value it as the most extraordinary resource. It affects everybody's lives. If it is taken away, everybody's lives will be affected for the worse,' says Thomas.

Eyre concludes, 'Nothing created by human beings is perfect. Every institution created by man has the flaws and virtues of the people who created it and continue to build it. It's as fallible as humanity is fallible, but I would defend it to my death.'

THE STING IN THE TALE

Like a sugar-coated pill, ALLELUJAH is not only a witty entertainment – it is also a provocation, challenging us to think hard about how we resource care for the elderly.

'Our ageing population is only going to become more important, not less important,' says Loader, 'It feels very timely to be focusing on what we want from our community healthcare, particularly in regard to the elderly,'

As Eyre comments: "At the end of the film, we see what the consequence of the actions of the two medical practitioners are - the doctor and the nursing sister. The doctor is an idealist. The nursing sister is a realist, and that's really the tension in the film between an ideal world in which the NHS is flawless and a perfect conception. And the reality of the NHS, which is that the government is constantly demanding greater efficiency, greater cost saving, greater cost-effectiveness. So, you see the strain between idealism and pragmatism. The thing that probably is the most complex issue in the film is the issue of whether you should continue to keep somebody alive - somebody who's in pain, somebody who feels their life has come to an end - because it's your duty. Is it your duty to care for the person regardless of their circumstance? We all know that in practice, what Sister Gilpin does, happens in the world - quite often compassionately." And I would like to think that if I was in a position where I was in extreme pain, in extreme old age, and simply being kept alive by painkillers, that somebody would do me the favour. So, these are highly complex moral and philosophical issues. And I wouldn't just draw a line that is a straight line and say, 'what sister Gilpin does in any circumstance is unforgivable'. Yes, it's wrong. And yes, she is in good faith. And I say in good faith because, in trying to fulfill the demand for efficiency and cost effectiveness, she is doing what she has been asked to do. It begs the question of whether the instructions coming from the national health service or from the government to the national health service are right. Are they proper? Do they encompass the moral issues that her actions embodied?"

Jennifer Saunders, who plays Sister Gilpin, comments that having herself cared for her own elderly mother, her immediate reaction to the script was that 'this just absolutely has to be said now - what do we do with old people? The film isn't a criticism of the NHS, it's a criticism of trying to introduce corporate efficiency into a caring system. It doesn't work, unless you're brutal'. As for the character she plays, Saunders is equally emphatic: 'She's been dedicated to the care of the old from a very early age, and she is dedicated to it, she does care.'

Thomas agrees; 'Gilpin has her own humanity. A villain will often believe they are a hero and she believes she is working for the greater good; she is doing what she perceives as the best that she can do in a system that is crumbling under its own weight.'

THE GENIUS OF BENNETT

One of the nation's greatest writers, with a career spanning over sixty years, Bennett has the ability to tackle difficult and taboo subjects through the lives and turns of phrase of everyday people. Eyre has commented: 'What we mean when we describe something as "very Alan Bennett" is that it is droll, sharp, overheard and unexpected.' That quality - as exemplified in his previous acclaimed work, including *THE HISTORY BOYS*, *THE LADY IN THE VAN*, *TALKING HEADS* and *THE MADNESS OF KING GEORGE* - means that cast and crew hold Bennett in incredibly high regard.

For Thomas, although she was invited by Alan to adapt his play, she still found the idea of stepping into his shoes very daunting, mainly because she is such a huge fan: 'I've always revered Alan's writing. I feel incredibly affirmed by it, not necessarily as a writer, but as a person, because Alan writes from a place of deep respect and admiration for people who lead very ordinary lives. He understands that small lives can be filled with enormous things.'

'It took some courage for Heidi to take up an Alan Bennett script and adapt it, like handing over a precious stone to someone and asking them to carve it,' Eyre explains.

Eyre was immediately impressed by the way Heidi was able to weave her own experiences into the script, whilst still keeping her screenplay true to Bennett's spirit and voice: 'Heidi's tone of voice and jokes are similar to Alan's - they're from the same comedic tribe. She's done a supremely clever and self-effacing job taking Alan's wonderful lines and throwing in a different perspective'. McCracken adds 'Heidi is far too modest to ever take credit for the fact that without her this film would not have been made; the wonderfully complex ensemble work that she has so beautifully crafted for so many years - from *CRANFORD* to *CALL THE MIDWIFE* - perfectly equipped her to reinvent the stage play and bring *The Beth* vividly to life on the big screen'

For many of the cast, this is the first Alan Bennett project that they have been involved in. Dench has always held a deep admiration for him, as she explains further: 'Alan's writing is so easily recognisable - every word is written in his own special way. The dark and the light are very marked and apparent. He's a playwright who allows the audience to look further than what is written in the script and what is shown on screen. There's a lot more behind the words.'

For Bradley, learning the script was not difficult: 'I did absolutely nothing in order to learn my lines, the words just leapt off the page and said, learn me!'

Saunders recalls feeling flattered at being offered the role of Nurse Gilpin: 'My generation grew up with Alan Bennett's plays, plus *TALKING HEADS* on the television. He's a National Treasure. You can hear his voice in everything that he does. What I loved about the script was the fact that it catches you by surprise - nothing is ever quite as it seems.'



Until ALLELUJAH came along, Gill had never had the chance to perform in any of Bennett's works, despite having studied his plays: 'I've been really looking forward to it. He, of course, has the comedy, but he also writes in a way that makes you recognise all the characters – they are your mum, your dad, your grandparents. That's such a beautiful thing – being able to connect with them on a human level – for example having someone whose job it is to close down a hospital when his father is a patient there – it's so beautifully layered. The characters that he writes are so three-dimensional.'

For Tovey, having worked with Bennett many times, most famously in THE HISTORY BOYS, he was eager to sink his teeth into this new project: 'It's typical Alan Bennett brilliance. He's an incredibly subversive writer – outwardly, proudly subversive. He tackles everything, even difficult subjects, in a very bolshie, confident way.'

'He writes these great jokes and these marvellous characters, and then suddenly he'll hit you with a reality that really make you sit up and pay attention,' Saunders continues. 'He has this tremendous ability to make you laugh and cry at the same time. He's so funny, and you can hear his voice through all of the characters.'

'Alan Bennett's way of looking at the world is pretty unique. He has a very warm, humanitarian view of people, but he is not a cosy writer, he's not a cute writer. He relishes the individual selfishness and darkness within people, as well as celebrating their humanity. So, I think there is that particular Bennett flavour in this film, which is something we can all enjoy,' says Loader.

For Jacobi, it's the cleverness of Bennett's writing that makes it such a joy to read: 'He's a very real writer but he has this wonderful humour which is not forced. It's a natural humour that's not imposed, it's just who the characters are and how they express themselves. He's not a writer who shows off, his words don't come from left field – they're there right in front of you but they're supremely clever.'

WORKING WITH RICHARD EYRE

With a career spanning film, television and theatre over more than five decades, Eyre is one of the greatest British directors working today. Loader and Jones admit that they felt very blessed when he agreed to direct the film.

'He is one of the most important theatre directors of his generation. Having run the National Theatre for many years, his CV is longer than both my arms,' Loader comments.

'Richard is a delight, he's just been so collaborative and knows exactly what he is doing. He's so precise and is able to easily choreograph these big scenes with lots of characters – it's very impressive,' Jones agrees.

For Thomas, Eyre's contribution was invaluable: 'Richard was able to bring a wisdom and sensitivity, as well as a marvellous ability to interrogate and really get to the heart of a scene or line of dialogue. He's both a writer's director and an actor's director, and he can really make the smallest moments resonate, which I absolutely love.'

ALLELUJAH also reunites Eyre with some of his past collaborators, including Dench and Bradley. Dench worked with Eyre on both IRIS and NOTES ON A SCANDAL, with her performance in each film earning an Oscar nomination.

'We have a relationship where he can say very little, and I know exactly what he wants. He's very relaxed and always has a moment to come and chat with you. It was lovely to be back working with him again,' Dench recalls.

Similarly for Bradley, who last worked with Eyre at the National Theatre over 30 years ago. 'He's a lovely man and I just loved what he has done with this film – he understands the process and knows the value of even a small bit of rehearsal time. He isn't overbearing – he doesn't tell you how to play it. His notes are just great – just small hints that really affect your performance. I just automatically trust his judgement.'

When filming began, it was clear that his directing style was one of collaboration and teamwork. For Gill, who studied Eyre's work at drama school, working with him was a delight: 'He is one of the most wonderful, gentle, encouraging directors that I've ever worked with. He brings a great energy to set. He'll come over and we'll talk about the scene and speaking with him will just unlock things for me. I trust him implicitly.'

Jacobi agrees with this sentiment: 'Richard is very forensic yet very encouraging. I've worked with directors who bully performances out of actors – almost terrorising them. Richard is not like that. He coaxes, he cajoles, he teases and offers lots of encouragement. He's very much part of the team. Richard is one of us, which is nice.'

Working with Eyre had always been on Tovey's bucket list: 'I've loved the projects that he has done, the films that he has made. I've seen so many of his productions on stage. So taking this role was an easy yes.'

For Eyre himself, the most exciting part about filmmaking is the opportunity to work in a creative team, as he explains: 'I'm always wary, as a director, of being close-minded and doing the first thing that comes into your head. So often there's an opportunity for a different, more heartfelt viewpoint. I always find it best to present the world in a slightly idiosyncratic way so that it doesn't look like everything else you see. Being able to work so closely with so many knowledgeable people was extremely beneficial.' Additionally, he admits it was lovely just to watch these actors perform. Eyre particularly enjoyed shooting the final dance between Saunders and Bradley: 'I love that scene because it's so droll and both Jennifer and David dance with such grace – it's very touching.'

THE HOSPITAL STAFF

Leading the cast as Gilpin is Saunders: 'It was amazing – the people that I'm caring for are some of the greatest British actors', Saunders recalls. But it's not just the older, more-established cast members that Saunders has enjoyed working with, as she explains further: 'Bally Gill is a tremendous actor, and one of the loveliest people. I've particularly enjoyed my scenes with him as Sister Gilpin takes Dr Valentine under her wing.'

Thomas was thrilled when Saunders signed on to play Gilpin as she thought she was one of the most interesting characters on the page: 'I knew that Jennifer would not only have the dramatic chops for it, but also the comedy chops. This is not a glamorous role, it's not a character who goes home to a glamorous life. I knew that Jennifer would have the wit and the necessary lack of vanity.'

For Bally Gill, an award-winning stage actor facing his first major film role, he admitted that he wrote essays about many of his co-stars at drama school, so getting the chance to act alongside them has been a joy: 'All of the actors that I had scenes with have been amazing in terms of their characterisation and dedication to the role.'

For Eyre, finding an actor like Gill was immensely important to the production, as he explains: 'If a star means somebody who shines brightly in the firmament, Bally Gill is one of those. No matter how good of an actor you are, you can't fake charm.'

THE HOSPITAL PATIENTS

For the older actors, working on ALLELUJAH provided an opportunity both to reunite with old friends and to work with people they'd always admired.

For Dench, David Bradley and Derek Jacobi, this is the first chance they've had to work together, despite having known each other for many years. Dench and Bradley first met 60 years ago at an amateur dramatic group in York. Comments Bradley, 'We don't have any scenes together, but it's wonderful to be in the same film!'

And the last time Dench and Julia McKenzie acted together on stage was at the Haymarket Theatre in 2001. Judi was very keen to repeat the experience: 'We had tremendous fun starring together all those years ago,' she recalls.

Having worked with Dench previously on Cranford, Thomas admitted that there couldn't be a finer form of casting: 'Mary carries so much within her as a character. She sees things of which she does not speak. She's really quite an engine of discovery within the film. So, you really need an actor of Judi's calibre to play that level of complexity.'

Bradley and Russell Tovey, who play father and son, agree that working together has been wonderful. Says Tovey, 'The first week of filming was just us two and that was magic. He's incredible. In the film, we have quite a fraught relationship, so having that chance to get to know David was tremendously helpful.' Add Bradley: 'With Russell, there was always time for a giggle, which is very important.'

Eyre sums up his thoughts on his cast as follows: 'The great adage about all productions is that the whole has to be greater than the sum of its parts. And the sum of the parts is absolutely astonishing because of the generosity of the actors who give themselves without any airs and graces.'

CAST

Sister Gilpin	JENNIFER SAUNDERS
Dr Valentine	BALLY GILL
Joe Colman	DAVID BRADLEY
Mary	JUDI DENCH
Ambrose	DEREK JACOBI
Colin Colman	RUSSELL TOVEY
Nurse Pinkney	JESSE AKELE
Molly	EILEEN DAVIES
Mrs Earnshaw	LORRAINE ASHBOURNE
Mr Earnshaw	GERARD HORAN
Mr Salter	VINCENT FRANKLIN
Richard	PAUL BUTTERWORTH
Neville	JEFFERY KISSOON

CREW

Director	RICHARD EYRE
Screenplay	HEIDI THOMAS
Based on the play by	ALAN BENNETT
Producer	DAMIAN JONES
Co-Producer	KEVIN LOADER
Executive Producer	NICOLA MORROW
	CAMERON MCCRACKEN
	JENNY BORGARS
	ROSE GARNETT
	ANDREA SCARSO
	ALAN BENNETT
	NICHOLAS HYTNER
	CHARLES MOORE
	PAUL GRINDEY
Casting	NINA GOLD & MARTIN WARE
Director of Photography	BEN SMITHARD BSC
Editor	JOHN WILSON ACE
Production Designer	DONAL WOODS
Costume Designer	JACQUELINE DURRAN
Hair and Makeup Designer	NAOMI DONNE
Music	GEORGE FENTON
First Assistent Director	BARRIE MCCULLOCH
Associate Director	KATIE HENRY
International sales	PATHE INTERNATIONAL