



PREVIEW

# Sweetheart

+ Q&A with director Marley Morrison and actors Nell Barlow and Jo Hartley

‘Is this what we’re doing? Sunbathing?’ marvels AJ (Nell Barlow) as she settles into a new friendship with Isla (Ella RaeSmith), a lifeguard at the holiday park she is visiting with her family. This interior monologue, characterised largely by AJ’s disdain for what other people find fun, is sustained throughout *Sweetheart*. Marley Morrison’s feature debut is a gentle comedy-drama of hi-fi feelings on a lo-fi stage – *Little Miss Sunshine* meets *Bhaji on the Beach*.

‘Nobody likes being pale,’ AJ’s mother Tina (Jo Hartley) instructs her, as she attempts to win her teenage daughter over with the gaudy gimmicks of Freshwater, the summer destination she always used to adore. The park’s delights are captured with a combination of humour, tenderness and pity, from the caravan crammed full of two (going on three) generations of a bickering family to a stage magician with a mediocre routine and lacklustre audience.

We are introduced to AJ in the opening scene through her music, as the moody punk pop of British band Porridge Radio manifests her misery and immunises her against repetitive family chatter. Nell Barlow, in her first feature film, plays AJ’s deadpan humour and social awkwardness beautifully with an eye-rolling but lovable set of idiosyncrasies. In a wrinkled polo shirt, pink aviators and DIY haircut, AJ is as awkward as they come. ‘I’m seventeen ... everything is wrong with me,’ she explains as those around her try to lift her spirits. When she does allow herself a rare expression of joy, it is a fist-pump aimed at nobody but herself. Behind her, the slightly off-kilter row of washing machines in the Freshwater laundry room are painted candy shades of yellow, blue and pink – never is she allowed to forget that she’s on holiday and is supposed to be having fun.

This setting is a device that gets the best out of Morrison’s witty writing by getting the worst out of the ensemble of supporting characters – from the wannabe social media influencer to the teenage boy desperate for a girl, any girl, to have touched ‘it’ just once. Meanwhile, AJ’s mother Tina and Tina’s pregnant sister Lucy (Sophia Di Martino) routinely switch gears from talking about breast pumps and cracked nipples to choosing gammon off the dinner menu. Morrison is a great observer of social dynamics, and the cinematography allows family set pieces to unfold patiently with an unobtrusive camera. Occasionally, it experiments with more ostentatious shots – usually to express AJ’s fascination with love interest Isla – and the indie soundtrack supports these tonal shifts, from adolescent dissatisfaction to burgeoning romance and back again.

Contemporary lesbian films frequently sideline the coming-out narrative in a bid to normalise queerness. In Olivia Wilde’s *Booksmart* (2019), Kaitlyn Dever’s Amy has been out for two years (the problem is, she still hasn’t kissed a girl). In such films, femininity seems to become a requisite for lesbian progress, confounding stereotypes but revealing enduring anxieties about female masculinity. Boldly responding to this trend, *Sweetheart*’s best one-liners are devoted to the battle over not AJ’s sexuality but her gender. As Tina cautions, ‘Just because you’re a lesbian now doesn’t mean you have to dress

like a boy all the time.’ Jodie Foster is cited as the contemporary lesbian figure par excellence – you wouldn’t know by looking at her.

This complex combination of judgement and concern clearly underpins AJ’s depression, as her mother obsesses over what she wears and how she styles her hair. An ability to find the comic potential in this painful material is one of Morrison’s strengths as a writer. She has a hard balance to strike, however, because AJ is both endearing and obnoxiously ungrateful; Tina is both homophobic and overburdened and doing her best, a single mother unable to live up to an absentee father. This is familiar terrain that Morrison just about pulls off with the help of performances from Hartley (*This Is England*, 2006) and Di Martino (Marvel’s *Loki*), conjuring warmth and sympathy against the odds.

**Clara Bradbury-Rance, Sight and Sound, October 2021**

## **Marley Morrison**

With a background in music videos, Marley’s first narrative short *Sticks & Stones* was screened as part of the BFI Future Film RAW shorts scheme in 2014. Marley was one of six filmmakers chosen for the Encounters Film Festival ‘Widening the Lens’ competition 2016, earning 1st Prize for pitching short film *Baby Gravy*, a comedy about same-sex parenting. The short was later chosen as part of Film London’s ‘London Calling’ scheme, premiering at BFI London Film Festival 2017 and nominated for the screenwriting award at Underwire Film Festival 2018. Marley’s crowd-funded short film *Leroy* starring Nathan Bryon has screened at a number of high profile film festivals including LSFF, Aesthetica and was nominated for the prestigious LGBT Iris Prize Best British Short and Youth Jury Award 2018. *Sweetheart* is Marley’s debut feature, part of the Film London Microwave scheme, supported by BFI and BBC Films. In 2020 Marley was selected as a Film London ‘Lodestar’ celebrating the capital’s emerging creatives.

## **Nell Barlow**

*Sweetheart* is Nell’s first feature and also her first leading role. She graduated from the University of East Anglia with a First Class degree in Drama in 2017. In 2016 whilst still at UEA, she made her small screen debut as Beatrice Gresham in Julian Fellowes’ screen adaptation of Anthony Trollope’s novel *Doctor Thorne*, directed by Niall MacCormick for ITV/Amazon. Her next role was Lucy in Channel 4’s controversial, true life drama *Married to a Paedophile*, directed by Collete Camden for Hat Trick. She also voices Elsa Platt in the upcoming animation *Where Is Anne Frank?*, directed by Oscar-nominee Ari Folman, which is due for release in 2021.

## **Jo Hartley**

Manchester-born Jo Hartley has appeared in some of the UK’s most cutting-edge films and dramas. Starting her professional career in Shane Meadows’ *Dead Man’s Shoes*, her career to date has shown huge range and versatility. Jo was recently seen starring in the BBC Three comedy-drama *In My Skin*. It piloted in 2018 to critical acclaim, with it claiming a BAFTA Wales Award for Best TV Drama. In 2020, Jo also reprised her role as ‘June’ in the second season of Ricky Gervais’ critically acclaimed comedy drama *After Life* for Netflix. Perhaps best known for her role as the warm and lovable ‘Cynth’ in

the multi award-winning *This Is England*, Jo has also appeared in *Eddie the Eagle*, *Life on the Road*, *Slaughterhouse Rulez*, *The Jury*, *Stolen*, *Moving On*, *Bliss*, *Vera*, *The Mimic*, *Not Safe for Work*, *Torvill and Dean*, *Sick of It*, *Temple* and *Don’t Forget the Driver*.

SWEETHEART

Directed by: Marley Morrison  
©: Over A Cliff Ltd.  
a Hazey Jane Films and Microwave production  
in association with: Bohemia Media, SUMS Film & Media  
Made with the support of the: BFI’s Film Fund  
Presented by: Film London, BBC Films, BFI  
Executive Producers: Phil Hunt, Lucy Fenton, Anna Antoniou, Safitri Widagdo, Pietro Greppi, Adam Antoniadès, Andy Brunskill, Evan Leighton-Davies  
Produced by: Michelle Antoniadès  
Line Producer: Alexa Waugh  
1st Assistant Director: Amber Tordoff-Gibson  
Script Supervisor: Rebecca King  
Casting Director: Carolyn McLeod  
Written by: Marley Morrison  
Directors of Photography: Matt Wicks, Emily Almond Barr  
Unit Photographer: Chloe Sheppard  
Editor: Keelan Gumbley  
Production Designer: Carys Beard  
Costume Designer: Amy Thompson  
Make-up Designer: Amelia Mara Kildear  
Make-up Artist: Olta Citozzi  
Digital Colourist: Sam Chynoweth  
Original Score by: Toydrum  
Music Supervisor: Jenn Egan  
Additional Music Supervision: James Griffith  
Production Sound Recordist: Paul Caton

Cast

Nell Barlow (AJ)  
Jo Hartley (Tina)  
Ella-Rae Smith (Isla)  
Sophia Di Martino (Lucy)  
Samuel Anderson (Steve)  
Tabitha Byron (Dayna)  
Steffan Cennydd (Nathan)  
William Andrews (Phil the magician)  
Spike Fearn (Elvis)  
Anna Antoniadès (Gemma G)  
Celeste De Veazey (Bendy Wendy)  
Elizabeth Grace Hartley (cabaret singer)  
Davey Hunter Jones (Christoph)  
Jack Hamson (Jamie)  
Kayleigh Brown (Jemma J)  
Keelan Gumbley (Keith the barman)  
Jamie Hagley (guy in caravan)  
Anne Rathbone (woman in locker room)  
Baker Terry, Celeste De Veazey (TV show actors)  
Davey Hunter Jones (dad’s voice)  
Claire Weston (mum)  
Julia Abbiss (daughter)

UK 2021©  
104 mins

Courtesy of Peccadillo Pictures



IN PERSON & PREVIEWS

**Prime Suspect: 30th Anniversary (First Series Complete Screening)**  
Sun 19 Sep 14:00  
**Lynda La Plante in Conversation**  
Sun 19 Sep 18:45  
**Preview: Convergence + Q&A with director Orlando von Einsiedel and co-director and film contributor Hassan Akkad**  
Wed 29 Sep 19:00  
**60th Anniversary: Whistle Down the Wind + actor Hayley Mills in Conversation**  
Sun 3 Oct 12:00  
**Preview: Dune + pre-recorded Q&A with Denis Villeneuve**  
Tue 5 Oct 18:30

REGULAR PROGRAMME

**Gallivant + intro by Eden and Andrew Kötting**  
Sat 18 Sep 14:30  
**Short Films by Eden and Andrew Kötting + Andrew Kötting in Conversation with film curator Gareth Evans**  
Sat 18 Sep 18:00  
**Projecting the Archive: Flesh and Blood + intro by Jason Morell, actor and son of Joan Greenwood**  
Tue 21 Sep 18:10  
**Art in the Making: Cinema Architecture and Atmosphere + discussion**  
Thu 23 Sep 18:10  
**Member Picks: Moonstruck**  
Fri 24 Sep 18:05  
**Silent Cinema: Nasty Women: A Comic Tribute + intro by curator Bryony Dixon**  
Sun 26 Sep 12:40  
**Relaxed Screening: Seeing The Unseen (Að sjá hið ósýnilega)**  
Tue 28 Sep 18:00  
**Terror Vision: Altered States**  
Thu 30 Sep 21:00

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