



**NEW RELEASES**

# Blue Jean

*+ Q&A with director-screenwriter Georgia Oakley, producer Hélène Sifre and actors Rosy McEwen and Kerrie Hayes*

For many in the UK, the story of Section 28 and its eventual repeal is a triumphant memory of unity and activism. Resistance to the Conservative government's attempt to prohibit the 'promotion' of homosexuality as 'a pretended family relationship' was the catalyst for an assertion of gay pride that ultimately helped to sweep away historic prejudices. So blatant was the attack and so widespread the reaction against it that the bill might be said to have ultimately achieved the opposite of its original aim. That took time, however, and tremendous sacrifice. Behind the political wrangling, the public demonstrations and the celebrity opposition were thousands of ordinary people whose private lives were suddenly deemed a danger, particularly to children. Said Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher at the time: 'Children who need to be taught to respect traditional moral values are being taught that they have an inalienable right to be gay. All of those children are being cheated of a sound start in life.'

What if you were a teacher, devoted above all else to providing kids with 'a sound start in life', who also happened to be gay?

This is the starting point for Georgia Oakley's assured and stirring debut feature – not the activist community who immediately and loudly confronted this attack on their basic right to be who they were, but a woman who has worked hard to compartmentalise her life, keeping her girlfriend decisively separate from her family and her personal story a mystery to her workmates and pupils.

Jean, portrayed with quiet power by Rosy McEwen, is a gym teacher: she coaches the netball team, itself a riot of burgeoning teen emotion and conflict. As news stories proliferate about the impact of Section 28 – Tory ministers pontificating on moral decay, activists storming the House of Lords – Jean is hyper-aware of every glance and murmur in her direction. Her relationship with girlfriend Viv, meanwhile, presents the opposite challenge, for Viv is an out and proud lesbian with a crew of similarly assertive friends. To them, the secrecy still practiced by the woman they call 'Baby Jean' acts to extend the oppression they have – at considerable cost – thrown off.

Something has to give, and McEwen embodies with exquisite insight the mounting strain upon a woman who has sought to keep hidden what now burns for some release or resolution. The catalyst for change is the arrival at Jean's school of a new pupil, Lois (Lucy Halliday) – raw, vulnerable, and instinctively connected to Jean as soon as they meet. When Lois begins to frequent the lesbian bar that is Jean's refuge, the boundaries between Jean's worlds collapse, and she finds herself dangerously desperate to rebuild them.

Drawing on meticulous research among lesbians who experienced the impact of Section 28, Georgia Oakley has constructed a drama at once confronting and intimate, which renders palpably real the dilemma of a fictional woman whilst pulsing with the hidden pain of countless real lives. Rosy McEwen – acclaimed by fans of TNT's *The Alienist* for her performance as Libby Hatch, a *Screen International* Star of Tomorrow 2022, and one of *Variety*'s 2022 Top

10 Actors to Watch – shows herself to be a leading actor of phenomenal presence and subtlety in her very first lead role. Kerrie Hayes as Viv is a further revelation, giving us a woman devoted to her community and torn between love and principle. As Lois, newcomer Lucy Halliday embodies with thrilling immediacy all the volatility, defensiveness and disruptive energy of adolescence.

Through these deeply-felt performances, the economy and elegance of Oakley's writing, and a dreamlike evocation of the sights and sounds of 80s England, *Blue Jean* allows us to experience just how personal the political can become.

#### **Hannah McGill, Production notes**

An overtly queer variation on *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1969) is a nifty idea, and for the most part Georgia Oakley's *Blue Jean* pulls it off: this story of a gay P.E. teacher whose sexuality threatens her professional standing has style to spare, and is anchored by a commanding performance from Rosy McEwen.

We meet Jean as she heads to work; filmed in intimate proximity by cinematographer Vincent Seguin, she turns her back to the audience, listening to a Radio 4 segment about Section 28, the clause in the 1988 Local Government Act that made it illegal to 'promote' homosexuality in schools. A lot of storytelling and character work happens in these first seconds: the premise of the film is set up, and Jean's diffident, unknowable character is established. Over the course of the film, she will be a most slippery protagonist, McEwen never succumbing to the audience-pleasing grandstanding of Maggie Smith in her Oscar-winning performance as Jean Brodie.

We observe McEwen's Jean interacting with pupils with easy authority, before heading to a gay club after work, where she meets up with her girlfriend Viv (Kerrie Hayes) and various lesbian friends. The film shifts between these universes – the increasingly claustrophobic school and the liberated queer community to which Jean tentatively belongs. Soon, a new pupil, Lois (Lucy Halliday), joins Jean's netball classes, and when she appears at the bar one night and gathers that her teacher is gay, it appears to spell danger for Jean's job.

Oakley, in her directorial debut, adroitly seizes upon the tension of this premise, greatly abetted by a fine performance from McEwen, who with every mannerism and utterance suggests somebody completely hobbled by fear. At the heart of the film is the question: when Lois is bullied at school for her sexuality, can Jean stand by her pupil while protecting her own job? It isn't easy for a film to have such a non-committal protagonist, and Oakley should be greatly commended for not picking the easy way out. Nevertheless, the film resorts to a few narrative shortcuts, particularly in the simplistic opposition it draws between Jean and her more liberated girlfriend. Hayes gives a note-perfect performance as Viv, showing how her queerness is central to her warm and open character – but too many conversations between the two women seem to enact a rigid argument about queer identity. These more facile moments threaten to undo the film's fine work on setting and character; clichés such as Jean coming out to a stranger at a party and then having a laugh-crying epiphany while watching cantering horses in a field are too heavy for the film's more delicate framework. But the handful of wearisome

moments (which also include crowbarred radio news bulletins about Section 28; secondary characters spelling out the stakes; and muted audio to signify panic) are largely absorbed into what is, finally, a touching story told with sensitivity.

In a low budget package with no fripperies, the cinematography and design stand out, with arresting tableaux that frame McEwen’s alabaster complexion and tightly coiled expressions against rich blue backdrops (which some might consider overkill, in tandem with the blue of the movie’s title). A scene where Jean, driven to distraction, confronts Lois in the nightclub bathroom is handled ably, milking the moment for tension and capturing the pair, against a red background, in a kind of hellish desperation. The 80s setting is perfectly executed, save for the odd anachronistic idiom; hair and costumes are on point. But best of all is the sheer queerness of the project. Viv and her friends’ otherness is clear, and creates an inviting sense of community in language, appearance and sexuality. Women’s bodies are filmed with an elating lack of regard for the male eye. That queerness helps immeasurably, conveying the difficulty with which Jean straddles both worlds; how she must tamp down her very selfhood in order to get by.

Ultimately, Oakley’s twisty, sometimes discomfiting story sets up more questions than the film can answer, particularly with regard to class privilege. But it’s a strength in *Blue Jean* that knots are left untied, wounds unhealed. Where *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* gave us a woman kicking against the establishment and fighting for her independence, *Blue Jean* shows how impossible that struggle is for its queer heroine in a straight and straitening world; what a feat of courage it would take, and just how much could be lost thereby.

**Caspar Salmon, *Sight and Sound*, [bfi.org.uk/sighs-and-sound](https://www.bfi.org.uk/sighs-and-sound), 4 September 2022**

**BLUE JEAN**

*Written & Directed by:* Georgia Oakley  
©: Blue Jean Productions Ltd, British Broadcasting Corporation, The British Film Institute  
*Presented by:* BBC Film, BFI  
*In association with:* Great Point Media  
*A Kleio Films production*  
*Executive Producers:* Eva Yates, Louise Ortega, Jim Reeve  
*Produced by:* H  l  ne Sifre  
*Co-Producer:* Marie-Elena Dych    
*Unit Manager:* Stuart Wharton  
*Production Manager:* Barbara Maria Hauser  
*1st Assistant Director:* Jamie Hamer  
*Script Supervisor:* Daniela Brandano  
*Casting Director:* Shaheen Baig  
*Director of Photography:* Victor Seguin  
*Editor:* Izabella Curry  
*Production Designer:* Soraya Gilanni  
*Costume Designer:* Kirsty Halliday  
*Hair & Make-Up Designer:* Kat Morgan  
*Original Music:* Chris Roe  
*Music Supervisor:* Bridget Samuels  
*Supervising Sound Designer:* James H. Mather  
*Boom Operator:* Joshua Tot Carr  
*Sound Effects Editor:* Xena Kirby

**Cast**

Rosy McEwen (*Jean*)  
Kerrie Hayes (*Viv*)  
Lucy Halliday (*Lois*)  
Lydia Page (*Siobhan*)  
Stacy Abalogun (*Ace*)  
Amy Booth-Steel (*Debbie*)  
Aoife Kennan (*Sasha*)  
Scott Tumbull (*Tim*)  
Farrah Cave (*Michelle*)  
Lainey Shaw (*Paula*)  
Izzy Neish (*Abi*)  
Becky Lindsay (*Jill*)  
Ellen Gowland (*Carol*)  
Gavin Kitchen (*Baldock*)  
Maya Torres (*Mindy*)  
Deka Walmsley (*Dave*)  
Edmund Wiseman (*Craig*)  
Kylie Ann Ford (*Lisa*)  
Emily Fairweather (*Mrs Lea*)  
Elizabeth Shaw (*Anne*)  
Kate Soulsby (*Joni*)  
Isla Bowles (*Aimee*)  
Oliver Maratty Quinn (*Mike*)

UK 2022    
97 mins

An Altitude Entertainment Film release

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**NEW RELEASES**

**Enys Men**

Continues from Fri 13 Jan

**EO**

From Fri 3 Feb

**Blue Jean**

From Fri 10 Feb; Fri 10 Feb 18:10 (+ Q&A with director-screenwriter Georgia Oakley and producer Hélène Sifre)

**Creature**

From Fri 24 Feb; Fri 24 Feb 18:10 (+ intro and Q&A with director Asif Kapadia and other members of the filmmaking team)

**Broker**

From Fri 24 Feb

**IN PERSON & PREVIEWS**

**Spike Lee in Conversation**

Mon 13 Feb 18:15

**Summer of Sam + Introduction by Spike Lee**

Mon 13 Feb 20:35

**BFI Future Film Festival**

16-19 Feb

**Preview: Subject + Q&A with director Camilla Hall and contributor**

**Margaret Ratliff**

Fri 17 Feb 18:10

**Preview: The Strays + Q&A**

Mon 20 Feb 18:15

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