



SEEN & HEARD: DARING FEMALE COMING-OF-AGE FILMS

Fish Tank

Andrea Arnold on 'Fish Tank'

'The thing about the film industry is that it's incredibly middle-class, isn't it?' she says. 'All the people who look at it and study it and talk about it – write about it – are middle-class, so they always see films about the working class as being grim, because the people in the film don't have what they have. I very much get the feeling that I'm seeing a different place. People at Cannes kept asking me about grim estates and I thought, ugh, I don't mean that. I tried not to mean that'

The Essex estate in question is the setting for her new film *Fish Tank* and – depending on how your sliding scale of poverty is calibrated – it's not so bad, really. Certainly it's paradise compared to the looming, low-res menace of the Glasgow tower block in Arnold's feature debut *Red Road*, where the tectonic plates of death, sex and revenge crunched together with such riveting inevitability. *Fish Tank*, the story of a troubled girl struggling to relate to her own physicality, builds up some fairly seismic emotional pressure too, but it's not so much the fault of the shabby, banal setting as of the cultural and emotional limitations of modern life. Arnold is regularly compared to Ken Leach ('Don't insult him! He must be getting sick of it.'), but her new film's depiction of council-flat life recalls just as much the cheery survivalism of Penny Woolcock's 'Tina' films, or even television comedies like *Shameless*. 'I actually think estates are great places,' Arnold insists. 'They're full of people, they're full of life. I mean, that's how most people live. It's probably a better way to live than a lot of middleclass lives, which are more isolated and more lonely and have less community. So I'm kind of dismayed by the reaction.'

All the same, her character Mia – played with great charm and freshness by newcomer Katie Jarvis – feels confined; she swims frustrated circles, like a shark in a tank. Unlike her hard-partying mother (Kierston Wareing) and precociously cynical younger sister (Rebecca Griffiths), she keeps banging into the glass walls, and is secretly exploring ways to escape. Every day she skips school to creep into an empty flat and plug into an alternative reality through headphones and fierce, intricately demanding hip hop moves. Will dancing be her exit route?

In a culture increasingly sedated by and addicted to the myth of salvation through show business, celebrity is often presented as an easy solution for the disenfranchised dreamer. But Arnold – who cites *Saturday Night Fever* as a guilty pleasure – viciously undercuts all our expectations in *Fish Tank*.

'Obviously dancing is the one thing Mia feels she can do,' she says, 'and that's her escape, the way in which she can get some self-esteem.'

She's probably like one of those people who go to *The X Factor* and get tuned away, who aren't so good – she's one of those, really, one of the many. My heart breaks when I see that, not because they don't get through, but because they see that as some answer in life, as a way of finding contentment or happiness. To aspire towards celebrity – that's what makes me feel sad. People think they can have anything – and they can't.'

Mia, though, is no dewy-eyed young trouper, nor is she as innocent as she might first appear. As she negotiates two key relationships – with her

mother's new boyfriend Connor (Michael Fassbender) and Billy (Harry Treadaway), a traveller lad who recognises her as a fellow outsider – we're repeatedly asked to reassess our reactions to Mia and our assumptions about her. One quality Arnold says she likes about the film is its ability to trip its audience up: 'Somebody said to me: "When I'm watching your films, I'm always sitting there saying, 'Don't go there, don't go there...' And you always go there." And I think that's probably it. I'm really interested in characters who behave in quite difficult ways. I like to see whether it's possible to have empathy with somebody who does that.'

Perhaps part of the reason that Mia's development is so vividly realised is that Katie Jarvis was experiencing her own rite of passage out here in real life, and real time. As an untrained actor (she was cast after a chance encounter at Tilbury Town railway station) who also had to take intensive dance lessons for the role, she found herself suddenly tasked with carrying a film where she's the emotional centre of every scene. In order to help Jarvis stay on top of the narrative arc, Arnold decided to shoot the film in chronological order; she withheld the full script not just from Jarvis but from all the actors, revealing the plot to them only a few days in advance to keep their reactions real.

'For Katie not to have the whole film in her head was quite good, because it was quite a lot to take on,' says Arnold. 'It was a big experience for her, and it shows. There's a very definite feel about her at the end – she feels older somehow.'

Jarvis brings a vividness and immediacy to the role which invite interesting comparisons with the efforts of more technically sophisticated actors – Samantha Morton in Lynne Ramsay's *Morvern Callar*, say – and bring an extra layer of tension to a film that often threatens to slip over the cliff of credibility, then manages to yank itself back from the edge.

Casting an unknown was a nerve-racking decision for Arnold; 'It seemed like a massive risk,' she admits. 'I just didn't know if she'd be able to do it.' But it was even more stressful for the 17-year-old. 'Professional actors have learned professional attitudes to their work,' Arnold points out. 'But Katie hadn't done anything like that. She was just out of school. I don't think she'd ever done a job, or was used to a working day. We worked ten hours a day, which isn't too bad – but to her seemed very long. She'd get very tired, which is understandable. She needed a lot of looking after.'

For one thing, Jarvis had to negotiate the social rules of a new peer group, who expected her to share their fluid grasp of personality and reality. 'When we were doing the scene with the traveller boys,' Arnold recalls, 'they were staying in character off camera. Katie went up to speak to one of them and he just blew smoke in her face, and she was absolutely furious and came over to complain to me about it. And I said, 'But that's not them they're just normal, regular, really nice blokes. They're just pretending.' She really found that hard to understand, so I had to get them to come and speak to her normally. She'd believed them – it's a testament to their acting, if you like.'

Interview by Lisa Mullen, *Sight & Sound*, October 2009

Fish Tank

Directed by: Andrea Arnold
©: Kasander (Andrea Untitled) Ltd, UK Film Council
Presented by: BBC Films, UK Film Council, Limelight Fund
Developed by: BBC Films, UK Film Council New Cinema Fund, UK Film Council Development Fund
Executive Producers: Paul Trijbits, Christine Langan, David M. Thompson
Produced by: Kees Kasander, Nick Laws
Associate Producer: Lisette Kelder
For UKFC (Head of New Cinema Fund: Lenny Crooks; Senior Production Executive: Emma Clarke; Head of Production: Fiona Morham; Production Finance: Amanda Pyne; Head of Business Affairs: Will Evans) For BBC Films (Production Executive: Jane Hawley; Legal/Business Affairs: Livy Sandler; Production Delivery Co-ordinator: Matthew Vizard; Development Editor: Beth Pattinson) For Limelight: Liz Barron, Michael Henry, Ivan Mactaggart, Erica Watt For Kasander: Ineke Kanters, Natascha Teunissen, Willy Rasenberg, Julia Ton
Production Accountant: Peter Eardley
Production Co-ordinator: Emma Olrich-Smith
Production Manager: Beth Timbrell
Unit Manager: David Gunkle
Location Manager: Ben Gladstone
Post-production Supervisor: Emma Zee
Post-production Co-ordinators: Alexandra Montgomery, Siobhan Boyes
1st Assistant Director: Lee Grumett
2nd Assistant Director: Jo Tew
3rd Assistant Director: Carley Lane
Casting Director: Jill Trevellick
Screenplay: Andrea Arnold
Director of Photography: Robbie Ryan
Focus Puller: John Watters
Clapper Loaders: Rachel Clark, Naresh Kaushal
Gaffer: John Colley
Rigging Gaffer: Andy Cole
Stills Photographer: Holly Horner
Visual Effects by: Rushes Post Production
Visual Effects Supervisor: Jonathon Privett
Visual Effects Producer: Louise Hussey
Visual Effects Co-ordinator: Sukh Gill
Graphics: Compuhire
Editor: Nicolas Chaudeurge
1st Assistant Editor: Rebecca Lloyd
Production Designer: Helen Scott
Art Director: Christopher Wyatt
Standby Art Director: Maxine Carlier
Props Master: Jason Orr
Costume Designer: Jane Petrie
Wardrobe Supervisor: Holly Freeman
Hair/Make-up Designer: Marese Langan
Digital Intermediate Provided by: Ascent 142
Camera Equipment: Panavision UK
Additional Grip Equipment: Titan Grips Ltd
Electrical Equipment: Arri Lighting Rental
Film Stock: Fujifilm UK Ltd.
Laboratory: Soho Film Labs
Negative Checks: Kate Penlington, Raging Goose London Ltd

Music Supervisor: Liz Gallacher
Choreographer: Sunanda Biswas
Sound Recordist: Rashad Omar
Sound Maintenance Engineer: William Whale
Re-recording Mixer: Per Boström
Supervising Sound Editor: Joakim Sundström
Dialogue Editor: Linda Forsén
Sound Effects Editor: Christer Melén
ADR Recorded at: Mayflower Studio London
ADR Recordist: Naomi Dandridge
ADR Mixer: Tom Deane
Foley Artist: Ulf Olausson
Foley Recordist: Lotta Nilsson
Stunt Co-ordinators: Abbi Collins, Sarah Franzl
Animals Supplied by: Rona Brown’s Movie Animals
Animal Consultant, Dogs: Rona Brown
Animal Co-ordinator, Dogs: Tanya Steel
Horse Supplied by: Film & TV Horses
Horse Co-ordinator: Janet Rogers
Unit Publicist: Emma Davie

Cast

Katie Jarvis (Mia)
Michael Fassbender (Connor)
Kierston Wareing (Joanne)
Rebecca Griffiths (Tyler)
Harry Treadaway (Billy)
Sydney Mary Nash (Keira)
Carrie-Ann Savill, Toyin Ogidi (Tyler’s friends)
Grant Wild (Keeley’s dad)
Sarah Bayes (Keeley)
Charlotte Collins (tall dancing girl)
Kirsty Smith, Chelsea Chase, Brooke Hobby (dancing girls)
Syrus (Tennents the dog)
Alan Francis, Ben Francis (free runners)
Jack Gordon, Jason Maza (Billy’s brothers)
Michael Prior (Connor’s friend)
Dave Hawley (snogging man)
Lisa Mahoney (snogging woman)
Sarah Counsell (social worker)
Nick Staverson (shouting man)
Sunanda Biswas, Gavin Cooper, Amiir Saleem, Jody Schroeder, Fase Alzakwani, Stella McGowan, Mia Copas (breakers)
Tony Geary (van man)
Hannah-Marie Keeble (Danton Road girl)
Joanna Horton (Kelly)
Charlie Baker (podium girl)
Peter Roue (club DJ)
Geoff McCracken (club man)
Val King (club woman)
Kishana Thomas, Raquel Thomas, Natasha Ilic, Maxine Brogan, Kirsty Page, Georgia Crane (audition girls)

UK 2009©
122 mins

BECOME A BFI MEMBER

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at **bfi.org.uk/join**

BFI PLAYER

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on **player.bfi.org.uk**

Join the **BFI mailing list** for regular programme updates. Not yet registered? Create a new account at **www.bfi.org.uk/signup**

SEEN & HEARD: DARING FEMALE COMING-OF-AGE FILMS

Thirteen
Wed 2 Feb 20:40; Fri 11 Feb 18:10
House of Hummingbird (Beolsae)
Sat 5 Feb 20:20; Sat 26 Feb 17:40
It Felt Like Love
Sun 6 Feb 18:00; Wed 16 Feb 20:30
Fish Tank
Thu 10 Feb 20:30; Sat 19 Feb 20:40
Mustang
Fri 11 Feb 20:30; Sat 26 Feb 13:40
In Between Days
Sun 13 Feb 18:30; Sat 26 Feb 20:40
Rafiki
Mon 14 Feb 18:20; Fri 18 Feb 18:00; Wed 23 Feb 20:30