



## The Neon Bible

**Director:** Terence Davies  
**A production of:** Scala Productions  
**For:** Film Four International, Channel 4 Films  
**Developed with the support of:**  
European Script Fund  
**Executive Producers:** Nik Powell, Stephen Woolley  
**Producers:** Elizabeth Karlsen, Olivia Stewart  
**Line Producer:** Victoria Westhead  
**Production Accountant:** April Janow  
**Production Co-ordinators:** Melanie Bell, Wendy Broom  
**Unit Production Manager:** Teresa M. Yarbrough  
**Location Manager:** Jonathan Karlsen  
**1st Assistant Director:** Cas Donovan  
**Assistant Directors:** Amy Schmidt, Rich Greenberg, Thomas D. Coe  
**Script Supervisor:** Amy Blanc  
**Casting:** Laura Rosenthal  
**Screenplay:** Terence Davies  
**Based on the novel by:** John Kennedy Toole  
**Director of Photography:** Mick Coulter  
**2nd Unit Director of Photography:** Howard Bashew  
**Camera Operator:** Robin Brown  
**Special Effects Co-ordinator:** Lisa Reynolds  
**Editor:** Charles Rees  
**Production Designer:** Christopher Hobbs  
**Art Director:** Phil Messina  
**Set Decorator:** Kristen Messina  
**Set Dressers:** Thomas (Pete) Ellis, Gary Bannister, Alice Nisbet  
**Additional Set Dressers:** Gerald F. D'Alessio, Marshall Davis  
**Scenic Artist:** Larry Shepard  
**Costume Design:** Monica Howe  
**Wardrobe Supervisor:** Kathy Heiner  
**Make-up Artist:** Sarah Mays  
**Additional Make-up Artist:** Heather Prichard  
**Hairstylist:** Rita Parillo  
**Additional Hairstylist:** Heather Prichard  
**Music Arrangements:** Robert Lockhart  
**Choreography:** Renee Victor  
**Sound Mixer:** Thomas Varga  
**Sound Editors:** Zane Hayward, Pat O'Neill  
**Stunt Co-ordinator:** Lonnie Smith  
**Animal Trainer:** Senia Phillips  
**Cast:**  
Gena Rowlands (*Aunt Mae*)  
Diana Scarwid (*Sarah*)  
Denis Leary (*Frank*)  
Jacob Tierney (*David, age 15*)  
Leo Bermester (*Bobbie Lee Taylor*)  
Frances Conroy (*Miss Scover*)  
Peter McRobbie (*Reverend Watkins*)  
Joan Glover (*Flora*)  
Bob Hannah (*George*)  
Tom Turbiville (*Clyde*)  
Drake Bell (*David, age 10*)  
Dana Dick (*Jo Lynne*)  
Virgil Graham Hopkins (*Mr Williams*)  
Jill Jane Clements (*woman*)  
Aaron Frisch (*Bruce*)  
Sharon Blackwood (*Mrs Watkins*)  
Charlie Franzen (*tannoy*)  
Sherry Velvet, Stephanie Astalos-Jones (*testifiers*)  
Ian Shearer (*Billy Sunday Thompson*)  
Duncan Stewart (*head boy*)  
UK 1994©  
92 mins  
35mm

Love, Sex, Religion, Death: The Complete Films of Terence Davies

# The Neon Bible

**SPOILER WARNING** The following notes give away some of the plot.

## A contemporary review

No director – probably not even Quentin Tarantino – is more thoroughly saturated in popular culture than Terence Davies. Ever since the funeral scene of Robert Tucker's mother in *Death and Transfiguration* – which raises Doris Day's 'It All Depends on You' to new levels of bitter-sweet irony – right through to Gena Rowlands' smoky, slightly off-key performances of 'My Romance' and 'How Long Has This Been Going On' in *The Neon Bible*, his films have depended for much of their emotional impact on the worlds of the torch song and the musical comedy. And yet, for many arthouse cinemagoers, he still has the reputation of being a 'difficult' director: perhaps because, by contrast with Tarantino, there is nothing knowing or hip about the way he deploys pop culture; or perhaps because, paradoxically, his films are too direct and sincere, with none of the high-gloss camp of a Greenaway or Almodóvar. Some people, after all, find them simply depressing. There were stories from this year's Cannes festival, too, of audiences booing and catcalling at a preview of *The Neon Bible*, completely wrong-footed by its unfashionably stately pacing and also – I suspect – by the sheer quietness with which its narrative unfolds. (It must be one of the quietest movies ever made: the last few minutes of the soundtrack, consisting of birdsong, cicadas and rippling water instead of the hitherto obligatory, send-'em-out-with-the-adrenaline-pumping pop song, makes even sitting through the end credits a magical experience.)

John Kennedy Toole's novel begins on a train, as the teenage David leaves his hometown for good, after a night in which he has witnessed the death of his mother and killed a sinister priest called the Reverend Watkins. We don't know any of this at first in the film, though, and Davies is not in the business of giving away plot details. 'I didn't want to dramatise the book,' he has said, 'I wanted to interpret it.' The motif of David sitting in the train carriage – his expressionless face staring at a full moon which is often seen in reflection – punctuates the film and is one of the many poetic devices used to break loose from the conscientious realism of John Kennedy Toole's novel. Some devices are more successful than others. After the scene where David's father has beaten up his mother, David steps out onto the porch to take in the enormity of what he's just seen, and in a few seconds (courtesy of morphing techniques) he physically grows from a boy of ten to a young man of fifteen. Presumably it's meant to symbolise his sudden, forced maturity, but I found it abrupt and alienating: a moment when the rigorous simplicity of Davies' methods almost shades into simple-mindedness.

On the whole, however, Davies' anti-realism does preserve the strong sense of interiority which characterises the novel. The small Southern town where the action takes place is never named by Toole, and by the same token Davies allows us to get well into the narrative before giving us an establishing shot of the main street: like Toole, he is interested in the town as a state of mind rather than as a physical location. In this way Davies foregrounds the theme of community, just as he did in *Distant Voices*, *Still Lives* and *The Long Day Closes*: but what makes *The Neon Bible* far more interesting is that here he interrogates this concept rather than merely celebrating it. If the two earlier films

## Love, Sex, Religion, Death: The Complete Films of Terence Davies

### The Terence Davies Trilogy

Tue 21 Oct 18:15 (+ intro by season curator Ben Roberts); Sat 1 Nov 12:10; Fri 7 Nov 20:55

### Distant Voices, Still Lives

Thu 23 Oct 18:20; Mon 27 Oct 18:20; Sat 29 Nov 18:30

### Terence on Television

Sat 25 Oct 15:00

### The Neon Bible

Sat 25 Oct 18:10; Sun 16 Nov 18:20

### Of Time and the City

Sun 26 Oct 12:10; Wed 29 Oct 20:45 (+ pre-recorded intro by Jason Wood, BFI Executive Director of Public Programmes & Audiences); Fri 28 Nov 20:40

### Remembering Terence Davies

Tue 28 Oct 18:30

### The Long Day Closes

Tue 28 Oct 20:45; Wed 19 Nov 18:20 (+ intro by season curator Ben Roberts)

### The Deep Blue Sea

Sat 1 Nov 15:10; Thu 6 Nov 18:10; Wed 19 Nov 20:45

### Sunset Song

Sun 2 Nov 18:00; Mon 3 Nov 20:20

### A Quiet Passion

Fri 7 Nov 18:00; Fri 21 Nov 20:30

### Book Launch: Terence Davies Screenplays, Volumes I and II

Tue 11 Nov 20:00 BFI Reuben Library

### The Unrealised Projects of Terence Davies

Tue 18 Nov 18:20

### Benediction

Sat 22 Nov 20:20; Sun 30 Nov (+ intro by season curator Ben Roberts)

### With thanks to

James Dowling, John Taylor, Dan Copley, Sophie Smith, Edge Hill University

## The Terence Davies Estate



### Dear Bud: The Creative Mind of Terence Davies

Edge Hill University, the repository of the Terence Davies Archive, curates a free exhibition of previously unseen materials from Davies' personal archive and the archive of production company Hurricane Films. The exhibition will include materials from both Terence's personal life and film career such as family letters and belongings, behind-the-scenes photos, props and draft scripts, highlighting his career long connection to the BFI, his deep love of music and a glimpse of his creative space with an interactive recreation of his working desk.

1-30 Nov BFI Southbank Mezzanine

were, on one level, nostalgic elegies for a vanished form of family and community life which shielded its members from (unspecified) outside forces, *The Neon Bible* shows a more complex awareness that the process of growing up in such a close-knit environment might also have its tragic and stifling downside.

*The Neon Bible* contains a crucial central episode which focuses this conflict. It takes place at a revivalist meeting organised by the charismatic evangelist Bobbie Lee Taylor (young in the book, middle-aged in the film). In both the novel and the film, an authentic version of religious feeling is offered in the form of a bedtime prayer spoken by Aunt Mae: 'We'll pray that your mother feels well tomorrow and that nothing happens to your Poppa tonight and that you and I... that you and I won't be hurt too bad tomorrow or ever again.' Thirty pages go by in the book before David attends the meeting, but immediately after Aunt Mae's prayer Davies audaciously pans sweepingly up to a star-studded night sky, and then down to a wide-angle shot of people arriving at Bobbie Lee's tent – greeting each other, laughing, talking – as if to argue for absolute continuity between the impulse behind her prayer and the impulse which draws the townsfolk to the evangelical show.

Davies wastes little time in establishing Bobbie Lee as a fake: we see him waiting in the wings, his face in sinister half-shadow, murmuring to himself, 'Good crowd. Good money'. The gradual collapse of the audience into tearful hysteria under the sway of Bobbie Lee's eloquence is very affecting, but Davies ends the sequence on a bleak note: instead of the 'fast song' with which the meeting concludes in Toole's version, we get a mournful arrangement of the New World Symphony sung by the congregation, and the camera tracks towards the doorway of the tent until it becomes a rectangle of infinite blackness.

It's remarkable how often, in teasing out the meaning of Davies' films, you find yourself talking about camera movements and musical accompaniments rather than dialogue or performances. Wonderful though Gena Rowlands and Diana Scarwid are in their roles, no one goes to a Terence Davies film for the acting. The most eloquent sequence in this film is again wordless, and consists of a series of long-held shots dissolving into one another: the coffins of soldiers who have not survived the war, ranged on a lawn and draped in the American flag; David sitting on the train, reaching up to lay his hand on a reflection of the moon; a white cotton sheet billowing on a clothes line, blurring again into the Stars and Stripes; a class of children solemnly pledging allegiance in their schoolroom. All of this is scored to 'Tara's Theme' from *Gone with the Wind*. The fluttering sheet takes us back to that controversial shot of a carpet in *The Long Day Closes*, a shot that for Davies' critics summed up everything that was precious and wilfully enigmatic about his technique. It's true that in his earlier films some of his references – including those culled from popular culture – while ostensibly gesturing towards a notion of community, of shared experience, were in fact intensely private. But his use of Max Steiner's music in this sequence, with its instant evocation of Southern history and its tremulously hopeful overtones ('Tomorrow is another day'), suggests a director fully in command of a wide and intelligible emotional register.

Jonathan Coe, *Sight and Sound*, October 1995