



Clockwise from far left The Road Home, Photograph of Jesus, Baby, Sign Language, Sis

BEST BRITISH SHORT 2010

TEXT BY BEN WILLIAMS

SIS [DEBORAH HAYWOOD]

Coaxing realistic performances from very young child actors may be one thing, but asking them to do so amid themes of paedophilia, teenage pregnancy and mob rule is something altogether more challenging. Director Deborah Haywood had a solution: 'stickers,' she says, 'and rides around set on crew members' toes.'

Innocence and misunderstanding collide in *Sis*, the third short film from Derbyshire-born writer-director Deborah Haywood. Laura is a young girl obsessed with having a baby. When she overhears that a paedophile is living on her road, and that such men 'like kids', Laura and her friend decide to go and ask him to give them a baby – as well as some sweets. When no one answers, the two girls crawl into his home through a catflap to see if he's inside. The harassed inhabitant of the house is horrified by the intrusion, and has little strength left to explain to Lauren's rescuers that he did nothing wrong.

Considering its serious subject matter, Haywood conducts her story with a lightness that is both a relief and a delight. At turns cute, shocking and funny, *Sis* is many things: a meditation on the persecution of suspected paedophiles; a comment on the issue of teen pregnancy; and an inky black comedy about two little girls who want to show a man their gymnastics in exchange for some sweets. Perhaps this mix is due to the film's inspiration – Haywood's own experiences growing up. 'At age six, I was obsessed with dressing-up,' she says. 'I once set off down the road in my mother's make-up and shoes.' It's this eye for unlikely comedy that results in a deceptively complex and rewarding film.

THE ROAD HOME [RAHUL GANDOTRA]

Whichever way you look at it, Rahul Gandotra's *The Road Home* is an extraordinary short. It's a 35mm student film shot entirely on location in the foothills of the Himalayas. It has a multinational cast speaking three languages, and the principal actor is a child. It confronts issues of race, heritage, and identity but is neither condescending towards nor weighed down by them. Its nomination for a BIFA follows a 2010 Student Oscar nod. It's also magically moving and, frankly, surprisingly entertaining.

The film follows Pico, a wealthy English boy of Indian heritage, who escapes from a remote boarding school intent on flying home

to England. Pico's anger and determination stem from the bullying he receives from fellow students, who resent his insistence on being British despite his Indian looks. Pico enlists the help of a local taxi driver, who is surprised at his inability to speak Hindi and his support for the English cricket team. En route they encounter a westerner totally in love with the mountains and local cuisine. She insists that Pico is lucky to be from India, a suggestion that angers him further. Eventually returned to the school by the taxi driver, Pico is mistaken for a local Indian boy by two English tourists in what becomes the film's most moving scene.

'The story is essentially semi-autobiographical,' says Gandotra, who was born in Belfast, spent some of his childhood in England before moving to the film's location, the real-life Woodstock boarding school. 'I suffered the same mislabelling and anger as Pico, who tries again and again to convince people that he is who he feels he is, but they simply don't believe him.' Gandotra says the film is a tragedy: that Pico will have to accept how the world will view him in spite of how he sees himself. But it's also hopeful. We're left hoping Pico may one day accept his rich and relevant Indian heritage, and therein lies the film's deepest pleasure.

PHOTOGRAPH OF JESUS [LAURIE HILL]

Laurie Hill's response to an invitation from Getty Images to make a film with photos from its archive must have given them some alarm. The proposal had been simple: make a short film using any of the millions of images in Getty's archives. Hill's response was not. Deploying a cast of hundreds of cut-out figures, Hill took over its historic Hulton Archive, shooting stop-motion animations after-hours to create his dazzling film.

Photograph of Jesus brings to life the bizarre and occasionally impossible requests for images received by the archive. Set to the deadpan testimony of one of its long-suffering archivists, Hill realises the stories using assets from the archive, animating photographed figures as they peel themselves from their frames and tiptoe from shelf to shelf. As the narrator continues, the archive fills with the living chaos of the photo miniatures: a tiny Jack the Ripper evades the police, a dogfight sweeps down the aisles, and Hitler cheats death to take part in the 1948 Olympics.

Hill had wanted to make a 'collage film' of found material for some time, and the Getty proposition seemed like a perfect way of achieving that goal in a truly original way. 'I spent a couple of days at their archive and was completely seduced by the building,' Hill says. 'There seemed to be a great film waiting in there.' But it wasn't until he began to talk to archivist Matthew Butson, who became the film's narrator, that he realised he was on to something more: 'I couldn't quite believe what I was hearing. His stories provided the perfect marriage of form and content.'

But it's Hill's skill and determination as a director that is the main wonder here. The sense of mischief he creates, melding the fruit of his stop-motion labours with computer-generated animation and a catchy score, is irresistible.

BABY [DANIEL MULLOY]

Who would you sit next to on the bus: the quietly beautiful woman, hands on her lap, minding her own business, or the staring, restless black youth considering you from his seat? We all know the answer, and it's these perceptions of danger and safety at which *Baby* takes its aim.

Daniel Mulloy's latest short film is a tense, fascinating study of a chance encounter by two social opposites in modern London. We awake with Sara, who swallows a dose of pills as her disgruntled mother shovels her out of bed. Later, while waiting for a bus, she intervenes in a pickpocketing and is threatened with a knife. It's a scene that attracts the attention of a member of the gang, who follows Sara on to the bus. What follows is a stifling, halting exchange as Sara's fear beats into an intense attraction to the boy and, with few words, they walk back to her house together. As Sara hides charts and hundreds of tablets, Mulloy reveals her to be HIV-positive, and suitably unsure whether she should allow herself the pleasure of her new companion. As she and Damon embrace, a moral fog descends. It shrouds any easy answers, making an appropriate response to the film's initial question much harder to define.

Producer Ohna Falby, reteaming with Mulloy after their acclaimed *Dad* (2006) and *Son* (2007), explains: 'The film explores the emotional repercussions that someone such as Sara might have experienced: the dramatic change from carefree young woman to victim, and

almost in the same moment becoming herself a threat. I love that the characters in this film are very human, because humans are complex and also flawed.' No one in Mulloy's film is as they seem, and, according to Falby, crafting this message involved a lot of development – more so than any of Daniel's other films to date. And it shows. The distilled intensity of *Baby* is remarkable.

SIGN LANGUAGE [OSCAR SHARP]

Oscar Sharp's film is apparently the most profitable short ever made. 'It's not the point, of course, but I did the maths recently and worked out it made back about 17,000% of its budget,' he says. Produced for a mere £236 and shot over one cold London afternoon, *Sign Language* went on to win £10,000 from one short film competition, plus a further £30,000 of future funding from the UK Film Council and Virgin Media.

Sign Language is about Ben, a man from a long line of 'static outdoor information technicians' – better known as the guys who hold enormous 'Golf Sale' signs on Oxford Street. Through Ben's spirited and enthusiastic explanation, we learn that he's recently secured a promotion. But Ben loves his job, and his last day seems to have passed without any recognition from his fellow friends with signs.

Though Sharp's film is fresh and engaging, it's most notable for its kind portrayal of the men and women who flyer and hold signs on our high streets. Ben is articulate, caring and devoted to his craft in a way that may have appeared sarcastic were it not handled so well by Sharp and writer Stephen Follows. 'We knew silly humour wouldn't work,' says Sharp. 'It all had to feel true. You have to know Ben is either beautifully deluded, or completely real.'

Sign Language is the only short among this year's nominations to have been produced directly for a short film competition – in this case one run by recruitment agency Reed under the theme of 'the wonderful workplace'. While some filmmakers may be adverse to the idea of creating work to order, Sharp is more realistic: 'It's an important part of what's happening to short film funding. It has left me with a budget for my next film.' Indeed, thanks to its nomination *Sign Language* represents the thousands of unseen shorts made for such competitions every year. As Ben rightfully points out in the film: 'I'm here to point out less obvious things.' ★