



Registered Charity: 1156478. Patron: Jim Broadbent

Friday October 9th, 7.30pm

## Still Life (12a)

dir: **Uberto Pasolini**

starring: **Eddie Marsan, Joanne Froggatt**

sponsors: **Jonathan and Shuna Killin**

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Who will mourn for those who die forgotten and alone? In a suburban London church, a minister reads a valediction to rows of empty chairs and one sole attendee, indefatigable council employee John May.

Characteristically exuding that particularly sympathetic quality of being one of life's underdogs, Eddie Marsan is spot-on casting as a kindly but almost pathologically reserved council functionary, determined to provide a decent send off for local residents who pass away without family to care for them. This involves going through the sad detritus of personal effects left in shabby council properties - in part looking for clues to any surviving relatives who need to be informed - and there's something inherently affecting about these yellowing old photographs and dusty knick-knacks, mundane yet telling leftovers of lives that have expired, almost unnoticed. With this choice of material, writer-director Uberto Pasolini, once better known as the producer of 1997's surprise home-grown hit *The Full Monty*, is certainly on to something touching and quietly revealing about dissipating community values in today's compartmentalised suburbia - which makes it all the more disappointing that his heavy-handed execution of the story does it no favours at all.

Eschewing the sort of self-effacing naturalism that would have allowed John's quest for a departed alcoholic's long-estranged daughter to speak for itself, Pasolini instead opts for a washed-out palette emphasising murky primary-school blue, effectively putting everything in quotes and insisting that we're watching a modern fable. While this heightened approach is a ploy that has served Aki Kaurismäki well in the past, here the emphatic design choices and deliberate pacing combine to deliver a film that's far too eager to proclaim its own poignancy. In the meantime, its passing details - look how sad May is, his daily dinner is an upturned can of tuna on toast! - contrive to turn this evidently decent and caring misfit into an unnecessary caricature of socially unskilled bachelordom.

That Marsan's underplayed performance steadfastly refuses to give in to mawkishness proves a saving grace, while Joanne Froggatt is believably down-to-earth as the bereaved relative who may yet present him with a chance to emerge from his lonely rut. Her brief scenes with Marsan have an easy uncontrived warmth that seems to present the film with an escape route from its at times suffocating air of calculation, but Pasolini, alas, has other ideas. Piling outrageous coincidence onto sickly lachrymosity, he unleashes a climactic



flourish whose all-out assault on our tear ducts would almost be laughable, were it not accompanied by the elegant tones of Rachel Portman's score, which is typically velvety but not over rich. It's all so exasperatingly counterproductive, leaving us staggered by the melodramatic crassness of the film-making, when *Still Life* in its early stages suggests some degree of reflective empathy with lives passing by otherwise unnoticed behind the curtains in tower blocks.

**Synopsis:** London, present day. Council functionary John May is dedicated to his job, tracing the families of deceased local residents and arranging the burial of those whose surviving relatives cannot be found. The task brings John himself some comfort in an otherwise lonely bachelor existence, so when his boss announces that restructuring will mean his redundancy, he continues to work on the case of Billy Stoke, an alcoholic who died alone. He contacts Billy's former workmates at a food-processing plant, and also his old flame Mary, now running a fish and chip shop. This brings him into contact with Billy's long-estranged daughter Kelly. She is shocked at the news of her father's death but appreciative of the effort John has made in tracking her down. There's the glimmer of a connection between them, as further discussion on the funeral arrangements prompt a suggestion to have coffee after the ceremony. Just before the funeral, however, John is knocked down by a bus and killed. Billy's funeral is attended by all the people John has brought together; after they leave, the spirits of those he had laid to rest rise up across the graveyard in tribute to his kindness.

### **Credits (selected)**

**John:** Eddie Marsan

**Kelly:** Joanne Froggatt

**Council manager:** Andrew Buchan

**Mary:** Karen Drury

**Jumbo:** Ciaran McIntyre

**Homeless men:** Paul Anderson, Tim Potter

**Morgue attendant:** Bronson Webb

**Shakthi:** Neil D'Souza

**Fishmonger:** Wayne Foskett

**Director/Screenplay:** Uberto Pasolini

**DoP:** Stefani Falveni

**Editors:** Tracy Granger, Gavin

Buckley

**Music:** Rachel Portman

**Sound:** Kieran Teather

**UK/Italy/Germany 2012. 92 mins**

### **Another View - Mark Kermode (*The Observer*)**

*There are few faces more forlorn than that of Eddie Marsan in this painfully melancholic tale of half-lives and lonely deaths. He plays John May, a civil servant whose thankless job is to locate relatives of the recently deceased and perpetually unloved. To his superiors (and indeed everyone else), these poor unfortunates are just numbers, but John takes an all-too-personal interest in their passing – lovingly pasting their photos into his own family albums, while eating tuna and toast at home alone. Facing his final case, John embarks on an odyssey through the land of the living that brings him into contact with the fractured friends and acquaintances of a previously unnoticed neighbour. It's touching stuff, Rachel Portman's plaintive score plucking endearingly at our heartstrings, Marsan's worried demeanour dripping with an almost Chaplinesque sense of pathos. For a while, it seems as though we're heading toward clichéd resolution in the form of Joanne Froggatt's angel of grace. But I was unprepared for the transcendent final moments, which left me suddenly and unexpectedly in tears.*

### **..and Another view (Regan Reid - *Paste*)**

*In Still Life, John May (Eddie Marsan) plans funerals for strangers. He carefully picks out music for services that nobody attends; he writes eulogies for people no one else cares to memorialize; he pays his respects, alone, as caskets are lowered into the ground; and then he goes home to an empty apartment to eat tuna and dry toast and flip through a photo album of all the other lonely souls he's put to rest.*

*For more than 22 years, John has worked for the South London council, trying to track down relatives of people who have died alone. He's earnest in his efforts, though not often successful. People live and die alone for a reason, you see. But when John learns that his position with the council has become redundant, he makes it his mission to close his last case successfully. And it's a case that hits particularly close to home—literally. When he gets the call that a man has been found dead in an apartment in John's own complex, he realizes that this could be his fate someday, too. So John sets out to find the estranged family and friends of his reclusive, alcoholic neighbor, Billy Stoke, and convince them that Billy's worth remembering.*

*John's whole life is his job. He's a meticulous and careful man who spends his days dealing with the affairs of the dead, at the expense of living his own life. His is a dull and dreary existence—something director Uberto Pasolini makes sure we understand. There is nothing vibrant in his protagonist's life: He works at a white computer on a white desk and drinks from a white coffee cup; he lives in an apartment painted all white with white appliances and white furniture; he walks through grey streets, under grey skies, in grey suits. Pasolini practically beats us over the head with beige—but by doing so, we know from the get-go that John is destined to find some color, some life, in his life. And when he does, it comes in the form of a blonde in a pink sweater.*

*After conducting some investigative work that would make Poirot proud, John eventually tracks down Kelly Stoke (Joanne Froggatt), the daughter Billy abandoned but never forgot. Along the way, John learns more about his wild and unpredictable neighbor, and, perhaps taking a page out of Billy's book, John*

*soon allows himself to loosen up a little—he drinks hot chocolate instead of his regular black tea, swigs whiskey from the bottle and even skips work. He develops a fast and unlikely friendship with Kelly, and his life begins to brighten (as does his wardrobe).*

*Admittedly, it's a predictable storyline, as exciting to watch as it is to read, saved only by Eddie Marsan, who is absolutely superb as the large-hearted loner. While Pasolini's direction and script feel heavy-handed, Marsan still manages to deliver a compelling and understated performance. Even when the film drags at times, almost predictably so, Marsan is always interesting to watch. Marsan has the ability to melt into every role he adopts, leaving behind all the others that came before it. In other words, when I saw Marsan play an abusive, cruel husband in *Tyrannosaur*, I thought I'd never be able to see him as anything else, but within the first few moments of *Still Life*, every memory of that role was forgotten. While fans of *Downton Abbey*, might be excited to see Golden Globe-winner Joanne Froggatt somewhere other than the country estate, her screen time is limited. This is Marsan's movie from start to finish—and it's all the better for it.*

**Our next film: Friday October 16th, 7.30pm**

**Elle l'adore (France 2014. Cert 15)**

This black-comic suspense thriller from France is gripping and ingenious, the kind of picture that Claude Chabrol might have admired. At its centre is a veteran superstar *chanteur*, Vincent Lacroix, played by Laurent Lafitte, living a gilded celebrity life in Paris. Sandrine Kiberlain plays middle-aged divorcee Muriel – his biggest fan. Since her teenage years, poor Muriel has written to him every day, bought all his records, gone to all his concerts, hung around the stage door afterwards. She is a sad case, a fantasist and obsessive, just short of being a stalker, and Vincent has become wearily resigned to her peripheral presence. But when he gets into a terrible jam, he realises there is only one person he can turn to for help.