

Charlie Bubbles (15) UK 1968 ✓

27 April 2020

DIRECTOR: **Albert Finney**

Running time: 89 minutes

LEADING PLAYERS: **Albert Finney** (Charlie Bubbles), **Colin Blakely** (Smokey Pickles), **Billie Whitelaw** (Lottie Bubbles), **Liza Minelli** (Eliza), **Timothy Garland** (Jack Bubbles), **Peter Sallis** (solicitor), **Yootha Joyce** (woman in cafe), **Wendy Padbury** (woman in cafe), **Jean Marsh** (waitress).

SCREENPLAY: **Shelagh Delaney**. PHOTOGRAPHY: **Peter Suschitzky**. EDITING: **Fergus McDonell**. MUSIC: **Misha Donat**.

Born in Salford in 1936, Albert Finney, was surely one of the more flamboyant British actors of the twentieth century. Early work centred on the theatre (RADA, RSC), but after replacing a poorly Olivier as Coriolanus at Stratford in 1959, he appeared as one of Archie Rice's sons in Tony Richardson's 1960 film of *The Entertainer*. That same year he burst onto our screens as Arthur Seaton in Karel Reisz's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, and a cinema career was assured.

Over the next few years, however, he did not 'sell his soul' to film stardom as other 'thesps' have. *Billy Liar* and *Luther* were both roles for the theatre that sustained links to the British cinema's 'New Wave', but together with his turning down of the lead in *Lawrence of Arabia* (loath to commit himself to a string of Sam Spiegel productions), they represented a break from the big screen. This was interrupted in 1963-4 by *Tom Jones* (Richardson), *Night Must Fall* (Reisz), and Carl Foreman's extraordinarily star-studded WW2 epic, *The Victors* (surely a title up for reappraisal!) A further break, largely taken up with seasons at Olivier's National Theatre, ended more substantively in 1967 with *Two for the Road* (shown here a few seasons ago) and the following year's vanity project, *Charlie Bubbles*.

Throughout his life Finney never entirely abandoned this link to the theatre, and indeed some of his on-screen performances, such as Hercule Poirot in *Murder on the Orient Express* and Constable Hegarty in *The Playboys*, might earn the epithet 'theatrical'! Moreover, it was at about that time that, together with Michael Medwin, another actor who, like Attenborough and Bryan Forbes, went into production, Finney established Memorial Productions, for stage and screen. This creative period was the background to the production of *Charlie Bubbles*, as well as Lindsay Anderson's ...*If*; it also saw Stephen Frears direct his first short, and then his first feature (*Gumshoe*, in 1971). As

Finney himself put it, "(It was) the most intense sense of creation I have ever had... but in the end it was sitting in an office, pitching ideas to Hollywood and waiting for the phone to ring."

So, what of the film? Finney plays the eponymous Bubbles, a successful writer who journeys from London back to his working-class roots in Salford, Manchester. The script points up the contrasts between this world and the life he has gravitated to, which gives him many of the material things he wants, represented by his Rolls Royce Silver Cloud convertible and his travelling companion, his secretary Eliza, with whom he is having a casual affair. He visits the Victorian terraced neighbourhoods of his youth, sees his former wife for whom he has bought a farm in the Derbyshire hills, and takes his son to a football match at Old Trafford. All the while he feels unfulfilled, which, as this is a film, we must infer as we witness things through his eyes.

Charlie Bubbles was the culmination of the British kitchen sink drama that characterised so much of the New Wave, but henceforth would take a turn into gangster territory (*The Reckoning*, *Get Carter*). Like last season's *A Taste of Honey*, also scripted by Shelagh Delaney, it exposes the gulf between metropolitan swinging London and northern Britain, a theme also dominant in *Billy Liar*, and Richard Lester's *A Hard Day's Night*. That the bleakness is leavened by these films' wry, often surreal, sense of humour is now routine, but the result is the same: a social historian's treasure trove.

David Clare

Pushing Night Away – Norway 2018. Failed suicide Eddie is in the psychiatric ward. On the hospital roof he meets Kate, who says go ahead and jump or choose to live life to its fullest. 22 minutes.