CAST

BOB HOSKINS as George
CATHY TYSON as Simone
MICHAEL CAINE as Mortwell
ROBBIE COLTRANE as Thomas

CREW

Directed by **NEIL JORDAN**
Produced by **STEPHEN WOOLLEY**
and **PATRICK CASSAVETTI**
Executive Producers **GEORGE HARRISON**
and **DENIS O'BRIEN**
Screenplay by **NEIL JORDAN and DAVID LELAND**
Cinematography by **ROGER PRATT**
Production Design by **JAMIE LEONARD**
Costume Design by **LOUISE FROGLEY**
Edited by **LESLEY WALKER**
Music by **MICHAEL KAMEN**

MONA LISA

by Mike Sutton

When Bob Hoskins died in 2014, the power of his legacy was undeniable. From his television role as Arthur Parker in *Pennies From Heaven* (1978) to Harold Shand in *The Long Good Friday* (1980) to Eddie Valiant in *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (1988), he embodied a kind of honest to goodness, no-frills approach to acting which gained the respect of audiences, critics and his peers. But his skill as an actor has often been undervalued. It's not merely his presence, although that's certainly enough to stop you watching anybody else on the screen. It's his technique which, in a very unshowy way, proves to be immensely skilful in the way he gives his characters layers beyond what they initially seem to possess. There's no finer place to see this in action than in *Mona Lisa*, a British Noir in which he plays George, an ex-con who falls in love with the wrong woman in the wrong place at the wrong time, and manages to jump to all the wrong conclusions in the process.

According to Neil Jordan, the inspiration for *Mona Lisa* came from a story in a British newspaper about an ex-convict who was charged with grievous bodily harm and claimed to be "protecting ladies of the night against their Maltese pimps." I've tried, without success, to find this story but it's a perfect peg upon which to hang the story of George, an unlikely white knight in mufti, and his obsession with saving the woman he is hired to drive, Simone (Cathy Tyson), a "tall thin black tart", from her vicious pimp. Clearly, another inspiration is the British crime film, not least in the use of Brighton for the finale; that most English of seaside towns served as a memorable setting for *Brighton Rock* (book 1938, film 1947) and thrillers such as Val Guest's *Jigsaw* (1962), *Quadrophenia* (1979), the little-seen *Smokescreen* (1964), and the Richard Burton gangster movie *Villain* (1971) where it serves as the setting for a nice Sunday afternoon outing for the gangland boss and his old mum.

Essentially, *Mona Lisa* also fits into the gangster genre, dealing as it does with various low-lives; pimps, hard men, ex-cons, and putative big-shots. It shares a connection to the most iconic example of the latter day genre piece, Mike Hodges' *Get Carter* (1971), with the same attention to a specific time and place—1970s Newcastle swapped for 1980s Soho—although the tone of Jordan's film is very different. It's just as brutal in its details as the earlier film but the essential nihilism of Hodges' vision is replaced by a sense of longing and, ultimately, a tentative optimism which you could label as a cop-out but actually seems to express a kind of yearning idealism.

You see, George is an unusual leading man for a gangster movie because for all his street smarts and convict savvy, he's essentially pure in heart. Not pure in a traditional sense perhaps and he's certainly fearsome when roused, as a pimp finds out when he gets dragged through a car window. But when it comes to love, he's an innocent who believes as fervently in fairytales as any young child might. His heart is on his sleeve, just waiting to be taken and trampled underfoot. There's a wonderful misdirection here in terms of our expectations. George comes on like a bull and within five minutes he's having a barney in the street with his ex-wife. He's got no taste at all and his idea of home is a garage run by his friend Thomas (Robbie Coltrane). But Hoskins gradually reveals George's basic vulnerability and it turns out to be his romanticism. Early on in his relationship with Simone, he begins to tell his story to Thomas and you can see his mind working, thinking out the plot contrivances that will lead to the longed-for happy ending.

Just like Scotty in *Vertigo* (1958), J.J. Gittes in *Chinatown* (1974), or Harry Caul in *The Conversation* (1974), George believes in his ability to become the leading man in a romantic melodrama. He alone can save the innocent girl from the evil that threatens her, never thinking for one minute that he might actually be making the situation worse. Akin to the aforementioned characters—along with Harry Moseby in *Night Moves* (1975) and Philip Marlowe in The *Long Goodbye* (1973)—he's a noble fool. Right from the start, conversing with his writer friend Thomas, our hero is complacently explaining how the plot of the most recent novel should have worked out. Most of all, he believes in the conclusion where the princess kisses the frog and he turns into a prince. That this is dangerous should be immediately clear to seasoned Noir watchers—I use the term in a conceptual rather than a stylistic sense. In the rules of the genre, this all too human weakness makes him a target for the manipulations of the powers of worldly corruption.

It seems entirely appropriate given the film's forebears in British cinema that these powers should be represented by Michael Caine who plays the gang boss named,

in a delightfully Gothic touch, Mortwell. Caine was on something of a hot streak at the time, following *Educating Rita* (1983) and *The Honorary Consul* (1983), and just before winning an Oscar for his appearance in *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986). It was odd at the time to see him appearing in such a small role but his memorably sleazy characterisation casts a shadow over the whole film. Mortwell is a banal monster all right with his white rabbit and his flecked grey suit, but he's still a monster, representing the casual trade in women that lies at the heart of the film. His associate Anderson (Clarke Peters), Simone's homicidal pimp, is, by contrast, merely a physical threat—although Peters gives him a credible swagger.

At the beginning of the story, it appears as if Simone is also going to be an abstract figure, representing the Mona Lisa of the title—"a cold and lonely, lovely work of art." But Cathy Tyson is very fine actress and David Leland is a writer who has always been good with powerful, untypical female roles—the two representations of Cynthia Payne in *Wish You Were Here* and *Personal Services* (both 1987) being a case in point. Simone is a tremendously complex figure with numerous dimensions and an unnerving ability to change moods on the proverbial sixpence. As the filmmakers intended, she's like the Mona Lisa in that men can project their own thoughts and feelings onto her. It's immediately apparent that she's tough, a survivor with a capacity for endurance that far exceeds that of George. But she's also damaged and vulnerable in ways which a simple soul such as George could never begin to understand. He wants to protect her but the relationship is never so simple and she generally has the upper hand. There's a particularly touching sequence where she dresses him in expensive clothes as if he is some kind of doll, almost inversing the famous "dressing up" scene in *Vertigo*. But what Simone most definitely is not is a femme fatale. Not unlike Evelyn Mulwray in *Chinatown*, she's a fatal woman who is mostly fatal to herself, and the hero is collateral damage at most. Both women use the hero to find a girl, albeit for different reasons, and the hero doesn't realise until too late that he has, essentially, been had.

What makes the relationship between Simone and George so deeply affecting is the essential misunderstanding between them. What George wants most is love and a sense of being not merely needed but wanted. Unfortunately that's exactly the last thing that Simone needs from George and the emotional climax of the film is when he finally understands the situation he's into which he has put himself. Upon realising

how he has been used, not only by Mortwell and Anderson but also by Simone, Hoskins is at his most heartbreaking, replying to Simone's question about whether he ever needed anybody with three simple words—"all the time".

George breaks our heart, despite being initially unsympathetic to modern, liberal eyes. His fundamental racism is displayed in the early scenes when he expresses shock at the immigrants who have moved into his old stamping ground. Nor is his attitude to his ex-wife exactly progressive, but this is obviously a realistic depiction of someone of George's age and class and it soon becomes clear that he is far less stereotyped than we expect. His approach to Simone is certainly a touch paternalistic but never limited by either her race or her profession and when he asks her naïve questions after her engagements—"Was it good?"—it's clear that he is sincere and genuinely curious about how she goes about living with her work. He sees no contradiction between seeing Simone both as a "tall thin black tart" and "a lady". At one point he hits Simone when she lets her sharp tongue loose on him and she responds with infernal fury before accepting that he doesn't understand. Paradoxically, it's his inability to fully understand which allows him to rise above the pit in which he makes a living. Sometimes he's a fool, sometimes even ludicrous—never more so than when wearing novelty glasses at the seaside—but he's never needlessly cruel. That's not much, perhaps, but in this world of sleaze it's like a shaft of light in the darkness.

This sleaze is vividly portrayed by Jordan and his cinematographer Roger Pratt, otherwise best known for the equally vibrant worlds of *Brazil* (1985) and *Batman* (1989). The Soho settings are as bright and luminous as the New York locations of *Taxi Driver* (1976), a film which was a reference point for Jordan, and just as dangerous. This is a Soho which is all but gone now, surviving in back streets but largely replaced by trendy bars and licensed adult shops, and it's a sad scene, full of bored-looking girls and badly dressed men with steam cleaning equipment. Even more horrifying is the vision of Kings Cross at night, a kind of steam-drenched hell in which Simone tries to find the girl who she loves. George, it is clear, may be a small-time villain but he's the purest of the pure compared to this. One scene sums this up, an encounter in a small bedroom, strewn with childrens' toys, with a badly beaten teenage prostitute who may be the object of Simone's affections but turns out to be another loose end. It's sad and upsetting, not least for the girl's terror about her pimp's reaction when George refuses to play the part she expects. It is almost certainly not accidental that

the scene is heavily reminiscent of the bedroom sequence between Robert De Niro and Jodie Foster in *Taxi Driver.*

Quests of one kind or another are a frequent feature in Neil Jordan's work—the search for the paramilitary killers in *Angel* (1982), for theological answers in *The End of the Affair* (1999), for monsters in *The Company of Wolves* (1984). It's possible that the search which underlies *Mona Lisa* is tidied up a little too neatly compared to some in the other films but this is done with a sense of humanity and generosity which is startlingly fresh and mature. The presence of Hoskins and Tyson has a lot to do with this but there's also a vivid humour that constantly bubbles to the surface. Their dialogue exchanges crackle with misunderstandings and cross-purposes, reminding us that they are a classic mismatched couple, and the supporting cast are a vivid gallery of rogues. It's fun to see veteran Joe Brown with a terrible hairstyle as Mortwell's flunky and Rob Bedall is just right as the jack-of-all-trades for whom bartending is as much part of a day's work as finding a girl for a client. Most of all, there is Robbie Coltrane whose warmth provides a much needed contrast to the bleakness of the rest of the film. It's not merely the jokes he tells—upon seeing a dirty video playing he says "Channel 4, is it?"—but his whole demeanour which seems to represent a sense of loyalty and decency which gives George, and ultimately his daughter, a kind of home.

At the end of the film, the plot has resolved, the bad guys are dead and the lovers are reunited. George, in an unforgettable tracking shot which deserves to be as famous as the lengthy closing shot of *The Long Good Friday*, seems to be left out in the cold with nothing. The sheer desperate sadness at this point is almost unbearable and the filmmakers seem to realise this. Against all the odds, they allow George his own kind of happy ending. Perhaps not the one he wanted but a kind of happiness all the same. Even more than that, they allow him self-knowledge and that most elusive quality of all, a hard-won grace.

Mike Sutton has writing about films for most of his adult life. He has written for the British Film Institute's Screenonline project and his work has appeared in *The Third Alternative*, *Cinema Retro* and *The Huffington Post*. Since 1999 he has been one of the main DVD and Blu-ray reviewers for The Digital Fix. For Arrow, he has written the booklet essays for *The Killers* (1964 version) and *Network*, and also wrote and presented *The De Palma Digest*, included on the *Sisters* Blu-ray release.

ABOUT THE RESTORATION

Mona Lisa has been exclusively restored in 2K resolution by Arrow Films.

The original camera negative was scanned in 2K resolution on a pin-registered Arriscan and was graded on the Baselight grading system. The film's original Director Neil Jordan and Director of Photography Roger Pratt oversaw the colour grading for this project.

Thousands of instances of dirt, debris and light scratches were removed through a combination of digital restoration tools. Image stability, density fluctuation and other picture issues were also improved.

The film's original mono soundtrack was transferred from the original magnetic reels, and audio issues such as bumps, clicks and audible buzz were repaired, minimised, or removed.

This restoration of *Mona Lisa* was completed in 2K resolution with all work carried out at Deluxe Restoration, London.

Director Neil Jordan and cinematographer Roger Pratt have approved this restoration.

Restoration Supervised by James White, Arrow Films
Restoration services by Deluxe Restoration, London:
Film Scanning: Paul Doogan, Bob Roach
Film grading: Stephen Bearman
Restoration Supervisors: Tom Barrett, Clayton Baker
Restoration Technicians: Debi Bataller, Dave Burt, Lisa Copson, Tom Wiltshire
Restoration Management: Mark Bonnici, Graham Jones
Audio Transfer: Dominic Thomas, Gary Saunders/Deluxe 142

Special Thanks to Neil Jordan, Roger Pratt and HandMade Films.

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Discs and Booklet Produced by Michael Brooke
Executive Producer: Francesco Simeoni
Technical Producer: James White
Production Assistants: Louise Buckler, Liane Cunje
QC and Proofing: Michael Brooke, Anthony Nield
Authoring and Subtitling: David Mackenzie
Artist: Matthew Griffin
Design: Jack Pemberton

SPECIAL THANKS

Alex Agran, Carlotta Barrow, Christopher Byers, Daniel Bird, Carl Daft, HandMade, Barry Hanson, Mike Heap, Neil Jordan, David Leland, Colin Lomax, Debbie Mason, Marc Morris, Roger Pratt, Alexei Slater, Rod Smith, Starz/Anchor Bay, Mike Sutton, Marcus Tustin, Mark Upton, Stephen Woolley

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