

# Shelagh Delaney: Salford's Playwright Genius



Image credit: Patricia van den Berg from Pixabay

From the window of my hotel in Old Trafford I have a view of the Trafford Road Swing Bridge. Built in 1892, the last of seven such bridges across the Manchester Ship Canal, it's a structure that fascinates and haunts me. I first saw it in Tony Richardson's 1961 film *A Taste of Honey* based on a play by the immensely gifted Salford-born Shelagh Delaney. The story is about the coming of age of teenager Jo (played memorably by Rita Tushingham), who becomes pregnant by a black sailor, Jimmy. When Jimmy leaves, Jo takes up with a gay friend, Geoff (Murray Melvin); drama way ahead of its time on so many levels.

The scene that is etched on my memory is one where Jimmy walks to the end of the bridge as it swings open. It creates a giddy sensation as the black-and-white background landscape of Old Trafford floats past this mobile road. Years later, I discover the very same spot while working in MediaCity and become entranced by what the bridge seems to represent. Nowadays, it swings no more. No more do the big ships sail 'on the ally ally oh' (as children chant in the film). The bridge used to open, amazingly, for submarines too. Walking along the quaysides, noting the weighty iron mooring bollards no longer used but still preserved, I am assailed by many feelings. I have an admiration for the regeneration of this once industrial area, but also sadness for the passing of a great shipyard, a monumental engineering feat of the Victorians. It reached its apex of use in 1958. It must have been a noisy, busy and dirty place back then, but now it is quiet and full of swanky apartments, museums, the BBC and ITV studios, restaurants, bars and of course, the Lowry Centre, home to the collected work of another great genius of Salford.

In these surroundings I think often of Delaney and her curiously attenuated career. The film brought her fame, money and too many expectations for a follow-up, which perhaps she struggled to achieve. Her subsequent work is superb, however, but the box-office flop of the film *Charlie Bubbles* for which she wrote a dazzling screenplay, must have set the path of her career back somewhat.

It's an interesting film; perhaps flawed, but fascinatingly experimental. It deals with the return to Salford of a successful and rich writer, the eponymously named Charlie (Albert Finney, also from Salford, and friend of Delaney) on a visit to his divorced wife (Billie Whitelaw) and his young son. He seems to have lost his way and at one point is chided by an old schoolfriend about 'getting bogged down with a lot of false values' by going south. I wonder if Delaney is exploring some of her own love-hate

relationship with Salford, which she touches upon in Ken Russell's film about her? There, she speaks candidly about how people try to leave Salford, but can't; it's a place that is almost 'addictive'. She describes these people as 'lost'; the masses of working-class people condemned to boring, meaningless jobs. Perhaps the same people you see in L.S. Lowry's paintings? Yet footage of that immediate post-war period shows many happy faces and integrated communities getting along, despite the poverty. Delaney ruminates on the fabric of community itself; speculating how it takes such a long time to form.

Delaney also describes Salford as the perfect crucible for a writer, with its wealth of characters; her steely powers of authentic dialogue always cutting to the chase in these films. They surely stem from Salford's former communities, now perhaps lost forever.

I can't help but sense a slight decline in Delaney herself too, as her career (if not her writing capability) seemed to dip after the initial explosion of success. Perhaps she no longer had to struggle, having sold the rights to *A Taste of Honey* for £20,000 in 1961, a sum now equivalent to nearly half a million. Few people are able to talk candidly about the shock of suddenly becoming rich having been so poor. Except, of course, Delaney, who explores this theme in *Charlie Bubbles*. It makes me wonder if there is an element of the autobiographical here? The remainder of her career was surprisingly patchy despite impressive screenplays such as *Dance with a Stranger* about Ruth Ellis, the last woman to be hanged in Britain. Perhaps this writer did not need to produce? She was, apparently, lazy when it came to writing, although she took huge pains once the process was underway. I can't help but feel we have been deprived of something more. Some of these questions are partially answered in Selina Todd's fascinating biography *Tastes of Honey*. It's not easy to find photographs and interviews of Delaney after the 1960s, although she died as recently as 2011.

But Delaney took a decision to shun interviews and publicity after some way too intrusive exposure at the beginning of her career, and the rare footage of her in the Russell film on YouTube gives a tantalising glimpse of a beautiful, tall and highly intelligent woman with all her creative life ahead of her.

It's heartening to hear that there is actually a Shelagh Delaney Day celebrated in Salford every 25 November (her birthday) involving the encouragement of young writers. She has not been forgotten back in her place of origin, it seems.

In the midst of MediaCity, for all its forward-looking affluence and glamour, I often ponder on what has been replaced over the decades, the heart of a vanished community glimpsed mercurially in Delaney's best screen and stage work. Although I never knew it, I can't help but mourn the loss of a way of life; some unwritten works by a great genius, and a bridge that no longer swings.

**Ivor McGregor March 2024**