

My Favourite Londoner

Matt Lucas on Ron Peck

Matt Lucas grew up in Stanmore, Middlesex. He's worked extensively with Vic Reeves and Bob Mortimer, and written for Ali G, but found real, gold-plated fame in collaboration with David Walliams on 'Little Britain', which began as a Radio 4 programme before turning into a multi-award-winning, catchphrase-spawning TV smash hit.

I went to university when I was about 19 or 20, towards the end of 1993. Everyone else at university had a social life and would go to the pub, drink, and do various illegal things, but I didn't. I wasn't very skilled socially so I just sat in my bedroom. I was doing my stand-up but I would stay in on Saturday nights. I was the only student that had a little colour TV with teletext, and I'd also bought a video player in 1990. There was a video shop round the corner which rented out arthouse films, so one Saturday night I rented this film I'd heard about called 'Nighthawks', directed by Ron Peck. It was made in the late '70s and it was billed as the first gay British film.

I wasn't really out then; I was just in the process of coming out. Even to go into a shop and rent 'Nighthawks' is a coded way of telling the person behind the counter that you're gay, so that was an act of bravery for me at that age. Anyway, I watched the film and I actually found it incredibly bleak and depressing. I really didn't like it. I thought it was downbeat and dark and – not really having a gay life myself – I was very intimidated by its depiction. But it was one of the few pre-AIDS gay films, so it was quite interesting in that respect. You'd had films like 'Victim', which was about a homosexual, but not really from a gay angle or in terms of gay being an identity.

Scroll on to about 2000, and for some reason I suddenly remembered the film. I ordered a copy from America because it wasn't available here. This terrible-quality VHS came in the post and I had a completely different response to it. I watched it as somebody who was out now but also as someone living in the post-'Queer As Folk' era, when suddenly gay was glamorous. And, although we all acknowledged AIDS, it wasn't an instant death sentence any more; it was about living with the virus rather than dying from it. So gay-related television and film was appearing that wasn't preoccupied with the idea of HIV and AIDS. People like Graham Norton were on television and now it wasn't such a negative thing. Which was all great, but there was just a little gap somewhere in terms of the depiction of the gay lifestyle which 'Nighthawks' completely filled.

Although it's 25 years old, it's so real and it absolutely spoke to me in terms of what gay life is like. It doesn't glamorise it, it doesn't celebrate it, it doesn't condemn it; it just shows somebody who happens to be gay living their life. I could totally relate and connect to it. It's a film I've watched seven or eight times now and each time I see more in it. It transcends just being a gay film, I think it's a very important, progressive piece of social realism on film. It does interesting things with film form, too.



Man of vision Director Ron Peck

Night runs into day runs into night, so it becomes this endless trip around Soho clubs; the final scenes are shot in Heaven, where the teacher protagonist is searching for love through promiscuous sex. I don't think I was living his life – I don't think I ever have done, quite – but I could identify with what he was looking for at that time.

I had the chance to meet Ron Peck recently, when I was asked to interview him for a documentary. We managed to track both him and his collaborator Paul

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Hallam down. Ron's still a filmmaker. He's been working with co-operatives and non-profit making organisations in London. He turned out to be a very youthful-looking man in his mid-fifties. He's an interesting, unassuming, perceptive man. He doesn't take easy options. He's fully aware there are easier ways to make a film. Let's not forget that 'Nighthawks' was demonised by the national press and the tabloids; after all, this was the Mary Whitehouse era. Peck even received death threats.

I think it was shown once on Channel 4 but I don't believe it's been shown since on British television. In a way, Peck ought to be more celebrated and perhaps the re-release of 'Nighthawks' and the follow-up 'Strip Jack Naked' will achieve that. Some people say that 'Strip Jack Naked' is even

better than 'Nighthawks'. It's a magnificent autobiographical video piece, very poetic but accessible and direct at the same time. Watching it is an incredibly emotional experience. It was released in 1991 at the height of the visibility of the AIDS epidemic in the Western world. It contained some stuff that hit the cutting-room floor on 'Nighthawks', but it's also his own story of growing up.

I don't know Ron very well. I know he teaches a lot between films. Because his films are not the most commercial, they take a long time. 'Nighthawks' took something like four or five years to get funding. It was funded by a lot of high-profile gay people but Peck wasn't allowed to name many of them because they were in the public eye and it was a time when they had to give anonymously. I'm optimistic that, now 'Nighthawks' and 'Strip Jack Naked' are available on DVD, his work will find a wider audience – because 'Nighthawks' at the time was criticised as being quite downbeat, by me too, but now I actually think there's a lot of optimism in that film. I think it's due for a re-evaluation. You can see a link to things like 'Queer As Folk'. You're not just seeing a gay film; you can view 'Nighthawks' alongside Mike Leigh's and Ken Loach's work.

I know Ron's had one or two difficult patches in his career but I don't think there's ever been a serious downturn. He's always done what he's wanted to do; I'd hate to paint a picture of a man who's been neglected. He's an artist first and foremost; a man of great integrity, who really believes in what he's doing. I'm sure he could have gone down a more commercial route but he's got the things he wants to do, he does them, and I respect that. Sitting

here with my 'Little Britain' dolls, I do respect that!

*Interview: Kieron Corless
'Nighthawks'/'Strip Jack Naked' out now, Second Run DVD, £12.99 each.
'Nighthawks' extras include a new documentary presented by Matt Lucas.*

The bare facts

Ron Peck

1948 Born in Merton, south London.

1959 Attends Rutlish School, Merton Park, where John Major was also a pupil.

1972 Attends London Film School in Covent Garden. Jointly creates Four Corner Films with other ex-film students.

1974-76 Works at the Other Cinema in Little Newport Street. Stephen Woolley takes over his job when he leaves.

1978 'Nighthawks' released. Wide international distribution, but also several bans and death threats.

1991 'Strip Jack Naked', the sequel to 'Nighthawks', is released, plus 'Fighters', a film about boxers in Canning Town.

1996 Lottery money enables him to create a groundbreaking East London digital studio at Mile End.

2002 Awarded NESTA Fellowship.

2006 Two new features in pipeline, set in Russia and the Ukraine.