

# CATHY COME HOME

Followed by a Q&A with **KEN LOACH** and **TONY GARNETT**  
hosted by **CLARE ALLAN**.



In 2013 director Alan Parker, reflecting on the inspiration he took from *Cathy Come Home*, made the following comment: “I was obsessed with how brilliant Loach and Tony Garnett were when I was a young filmmaker and I remember asking them how they did it. They replied: ‘Stop asking us how we did it and ask instead, why we did it?’”

First broadcast fifty years ago tonight, *Cathy Come Home* remains one of the most influential television drama ever shown; its title alone has become a touchstone that can be cited without need of further exposition, its legacy amended the Welfare State in both spirit and shape. Few would argue then that *Cathy Come Home* demonstrates how powerful a medium television can be, but few can point to any drama since that has had even a fraction of the impact.

By the early 1960s social upheavals were convulsing Britain, pre-war slums were swept away and the ‘white heat’ of Harold Wilson’s technological revolution promised a future of jobs, equality and opportunity for all. Beneath the rhetoric however things for working-class families were often starkly different.

Two young additions to the BBC’s *The Wednesday Play*, assistant story editor Garnett and director Loach, were determined the strand should reflect these realities of ordinary people’s lives and the devastating consequences that the morally-conservative welfare state of the day could unexpectedly visit

on the unfortunate and on the unlucky. Their first major collaboration, a study of backstreet abortion and grinding factory work *Up the Junction* (1965) was a landmark, causing outrage due to its coarse language and portrayal of the ‘lower orders’ in their own words. But it was their next screenplay, on the seemingly less emotive topic of the unfair treatment of husbands when mothers became homeless, which triggered an earthquake that still reverberates.

Screenwriter and activist Jeremy Sandford had written a play about state hostels for homeless families. These were foreboding places and described by one politician as little better than ‘concentration camps’. Dickensian regulations imprisoned husbands who attempted to visit, and put young mothers to work on endless rotas of cleaning and polishing; conditions were punitive, humiliating and intended to deter.

Garnett and Loach were determined to put Sandford’s expose on television, and to make it in the same cine-verite style they had employed for *Up the Junction*.

One of their stars from *Up the Junction*, **Carol White**, was cast in the lead role as ‘Cathy’ with former *Coronation Street* actor **Ray Brooks** as her husband ‘Reg’.

*Cathy Come Home* focuses on a young family who at first appear to be enjoying the 1960s promise of the good life. After hitch-hiking to London Cathy meets Reg and their whirlwind



love affair quickly leads to marriage and children. Reg is a well-paid lorry driver and he and his new wife aspire to home-ownership. Then Reg is injured at work and a series of apparently temporary set-backs gradually drag Cathy and Reg into a bleak and unforgiving world of poverty, homelessness and peril. Expecting a happy ending 12 million viewers were horrified when, in the final harrowing scene, Cathy cries distraught as her children are dragged from her by social services for no other reason than because she is destitute.

The shocking ending of *Cathy Come Home* ripped away the conceit that 1960s Britain was a place of classlessness and social protection, exposing the public to the reality of the homelessness crisis. The BBC was deluged with calls and the fall-out saw Parliament debate the issue; for years afterwards White claimed people in the street would attempt to press money into her hand, so convinced were they that what they had seen had been real.

To achieve this devastating effect Loach and Garnett exploited to the full techniques which (arguably with the exception of banned drama *The War Game* [1965]) were largely new to drama-making on television – location-shooting, hand-held 16mm camera-work, a cast including non-actors and dialogue derived from unscripted interviews with members of the public, plus statistical details over-dubbed onto the narrative to give the impression that central characters were becoming trapped inside a living documentary charting the degradation of their own lives.

### KEN LOACH

One of the few directors ever to win the Palme d'Or twice and one of Britain's most garlanded film makers, Ken Loach once self-effacingly described himself chiefly as a teller of domestic stories. But it is the socially-charged and politically-committed context of the powerful dramas Loach has brought to the screen

which have bestowed on him world-renown and a reputation as one of the few remaining masters of the radical film-making tradition.

After a brief spell in the theatre, Loach was recruited by the BBC to direct *Z-Cars* in 1963. It was here at the BBC that his legendary creative partnership with Tony Garnett began on *The Wednesday Play*, addressing themes shied away from by other drama-makers: capital punishment, illegal abortion, mental breakdown, industrial strife and, most famously, homelessness.

Loach made his feature debut *Poor Cow* in 1967 and then the double BAFTA-winning film that has since endeared him to generations – *Kes* – two years later.

Most of Loach's mature canon brings to the screen the scripts of his collaborator and friend, former human rights activist Paul Laverty; including the Palme d'Or winners, *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* (2006) and *I, Daniel Blake* (2016).

Over a fifty year career, Ken has garnered two BAFTA wins for Best Television Drama Production (1967 and 1968), a BAFTA for Outstanding British Contribution to Cinema (1994) and a BAFTA Television Fellowship in 2006.

### TONY GARNETT

Tony Garnett's prestigious and varied career has included work as an actor, script editor, screenwriter, director, and producer. He has worked with some of the most influential and important writers, directors and producers in film and television including David Mercer, Jim Allen, Jack Gold, Mike Leigh, Dennis Potter, Kenith Trodd and James MacTaggart.

His partnership with Loach produced two of the most iconic works in British film and television, *Kes* (1969), still one of the nation's favourite films and for which he shared a BAFTA nomination for Best Screenplay and *Cathy Come*

*Home* (1966). He received a second shared nomination for *Days of Hope* (1975) for Best Drama Serial.

After a decade in Hollywood, Garnett returned to television producing iconic British serials, including *Between the Lines* (1992–94) which won a BAFTA TV Award for Best Drama Series and *This Life* (1996–97).



### CLARE ALLAN

Clare Allan is an author and journalist. Her novel, *Poppy Shakespeare*, a satire on the mental health system, was published in 2006 to widespread critical acclaim. It was shortlisted for The Orange Prize for New Writers, *The Guardian* First Book Award and the Mind Book of the Year, and was also adapted for television, starring Naomie Harris and Anna Maxwell Martin, who won the BAFTA Award for Best Actress for her portrayal of 'N'.

Clare has published extensively in *The Guardian*, *The Times*, *The Telegraph*, *The New York Times*, *The Independent* and elsewhere, and has been writing a column for *The Guardian*, *It's my Life*, since 2006. She has written and presented several programmes for BBC Radio 4, and lectures in Creative Writing at City, University of London.

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