

BAFTA HERITAGE SCREENING

DREAMCHILD

Sunday 24 May 2015
BAFTA 195 Piccadilly
London W1J 9LN

Followed by a Q&A with director GAVIN MILLAR, cinematographer BILLY WILLIAMS and producer KENITH TRODD, hosted by LARUSHKA IVAN-ZADEH



Celebrating the thirtieth anniversary of its release we are delighted to present a special screening of *Dreamchild* (1985), the double BAFTA-nominated collaboration between respected film and television director Gavin Millar and acclaimed screenwriter Dennis Potter. The screening is followed by a Q&A with Gavin Millar, cinematographer Billy Williams and long time Potter producer, Kenith Trodd.

The discussion will be hosted by Larushka Ivan-Zadeh, Film Editor for *Metro* newspaper and a regular contributor on BBC Radio 4 and Sky News.

The magical world created by Lewis Carroll has beguiled film-makers and writers since the publication of his children's classic *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) one hundred and fifty years ago. In *Dreamchild* Potter re-imagines key moments in the life of Carroll's famous muse Alice Liddell as she travels in old age to Columbia University to receive an honorary degree.

Potter skilfully fuses together past and present, fantasy and reality, breaking the rules of narrative so as to echo the structure of the famous book itself. There are standout performances by **Coral Browne** (in her final screen role) as the irascible old Alice, **Sir Ian Holm** as the intense Reverend Dodgson and **Amelia Shankley** as the engaging young Alice.



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With two BAFTA Television Awards nominations already under his belt, Gavin Millar approaches the challenge of *Dreamchild* with relish. He draws us into the complex relationship between Carroll and the young Alice whilst giving Carroll's hallucinatory characters free range to erupt into the bittersweet reminiscences of the older Alice on her journey to New York.

Dreamchild was an important project for Dennis Potter and he and Verity Lambert served as its executive producers. The film is co-produced by Potter's long-time associate and friend, the BAFTA winner (and seven-time BAFTA nominee) Kenith Trodd, alongside Rick McCallum, producer of three *Star Wars* films prior to *Dreamchild*.

Billy Williams, the three times BAFTA-nominated cinematographer, captures both the unworldly sequences and the live action moments perfectly, whilst Duncan Kenworthy OBE, John Stephenson OBE and Chris Carr were nominated for Special Visual Effects for their work on the film's creatures. Jenny Shircore was nominated for Best Makeup Artist. Editor Angus Newton, production designer Roger Hall and composer Stanley Myers also excel.

In an extract from an article in *Sight & Sound*, March 2014, writer Philip Horne delves deeper into the film's rich history. (Spoiler warning: some elements of the film's plot are revealed in this extract.)

Gavin Millar told Simon Banner, of *The Times*, that he'd been attracted by the "weird originality" of Potter's script about the aged Alice Liddell, inspiration for Lewis Carroll's 1865 *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. "And I liked it because of its tenderness and its complex range of emotions and motives, its ambiguities." Potter had written *Alice*, about the Reverend Charles Dodgson and his fixation on the prepubescent Alice Liddell, for TV in 1965 – but was stimulated by a fresh discovery, as he told Graham Fuller in 1993 for *Potter on Potter*:

"I read a paragraph somewhere – I don't know where – which said that Alice Liddell went to New York when she was in her eighties. I said, 'Jesus Christ'. A couple of days later I was writing it..." He wrote *Dreamchild*, he said, "in four and a half days". Maybe he recalled Dodgson's sad prediction – foreseeing that, as Alice grew up, "No thought of me shall find a place, in thy young life hereafter" – and imagined her thoughts of him in her old life.

The film joins the almost 80-year-old Alice (majestically yet vulnerably played by Coral Browne), now a stiff, grand, very proper widow insisting on being addressed only as 'Mrs Hargreaves', on the steamship carrying her to America for the first time, accompanied by her shy young companion Lucy (**Nicola Cowper**). The occasion is the centenary of Dodgson's birth, being spectacularly celebrated at Columbia University with 'Alice' as the guest of honour.

As Potter put it, he was stirred up by "the idea of that tied-in, repressed, strange, playful, tormented yet joyously inventive man, and an old woman thinking back because of the culture shock of arriving in New York at that time".

The film only partly occupies its 1932 present, where the script revels in the confrontation between this ultra-respectable embodiment of English repressiveness and a pastiche-version of the snappy, cynical, golden-age-Hollywood newspaper movie, as the press pack besieges the confused dowager with cheeky intrusions in the mode of *The Front Page*. When sacked newshound Jack Dolan (**Peter Gallagher**) insinuates himself into her company, showing how the publicity can be made to pay in dollars, he also falls for Lucy in a way that awakens in her employer memories hitherto dismissed as "things best not gone into".

Dodgson himself (Ian Holm, in the film's second great performance) is also vividly, ambiguously there – in the old woman's inner world, at the film's core.

Millar wrote in the production notes that "I liked the idea of the fantasy and reality, and never quite knowing where one ended and the other began, which gives weight to the place of nightmare and dream in people's lives." In Alice's hallucinations, the Mad Hatter, March Hare and others drawn from Walter Tennyel's illustrations, as realised by Jim Henson's Creature Shop, become harsh, sinister beings – in Millar's 1986 phrase "as fierce as we felt an old lady's nightmares would have made them".

RELEASE YEAR: 1985

RUNTIME: 94 mins

DIRECTOR: Gavin Millar

PRODUCERS:

Kenith Trodd and Rick McCallum

EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS:

Verity Lambert and Dennis Potter

SCREENWRITER: Dennis Potter

Sweet or sentimental as the conception might sound, it's given a very tough and painful edge by its troubled tone and by the tensions the aged woman rediscovers as she thinks back – to the pathos of Dodgson's intense, controlled adoration of her young self, that impossible object of desire. For the film steers a delicate course – aided by Stanley Myers's sensitive, atmospheric score and Billy Williams' lustrous yet shadowed cinematography – through territory thick with taboos.

The BFI's season of Dennis Potter's work continues in June. Further details can be found at bit.ly/DennisPotter

BAFTA HERITAGE SCREENINGS

BAFTA Heritage Screenings are a series of quarterly film screenings and on-stage interviews which celebrate British film and TV classics and the great film and TV professionals who made them.

