

## ISLE OF DOGS Programme Notes

Eyebrows were raised when Wes Anderson, one of the more idiosyncratic of the 'video store generation' crop of new American filmmakers to emerge during the late 1990s, announced his intention to adapt an animated version of Roald Dahl's 'Fantastic Mr Fox'. Henry Selick, who had worked on brief animated sequences for Wes' 'The Life Aquatic With Steve Zissou', had already achieved huge success in his own right as director of 'The Nightmare Before Christmas' (1993) and an earlier take on Dahl, 'James and the Giant Peach' (1996), both of which were produced by Denise Di Novi and Tim Burton. The intention with 'Fantastic Mr Fox' was for Selick and Anderson to co-helm; however, the opportunity arose for Henry to work on 'Coraline', eventually released in 2009, which left Anderson as sole director.

It's been rare for live action specialists to delve into the world of animation; however, with ambitious filmmakers ever keen to test themselves and seek out new territory, and with the gradual dominance of CGI now meaning that the majority of contemporary directors need to be au fait with processes beyond merely pointing a camera at a fake 'reality', perhaps it's becoming a natural progression. The aforementioned Tim Burton seems to have paved the way – with a background in animation at Disney in his younger days, it seemed a natural fit for Burton to exhibit this type of crossover, with his feature debut 'Pee Wee's Big Adventure' (1985) and his wild supernatural ride 'Beetle Juice' (1988) almost resembling live cartoons, and it surely came as no surprise when he began to create the likes of 'Corpse Bride' (2005) and 'Frankenweenie' (2012, based on Burton's live action short from 1984). By this time, Burton was resident in the UK, and utilising the facilities of Three Mills Studios in East London. Three Mills has become a thriving hive of production in recent years, with tv cookery programmes, high profile music videos, small screen dramas, and major feature movies ('Never Let Me Go', 'Made in Dagenham' and 'Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels' among them) emerging from these premises. Three Mills has proven an ideal centre for animation too, with Burton's films and the work of Wes Anderson being handled on this site.

Wes Anderson clearly hadn't quite got animation out of his system, since in late 2015 he announced that he would follow 'Fantastic Mr Fox' with "a film about dogs" in similar vein. His 'Moonrise Kingdom' (2012) had seemed something of a 'treading water' affair, exhibiting all of his usual quirks and trademarks perhaps once too often, but Anderson revitalised himself with the justly-acclaimed 'Grand Budapest Hotel' in 2014 – a riotous, frantic bit of mischief which revelled in its own artifice as well as humour which wouldn't have been out of place in a classic Warner Bros. 'Merrie Melodies' cartoon. So in a way, a return to full-on animation seemed the obvious next step!

For British audiences, of course, particularly those from the South East, 'Isle of Dogs' has a familiar ring to it! Indeed, Anderson said that while in England supervising 'Fantastic Mr Fox' he had spotted a road sign indicating the East End locale; the name

appears to have intrigued him, and the concept for a story about an actual 'isle of dogs' soon sprang forth. A number of the crew were returnees from 'Fantastic Mr Fox' as well as Burton's 'Frankenweenie' (several having also contributed to 2016's 'Kubo and the Two Strings') – thus indicating Anderson's personal vision as key to the production, as 'Fantastic Mr Fox' and 'Isle of Dogs' are evidently the work of the same filmmaker. Wes retains the slightly ragged look for his canine / animal protagonists witnessed in the Dahl adaptation, as well as a sort of jerky, offbeat rhythm to the animation style that gives his movies their own identity and which entirely fits this bunch of anthropomorphic misfits.

As ever, Anderson assembles a cast of major A-list names, top-lined by Bryan Cranston as lead dog 'Chief' (channelling George Clooney a little?), accompanied by Wes' totem Bill Murray, plus the likes of Frances McDormand, Scarlett Johansson, Tilda Swinton, Greta Gerwig, Jeff Goldblum, Ed Norton, and so on. Even Yoko Ono offers a brief, winning turn (as an assistant scientist named 'Yoko Ono'. Welcome to the crazy world of Wes Anderson!). Koyu Rankin voices the film's intrepid human hero, a young orphan boy who flies out to Trash Island in search of his beloved pet, in a dystopian scenario where a future Japan has seen the rapid spread of a virus infecting the country's dogs – all of whom have been transported to the island and left to fend for themselves.

'Isle of Dogs' caused a few middle-class ruffles when the world's critics began to debate its depiction of Japanese characters and eastern cultural references, though it's worth taking a look at Moeko Fujii's careful and considered defence of these aspects on the New Yorker website, written from the perspective of someone who actually seems to know what they are talking about as opposed to delivering a fashionable knee-jerk response. Fujii points out particular reasons why Anderson may have opted not to subtitle the Japanese dialogue or explain or interpret many of the signs and notices that pop up throughout. It seems that viewers who can speak or read Japanese may well get a richer and more fulfilling experience than the rest of us – whilst from any other filmmaker that may have diminished the overall effect, within the body of Anderson's work it's positively an enhancement!

Darrell Buxton

Darrell is a cult film historian and editor of the books 'The Shrieking Sixties: British Horror Films 1960-1969' (nominated for a British Fantasy Society award in 2011) and 'Dead Or Alive: British Horror Films 1980-1989'. He is a freelance film journalist and lecturer, has written reviews and in-depth articles for publications including Samhain, Shivers, and Giallo Pages, and is co-author of the screenplay for 2018 feature film Oujageist.