

The Last Bus (2021) MacKinnon

P Michell, 2023

A small Scottish film about a widower (Timothy Spall) fulfilling his late wife's pledge to bury her ashes near their first home. This entails travelling from John O'Groats in Scotland to Lands End in Cornwall. Being elderly and ill he does this by travelling by public bus and a bus card. [In reality not possible on Scottish travel card.] The film came about when the director heard his father and a friend discussion how far they could travel on a travel card. Due to limited budget most of the film was filmed in Scotland. The film is about the widower, Tom, experience of travel and the diverse people he meets. Social media (predictably) plays a part as the film as the journey south progresses.

"MacKinnon makes films that satisfy the eyes, the heart, and the mind." (Geoff Andrew, BFI)

This film raises interesting issues – One of which: How do we measure a successful film now? Before it was easy – ticket sales / bums on seats at the picture theatre. Now there is a very limited release of films to cinemas. Most going straight to streaming services (like Netflix). They very reluctant to release stats to non-commercial entities. Only listing top performing films. Last Bus was in cinemas for about a month before going to Netflix. Oscar nomination currently dictates for cinema release films only. Highly likely to change soon.

IMDB interesting article re this:

<https://pro.imdb.com/content/article/entertainment-industry-resources/featured-articles/how-is-the-success-of-films-and-tv-shows-measured/GLFTC8ZLBBUSNTM3>

Creative Personnel:

Gillies MacKinnon - Director (30 credits)

Scottish film director, writer and painter. He attended the Glasgow School of Art where he studied mural painting. Following this he became an art teacher and cartoonist, and about this time he travelled with a nomadic tribe in the Sahara for six months.

In the 1970s he studied at the Middlesex Polytechnic and in the 1980s in the National Film and Television School. He made a short film called *Passing Glory* as his graduation piece, a recreation of Glasgow in the 1950s and 1960s. It was premiered at the 1986 Edinburgh International Film Festival, where it won the first Scottish Film Prize.

Many of his films have won the Michael Powell award for best British Film in Glass Arena (1991), *Small Faces* (1995),

Known for *Small Faces* (1995), *Trojan Eddie* (1996), *The Playboys* (1992)

Joe Ainsworth - Writer (13 credits)

Known for *New Tricks* (2003), *Sanditon* (2019) and *The Lakes* (1997), *Call the Midwife* (2021).

Nick Lloyd Webber – Music (8 credits)

Unfortunately his last movie.

Son of British composer [Andrew Lloyd Webber](#) and his first wife, Sarah Hugill. His older sister is the author, broadcaster, and communications executive [Imogen Lloyd Webber](#),^[6] his grandfather was the organist, composer and music educator [William Lloyd Webber](#), and his uncle is the cellist and music educator [Julian Lloyd Webber](#).

Lloyd Webber was known for writing a theatrical and symphonic version of *The Little Prince* (co-written with James D. Reid) based on [the book by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry](#). Sadly passed away this year (2023) at 43 years, from gastric cancer.

Timothy Spall - Tom (161 credits)

Classically trained prolific actor, son of blue collar workers. The young actor at National Youth Theatre, London, showed great promise at RADA where he portrayed the title roles in "Macbeth" and "Othello." In 1979 he joined the Royal Shakespeare Company and stayed for approximately two years. Making his minor debut in a filmed version of the play [The Life Story of Baal \(1978\)](#), Tim went on to play featured roles in offbeat films such as [Quadrophenia \(1979\)](#), [Remembrance \(1982\)](#), etc. Appeared in *Secrets and Lies* (1996).

Phyllis Logan – Mary (99 credits)

Scottish actress, known for playing Lady Jane Felsham in [Lovejoy](#) (1986–1993) and Mrs Hughes (later Mrs Carson) in [Downton Abbey](#) (2010–2015). She won the [BAFTA Award for Most Promising Newcomer](#) for the 1983 film [Another Time, Another Place](#). Her other film appearances include [Secrets & Lies](#) (1996), [Shooting Fish](#) (1997), [Downton Abbey](#) (2019) and [Misbehaviour](#) (2020).

After graduation Logan joined the [Dundee Repertory Theatre](#).^[8] She left in 1979 to work on stage in [Edinburgh](#). She also worked regularly on Scottish television.

Before her success in [Downton Abbey](#), where she played the housekeeper [Mrs Hughes](#), Logan was most identified with the role of [Lady Jane Felsham](#), co-starring with [Ian McShane](#) for eight years in nearly 50 episodes of [Lovejoy](#), a comedy-drama for television.

Her character in [Downton Abbey](#), [Mrs Hughes](#), was voted the best Downton Abbey character of all times in a poll conducted by RadioTimes.com (the official website of [Radio Times](#)).^[10]

She also starred in the 1996 [Mike Leigh](#) film [Secrets & Lies](#) alongside [Timothy Spall](#) and [Brenda Blethyn](#). Logan provided the broadcast voice of [Ingsoc](#) in a film version of [Nineteen Eighty-Four](#) (1984).

Trivia

Whilst the trip as portrayed was not feasible at the time film is set, it is now! Richard Elloway did it in 2008. National bus pass just introduced. Likely that the premise of the film stated above, was in part linked to discussing Elloway's journey.

<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1013065/A-trip-Britain-paying-penny-record-breaking-OAP-free-bus-pass.html>

Both main actors were in their sixties portraying much older roles.

Sixteen-year-old busker [Caitlin Agnew](#) has had two of her original songs, "I Wanna" and "Don't Wanna Go Home", featured in the movie after her father, whilst working on the movie set, recommended her music to the director.^[3]

Very Low budget - M£2.5 funded through the Lottery.

Good example of how 'small films' get exposure through streaming services. Much more so than in the past.

Reviews

Tom Beasley, 2021. (flickeringmyth.com)

After the death of his wife, an elderly man decides to retrace the bus journey that took them from Land's End to John O'Groats decades earlier.

It's easy to sneer at movies like **The Last Bus**. These are films seemingly precision-tooled for those midweek morning screenings in which attendees are handed a cup of milky tea and a custard cream on the way in – gentle, sentimental and ultimately unchallenging. That's a reductive analysis, and certainly one I've been guilty of deploying in the past, but perhaps a year of lockdown has triggered something within me. I didn't just have a lump in my throat at the end of **The Last Bus**. It was there the whole time.

Much of this is down to the strength of Timothy Spall's central performance. With impressively weary physicality, he adds at least 20 years to his age in order to play Tom – a Second World War veteran reeling from the death of his wife Mary (Phyllis Logan) as a result of cancer. Via flashbacks, we learn that the couple fled their home of Land's End in the 1950s after an initially unspecified tragedy, with Mary asking Tom to get her as far away from that pain as possible. As a result, the couple caught dozens of buses and lived out their lives together in John O'Groats. With a promise to Mary ringing in his ears, the elderly Tom decides to repeat that trip in reverse.

Spall sells every inch of this story with exactly the consummate skill we've come to expect from him over the years. His take on the increasingly frail pensioner is never caricatured or over-played, with subtle grunts and stumbles enough to deliver a convincing sense of a man with the weight of a lifetime on his shoulders. His worsening health is seldom played for any sort of comedy, with director Gillies MacKinnon – whose last work was the 2018 TV movie **Torvill & Dean** – and veteran British telly screenwriter Joe Ainsworth telling the story with sensitivity at its heart.

Wisely, MacKinnon's movie seldom leaves the perspective of Spall's character, but it seems to be in something of a push and pull row with itself over what its thesis should be. It's strongest when it focuses on his determination to fulfil his promise to his wife, but finds itself embroiled in occasional episodic skits in which he crosses paths with symbols of diverse and multicultural Britain. Notably, it's never Tom who is challenged by this diversity, but rather those around him. When Tom intervenes to defend a woman in a niqab who is being sexually harassing and racially abused, it feels somewhat perfunctory – albeit laudable – given how little it relates to the central thrust of the story.

By contrast, a story thread in which Tom quietly becomes a social media celebrity gently bubbles beneath the surface of the narrative. It's never intrusive and only manifests in half-heard radio broadcasts and brief shots of fellow travellers typing the hashtag #BusHero into Instagram, but feeds into a rousing and life-affirming finale which does show the community spirit and diversity of modern British society in its best and most heart-warming form.

It only takes the most basic sort of familiarity with movies like this to know exactly where **The Last Bus** is going, but it would require a pretty black heart not to be at least a little moved by the journey. Spall elicits sympathy with his every creaky footstep or garbled word of thanks to the kindly strangers who help him on his way, and this is enough to compensate for a narrative that's as old as the picturesque hills and country lanes through which Tom rides. It's unlikely you'll ever be surprised by the film, but you'll definitely be charmed to bits

The People's Movies

Freda Cooper, 2021 (thepeoplesmovies.com)

It sounds like it's based on actual events and, while *The Last Bus* doesn't claim to be inspired by real life, it bears more than a passing resemblance to a bus trip taken by retired head teacher Richard Elloway in 2008. He travelled from Land's End to John O'Groats in just over seven and a half days using his free bus pass to cover the fare. Tom, the man at the centre of *The Last Bus*, undertakes the journey in the opposite direction and does it for very personal reasons.

Recently widowed and living in John O'Groats, Tom (**Timothy Spall**) sets out with his bus pass and a small 1950s style suitcase to return to his former Cornish home. He has a job to do when he gets there, but the journey turns out to be one that revives personal memories and means rubbing shoulders with many different people, as well as experiencing a country that has changed beyond his recognition. And, unbeknown to him, he becomes something of a social media celebrity along the way.

With a narrative that's structured around Tom's various encounters – good and bad – director Gillies MacKinnon makes extensive use of what is a familiar trope. The majority of the strangers are kind, from the couple who find him collapsed on a pavement and offer him a bed for the night to the Eastern European immigrant workers who give him a lift and insist he attends a family party. But they're balanced by some less warm hearted individuals, including the drunk who abuses a Muslim woman and an officious English bus driver who, discovering Tom has a Scottish bus pass, leaves him stranded at the road side in the middle of nowhere.

Despite those attempts to add some grit to proceedings, there's always a gentle rosy glow surrounding Tom's travels. It's through his memories that we find the film's emotional core – why he and his wife moved from Cornwall to the most northern point of the UK, the reasons for some of his stop-offs and a piece of news that isn't what it seems – so that when he arrives in Land's End to carry out his plan, there's the inevitable lump in the throat. And, refreshingly, the fact that he becomes a social media star along the way comes almost as an afterthought, raising its head only towards the end.

With a class act like Spall in the lead, the film is very much anchored by his performance. Despite being some twenty years younger than his character, he gives a prosthetic-free performance, relying on a stooped posture and, dare we say it, good old fashioned acting to win our hearts and prompt that essential mist in front of our eyes. But the film belongs so much to him and his character that everybody else has a few moments on screen only to fade into oblivion as soon as they're gone. It's a missed opportunity for more colour and depth, but we're still more than happy to go along with Spall for the ride.
