

Still Life (2013) Passolini

P Michell, June 2019

Still Life is a poignant, quixotic tale of life, love and the afterlife. Meticulous and organized to the point of obsession, John May (Eddie Marsan) is a council worker charged with finding the next of kin of those who have died alone. When his department is downsized, John must up his efforts on his final case, taking him on a liberating journey that allows him to start living life at last

A quintessential British movie made by an Italian and realised through RAI.

WRITER/DIRECTOR: UBERTO PASOLINI

STARS: EDDIE MARSAN, JOANNE FROGGATT, KAREN DRURY, ANDREW BUCHAN

Music: Rachel Portman

Cinematography: Stefano Falivene

COUNTRY: UK/ITALY

Uberto Pasolini (11 films, only two as director)

Producer and director, known for [The Full Monty](#) (1997) (producer), [Machan](#) (2008) and [Still Life](#) (2013). He has been married to composer [Rachel Portman](#) since 1995.

Despite his surname Uberto is an Italian count and nephew of the director Luchino Visconti. Initially worked as an investment banker in the UK. Worked with David Puttnam on a number of films and with him in Hollywood. Redwave Productions is his company.

Film won Best Director in the category 'Orrizonti' at 70th Venice Film Festival, where it premiered.

Eddie Marsan (121 films / TV)

Eddie Marsan was born in Stepney, East London, to a lorry driver father and a school employee mother, and raised in Bethnal Green. He served an apprenticeship as a printer before becoming an actor twenty years ago. During this time he has worked with directors such as [Martin Scorsese](#), [Michael Mann](#), [Steven Spielberg](#), [Terrence Malick](#), [Mike Leigh](#) (3 films), [Woody Allen](#), [Alejandro G. Iñárritu](#), [J.J. Abrams](#), [Peter Berg](#), [Guy Ritchie](#) and [Richard Linklater](#).

Quotes:

I used to do a lot of comedy. I don't know what happened. I think it's my face.

I see all these people talking about acting as a great spiritual thing. It's not. There's no great mystery to acting. It's a very simple thing to do but you have to work hard at it. It's about asking questions and using your imagination. The trick to acting is not to show off, it's to think the thoughts of the character. I was lucky because when I started acting, it was doing jobs above pubs. I learned to act in anonymity so by the time people saw me, I

knew what I was doing. I was crap for years but no one saw me being crap. It's a trade you learn.

...British actors, we have a tradition, I think it comes from weekly rep [repertory company], where we learn the lines and dodge the furniture. And also we have a tradition where we serve the writing. So when we get a script, our point of reference is the writing.

Stefano Falivene – Cinematographer (37 films)

Best cinematography award – Still Life – Golden Globe.

Reviews:

A tour-de-force by Eddie Marsan, in the quietest possible way. This is a poignant, thoughtful look at a man out of step with the modern world, who still holds to the (outdated) values of treating others with dignity and respect, in their last journey. He plays a British civil servant whose job is to organise funerals for those who have died alone, and locate their friends/relatives to advise them of their bereavement. After 22 years, he still pursues each new case with understated vigour, diligently seeking out anyone who may have had a connection to the deceased, but often being the sole attendant at the funeral.

It is a beautifully filmed slice-of-life on the themes of loneliness, loss and the disconnection of human beings in modern urban life. Marsan's performance is very authentic and affecting, and one is drawn in by his compassion and humanity. But then his Council decides it is inefficient - as a cost-cutting measure, you understand - to maintain his job, as "once they're dead, they don't care"... Marsan, battling till his final day in the face of bureaucratic indifference, finds some genuine connections and a ray of hope appears on his horizon...

This movie had lots of small moments of humour - a scene with two homeless men, and another with a Corrections officer are subtly amusing. But mostly, it is a thought-provoking homage to our humanity, and a reminder that social contacts with those we care for, are often the most positive, important and joyous moments of our lives. The movie sneaks up on you, and reaches into your soul, and I will remember it for a long time.

Urban Cinefile

Review by Louise Keller:

The opening scene shows a priest, a coffin and Eddie Marsan's John May, the borough council worker who brings humanity to the recently deceased - who are alone and friendless at the end of their lives. Uberto Pasolini, who produced *The Full Monty*, has created a wonderfully economical film with vibrant splashes of humour and understatement and whose cinematic style depicts a revealing and moving portrait of a man who lives his solitary life among ghosts. Like Aki Kaurismaki's films *Man Without a Past* and *Le Havre*, Pasolini tells his story with imagery and minimal dialogue and as a

result, there is a stillness to which we are drawn, like a powerful magnet.

There is something extremely moving as the priest reads out the eulogy to an empty church, with only John May as witness. But this is no template used by the man whose job it is to search for relatives and friends of those who have passed away. Each funeral is individually tailored and a labour of love by John May, who becomes involved in the lives of all the souls whose cases appear on his desk.

Marsan delivers an exemplary performance as John May, who we understand straight away is meticulous and fastidious in everything he does. We know this by the way he pulls out his chair at work, switches on his computer, opens his files, places photos of his deceased clients in an envelope and sets about to find some leads so they do not leave this world alone. The way he peels an apple (cutting the peel in one long circular piece) shows he is patient. He looks both ways even when the traffic light is green and life at home is a solitary tin of tuna, unceremoniously turned upside down on an empty plate and a lovingly kept photo album into which he carefully places photos of all of the friendless souls he has farewelled.

Pasolini tells the story through imagery as John May does his painstaking detective work for each client. First he examines the clues that make each of them a real person: an imprint on a pillow, letters, underpants drying on a heater and empty alcohol bottles on the shelf. As he prods and investigates, he becomes involved in each of his cases, none more so than his last case, taking him to a food processing factory, an animal shelter, a fish and chip shop and in the company of a Falklands soldier and two homeless men. Surprisingly, it is with the homeless men and a bottle of whisky that John May makes some important decisions. Nothing is articulated but everything is implied.

The colours and textures of the human experience are nicely captured by Rachel Portman's expressive music score and whose distinctive intervals bring a beauty that is a combination of melancholy and the sublime. The emotional wallop at the film's end is an unexpected bonus in what is a pearl of a cinematic experience.

Urban Cinefile

Review by Andrew L. Urban:

Still Life is one of those films in which how it's done is more important than what is done, more about character than story, although story there is, too. Eddie Marsan is perfectly cast as John May, a name subtle in its connotations of a nonentity with a reserved withdrawn personality. But the beauty of Uberto Pasolini's screenplay and direction is that this apparent nonentity assumes heroic proportions not for the obvious outward heroics, but for the inner and quiet humanity that drives him.

Not that you'd guess, from his quiet, sparse office and quiet, sparse flat, where he regularly dines on tinned tuna and toast. At work, he sees dead people ... who have died alone and abandoned, who need a funeral, who need some attend that funeral, and perhaps care about how they are coffined, buried, cremated ...Mr May is that man, alone

in life, but crowded with the photos and trinkets of the dead. It's quite a stunning juxtaposition.

Pasolini builds his character and his context with elaborate detail and deliberate restraint, which has its payoff in the complexity and richness of the character and the circumstances. It's not a film for the instant, just add water, take-away set. The rewards include Lisa Hall's meticulous production design plus a haunting but suitably restrained and melancholy score from Rachel Portman, a wonderfully evocative performance by Joanne Froggatt, and a gloriously conceived (and executed) magic realist ending.

Simple but not simplistic, *Still Life* is a unique contribution to British cinema, with its English restraint and eccentricity all celebrated in one rolled up human being.