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Jonathan Gili

Documentary film-maker, small-press publisher and collector extraordinary

JONATHAN GILI'S documentary film work was something wholly original, unlike anything else, certain in execution, exciting and complete.

His talent, always there, first reached a wider audience in 1979, when *Public School - Westminster*, directed by Gili and over an hour long, appeared on BBC1. With ITV on strike, it drew 12.5 million viewers, and won the Bafta Best Editing award. The film was the inspired idea of Eddie Mirzoeff, senior producer in General Features, who already knew his work. It showed the whole complex of education and ancient buildings with non-judgemental accuracy. Gili's eye for figures in a landscape and ear for the quirks of human nature made it moving and funny. It also gave him a lasting distaste for the Q-and-A interview; afterwards, he preferred to let the dramatis personae speak for themselves, with often only an unheard prompt from himself.

High Hopes, the first film that he wrote, produced and directed all himself, followed in 1981. This had an even more dramatic genesis. He had just finished making *The Pool of Life* (1980) for Granada, about Liverpool docks, and was back at the National Film School, where he had taught before, this time as stand-in Head of Editing. He saw in the newspapers that Columbia Pictures was going to hold an audition for John Huston's film *Annie* (1982) in the ballroom of the Dorchester Hotel in London, and realised that this could spark a film about children in show business.

Mirzoeff was supportive, and the project went to the temporary head of the department at the BBC, but he said no. Gili, full-time at the NFS, could see no way forward, but his wife Phillida, taking a hand for the first and only time, got Columbia and the Dorchester to agree to let him film for nothing, and made sure the idea got to all the ITV companies. They too said no. Then a miracle happened: his agent, Linda Seifert, persuaded her husband to pay for it on the off-chance that whoever took over at the BBC would buy it.

The lighting in the Dorchester was

dim, but Ernie Vincze, the cameraman, made the best of it, and the children, especially Dexter Fletcher, came over well. Footage and Gili's minimal script went back to the BBC, and Phillida, greatly daring, rang the new head, Will Wyatt. "My husband is a brilliant film-maker," she said. "You don't have to tell me," he said. "I'm already a fan of his work." The project was on, with Laura Gavshon as researcher and Ian Stone and Geoff Tookey, camera and sound. The follow-ups, *Dexter Fletcher in Midsummer Night's Dream* at Glyndebourne, the Haleys, interviewed on a low wall with a hand-held camera below, Marsha Bland and her silver shoes, the "Seaview Singers" at Margate, caught all the accidents, joys and pathos of child stars on the way up.

High Hopes was edited by Neil Thomson, a friend made (as also were Jamie Hay and Jon Bignold) over long hours in the cutting room at Document in Broadwick Street, Soho. Editing (by hand, not digitally, as now) was where Gili began his career.

Going yet further back, he was born in Oxford, in 1943, the son of Elizabeth and Joan Gili, the distinguished Catalan bookseller and translator of Lorca. Thence he went to Bryanston, returning with a Classics exhibition at New College. It was now that he discovered the cinema, and as film critic for *Isis*, with no editorial control, he devoted an entire issue (now a rare and sought-after item) to *Loosey's The Servant* (1963). He had found out what he wanted to do, but interviews in London, working in between at his father's bookshop, always came up short against the same block: no union card, no job. Finally he was taken on as assistant editor to Ted Roberts at Stewart Films, a small non-union outfit, remote in St John's Wood. Holding the trims, watching the snip-and-patch of hand-editing, he began to learn the mechanics of the trade. It was through Roberts, who cut *Jerusalem the Golden* (1968) for Eddie Mirzoeff, that he first met him. Then a disaffected Stewart employee was sacked, and shopped the firm to ACTT.

Faced with either closing the whole business or giving everyone in it a card, the union chose the latter course. At last, the door was open, and Gili was through it in a trice.

The first film that he edited was *Bronco Bullfrog* (1969), a sort of East End *West Side Story* redeemed by Bronco, escaped from Borstal, with no actors, only real live skinheads. It was made, like its successor *Private Road* (1971), by Barney Platts-Mills, and is still a cult movie. The first film that Gili directed, *Incident* (also 1971), about a man who comes home, sits down, hears a street accident, leaps to his feet to look out of the window, returns and sits down, and then does the same thing twice more, each time less engaged, starred Stephen Frears, later director of *Dangerous Liaisons* and *High Fidelity*. After *Incident* Gili worked on *Paradise Garden* (1973), Sidney Nolan's drawings and poems narrated by Orson Welles.

Wedding Day (1977), contrasting an Anglican with a Greek Orthodox wedding, and *Soldiers* (1978), three cameos of the Salvation Army, began to show Gili's distinctive style of letting real life make its own points; both were made with Nick Elliott at London Weekend. *Public School - Westminster* won the Bafta Best Editing award, then came the miracle of *High Hopes*, and Gili's career took off. *Year of the French* (1982) was a set of four portraits, a ticket-inspector, a farmer on the Lot, a manufacturer of crowd-barriers and the octogenarian woman who ran the wine co-operative at Fleurie in Beaujolais (who became a family friend in the process); *The Second Oldest Profession* (1983) disclosed the tricks of salesmanship, from door-to-door to tele-selling; and *To the World's End* (1985) charted the 31 bus route for London Transport's centenary.

Then came a series of 40-minute films for BBC2. With Lucinda Lambton he made *Animal Crackers* (1985), *A Cabinet of Curiosities* (1986) and *The Great North Road* (1988), all three wild and unforgettable films. *Stop the Wedding* (1985), on weddings called off at

the last minute, reached an audience of 8.1 million; *Mixed Blessings* (1988), about two babies swapped at birth, was the BBC Prix Italia entry and won a special jury recommendation at the 1st European Documentary Biennale; and *Chocolate!* (1990) was a memorable exploration of chocoholism. *Fire in the Blood* (1992) explored Spain with Ian Gibson. *The Seven Deadly Sins* (1993), 10 minutes each, featured Stephen Oliver's last opera, an early appearance of Simon Schama and an impassioned plea from the Pope's Latin secretary.

Timewatch, also for BBC2, produced *Typhoid Mary* (1994), the story of the New York cook who did not have but carried the disease, ending with a poignant view of Roosevelt Island where she was eventually isolated. *Tales from the Oklahoma Land Runs* (2000) won the Western Heritage Best Documentary award, and with it an immensely heavy sub-Remington statuette of a cowboy. The rushes of *Tales of the Eiffel Tower* (1999) show Gili's hand gently removing a prepared script from the hand of a charmingly camp expert, who succumbs unconsciously to unheard prompting; the waxwork figure of Eiffel in his sky-high office came almost eerily to life.

Coming Home (1995) commemorated the end of the Second World War. In 2002 came *Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother*, prepared over five years earlier, and shown on two consecutive evenings after her death, which probably got the widest audience of all. Earlier this year *Historians of Genius - In Their Own Words* pitted Simon Schama against Edward Gibbon, Lord Macaulay and Thomas Carlyle.

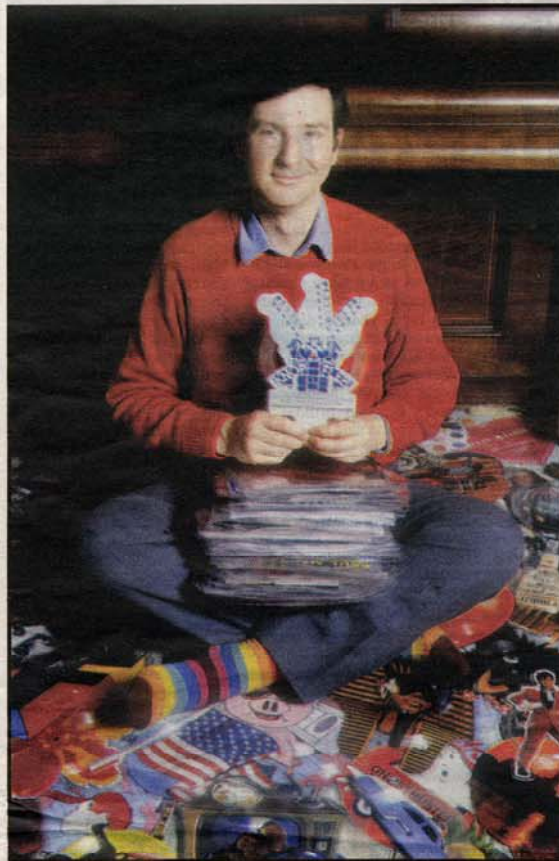
This outpouring of work was the more remarkable, since, 20 years ago, Jonathan Gili was diagnosed with leukaemia. To all but him, this was a dreadful blow. He refused even to consider it as a problem. Life was increasingly punctuated with visits to hospital, but his own determination and that, no less, of Professor John Goldman, in whose care he was, enabled him to go on working as if it did not

exist. There was so much else to do, besides. The eye that gave his films an effortless beauty made his still photography as magical. An Instamatic in his hands produced prints, in black and white and then colour; that professional photographers could envy; they made the annual David Game College calendars collectors' pieces.

Gili was himself a collector on an heroic scale, of books, of course, and pictures, too; long before others, he amassed the first editions of the Thirties, Forties and Fifties, art deco in any medium, the work of Barnett Freedman in particular. He wrote as well, easily and well, and he and Phillida set up Warren Editions to print and publish books they liked. "Warren" was for Joan Gili's first partner in the Dolphin Bookshop (Henry Warren, who left Jonathan £50), and its first publication, Kenneth Clark's *The Other Side of the Alde* (1968), was set in Janet type, designed by Phillida's father, Reynolds Stone. Next year came John Nash's *Flower Drawings*, a portfolio of prints from the original blocks.

A collection of Reynolds Stone's engravings, *The Old Rectory*, appeared in 1976. *The Lost Ears* (1970) had Phillida's enchanting drawings (the hero, an earless teddy bear, still survives), and *Murderer's Cottages* (1976) started a series of books illustrated by Glynn Boyd Harte, among them *Metroland* (1977), with verses by John Betjeman, *A Weekend in Dieppe* (1981), retracing Ardizzone's steps, and most recently *Les Sardines à Phuile* (1985).

This was based on another collection. But boxes (numbered 1-7) full of sardine-tins were only a few among the walls of boxes, carefully labelled ("Little Packets and Wrappers"), that filled the house in Fulham, along with visitors, music, food and wine, all greeted with equal enthusiasm. Crisp packets, jugs, snowstorms, lighters, salt-and-pepper sets, wine-bottles commemorating the bicentenary of the French Revolution, and picture discs in all their wild (and now obsolete) profusion, filled every available space, and some



Wholly original: Gili among his picture discs, 1986

Tim Mercer

that was not; out-housing was under serious discussion when he died.

Last year Gili was appointed OBE, an unexpected but well-deserved recognition, and on 8 November he was due to receive the highest award of the Grierson Trust, the Trustees' Lifetime Award for an outstanding contribution to documentary film-making. He would have enjoyed the occasion as well as the honour. Not long ago, at a Sheffield Documentary Film Festival full of young directors used to the

smallest crew or none, he was asked how, with one much larger, he got such remarkable revelations from his interviewees - why didn't they clam up? He smiled to himself and said, "Direction." That was all.

NICOLAS BARKER

Jonathan Francesc Gili, documentary film-maker: born Oxford 19 April 1943; OBE 2003; married 1968 Phillida Stone (two sons, one daughter); died London 1 October 2004.