

THE END OF THE TEENAGE ERA

Interview with Julien Temple

Julien Temple has collaborated with The Sex Pistols on the film *The Great Rock 'n Roll Swindle*. He is known for his videos of David Bowie and the Rolling Stones. Through his latest venture, the film of Colin MacInnes' book *Absolute Beginners*, he makes a final defiant cry for teendom. Here he talks to Marek Kohn about using popular cinema to explore political contradictions, about the teenage era he wants to capture and about his commitments to making mass-entertainment films.

How long ago did you start thinking it might be a good idea to make a musical about teendom in the 1950s?

I read the book in 1980. I had read the other books when I was at school but *Absolute Beginners* had been stolen from the shelves. I wanted to make a film that would clear my head of the 'teenage' obsession and this struck me as the ideal vehicle for a film about London and the energy of youth.

But it wasn't immediately obvious to do it as a musical because the book presented certain problems - the main one was in adapting the role of the narrator. I think many people have had a go at trying to adapt it and run into problems trying to keep the energy that comes through the descriptive style without resorting to an endless voice-over. It seemed to me that if you thought about the information in the book as a series of musical 'numbers' as they do in advertising - numbers which explore the nature of the time - then you can understand, for example, the Teds by performing a number rather than by talking about them. Music is central to the book - jazz is seen through the book. I love the musical and I don't agree with Howard Barker when he argues that the musical is an authoritarian form of culture. That just isn't true. The musical is like a computer - it's what you do with it that counts.

Why did you feel the need to 'wrap up the teenage era'?

That was a very personal feeling because I

have done a lot of work in that area and I'd like to move on to do other things. But I did want to say what I had to say on a big scale. Another thing that attracted me to this book was that it gave me the opportunity to bounce off from 1985 to 1958 as a historical period, to show how the teenage energy of the 50s is just no longer around.

Did you feel a sense of frustration that there wasn't that energy anymore?

Yes. In a sense the teenage era was aborted. I wanted to develop certain ideas that came from the Sex Pistols about the nature of teenage culture in England today - a force which I think is very much spent. Not totally, because I don't think you can parcel things out so neatly - after all people buy records and others are still making fortunes out of youth - but in a real adventurous sense it seems to be finished. It's a bit like joining the army now: you are given your kit, issue and age, your copy of *Smash Hits*, your haircut - and you're a teenager. It's like conscription.

What were the aspects of the book that you most wanted to translate into a musical?



Julien Temple: enfant terrible of the film industry?

I wanted to capture a city changing at a very important time in its history - seen through a very subjective pair of eyes and moving between different realities. I didn't want it to be a documentary, I wanted it to be personal and unreal, just like the reality of those cultural moments. In this way I wanted to show the whole Americanisation of England, the arrival of blacks in this country and the entrance of advertising as a national shrinking agent. I also wanted to show the 1950s' attack on the Victorian legacy. Now that Thatcher is trying to return to that there is a point in making a film that opens up a view on to that period.

One of the main problems in translating the book into the film must have been that there are actually two books: there is the book about teenage and then, as the legend goes, MacInnes was in Notting Hill during the race riots of 1958 and that impelled him to write the latter part of the book very eloquently about race. This is what takes the book beyond teendom.

To balance the fairy story of the book with one guy's journey through a summer with fascism and the race riots was the major problem we faced. Dance and then violence is a difficult thing to make work and it's a dangerous thing to try but I think that risk element is exciting. Some people would probably say that you shouldn't deal with the emotions of the race riot but I think you have to confront these things. They exist. A lot of the dynamic of a riot is the entertainment as well. So, in a strange way, we were trying to get to the heart of the riot. To show people dancing doesn't necessarily mean that they are having a good time. There's a kind of nightmare entertainment value in it which is why the Teds of Notting Hill were really into it. They didn't do it because they hated black people particularly. They were led into it by being bored and they were used by the Mosley groups in the area.

We departed slightly from the book in very clearly showing the fascists meeting. Mosley stood as MP the next year though he wasn't actually there. I'm quite happy for Mosley to be there in the film - it was not meant to be a literal translation in that sense. I wanted to make it clear that it wasn't Teddy boys hating blacks - it was just that they were whipped up into this frenzy of excitement.

But, in making a movie about the 1950s - particularly the glamour of the 1950s - aren't



Recreating the 1950s - Eddie O'Connell and Patsy Kensit star as the young photographer Colin and his fashion designer girlfriend Suzette in *Absolute Beginners*.

you simply trading on ideas of nostalgia and escapism that prop up precisely those values you are trying to expose?

I don't think that is totally true because half of the film is set in Notting Hill which was a stinking slum area and it does touch on the fascists going from the East End to the west of London and inspiring the riots. None of that is particularly glamorous. It's not normally the kind of thing you find in musicals.

I hope the main thrust of the glamour is in the idea that kids, for the first time, feel they can create and shape their life as an adventure in the way that Dada painters might have thought of it in the 20s or in the way that Oxbridge spies might have thought of it in the 30s. In a sense there is the beginning of a great adventure there.

As people of your generation were saying about punk rock in the 1970s?

Yes. I'm still radioactive from 1978 and I still feel it. I did base the summer of 1958 on the summer of 76 because that was a time when I did feel very close to a city. That's what I wanted the character in the book to feel - that he almost owned a city with his cohorts and that they saw a

different city to that seen by everyone else walking down the street. Soho meant something to the kids in the film that it doesn't mean to the people who are there today. I wanted to say that London can be an amazing place and I remember in 76 it was an extraordinary place. Why isn't it today?

There is a danger of nostalgia and we're obviously using an interest in the 50s to sell this film. But this period was very important in shaping the 60s and 70s and to understand, for example, what makes a working class Tory tick. Thatcher is there today because of what happened in the 50s to a large extent. To cause people to think about that in an exciting way - and music is exciting - allows them to think about doing something in the future. But, there seems to be an inbuilt resistance to taking recent history seriously. There is rather what I call a Capital Radio view of history - that 1958 was The Everley Brothers, 61 is Billy Fury, 63 is The Beatles - and that's postwar British history.

The media today is run by people from the 60s who were brought up to be forever young and if you start saying '1958 is a long time ago and a lot of water has flown under the bridge' they begin to think 'God, have I got grey hairs in my beard'. They can't pretend that they are now anything but middle-aged men.

In a way you seem to be saying that Absolute Beginners, the musical, is looking at the summer of 1958 through both the present and through the summer of 76. Do you really think that there is something that was present in 1976 and 58 that is absent now in London?

It exists as a kind of tourist attraction. When kids come to London they see something that represents no real threat in terms of the current situation. It still looks colourful, youth is still being marketed . . . but there's no direct inspiration from the time it is in. To me it's very flabby.

A lot of kids will see Absolute Beginners as simply a spectacular musical with all their favourite groups. Did you ever experience a tension between those who were financing the project who obviously would want to have more stars, more spectacle, and people who were trying to view the film with the elements you've been describing.

Enjoyment is a very important aspect of the film and I hope the kids will be dancing in the aisles.

When I went to sell it to Wardour Street, however, I didn't sell it in the way that we've been talking. They wouldn't want to know if you started talking like that. You have to say 'we've got David Bowie' and they understand that. There was always the possibility that the things that would be cut in the films were the things about the black situation in Notting Hill, the Teds, the less glamorous things, but the side of the film that I was very interested in including. But, you do need a commercial skeleton to make a movie on this scale, to reach the numbers of people I wanted to reach. I never wanted to write a treatise about teendom. I'd rather do it in a much more aggressive attack - to me that's the power of making movies rather than writing books.

But how did you go to Wardour Street and what did you sell them? Where did you get the money from?

I sold them a book called *Absolute Beginners* which they hadn't heard about by



Music is central to the film: David Bowie as an advertising executive.

sticking the 'right' magazines, like *The Face*, under their noses and, by getting the book mentioned in the right places, it became important enough for them to consider it as a valid project for a film. But they didn't like the idea of a musical. They said it hadn't been done for a long time so it wouldn't work. They all want to do last



year's hit you see. They don't want anything too risky.

I was sure that the music was our main ally. In Hollywood they may not have heard of London and MacInnes but they know David Bowie. I wanted to make a film about London that was understandable to the rest of the world and music is a great antennae - the rest of the world is fascinated by English music. But we didn't just choose music, we chose people that were right, who were from London, and people who could sell records - Bowie, Sade, that got Goldcrest excited.

There has been a considerable amount of publicity about Goldcrest's financial problems with Revolution and Absolute Beginners going over budget.

The problems for Goldcrest are very big. They've lost a hell of a lot of money on *Revolution* which has severely damaged the possibility of the British film industry carrying on. There are only two major producers of film in this country - EMI and Goldcrest, and of the three films that they've made for release this year it's difficult to see the remaining two recouping enough to pull through. *The Mission* is not a *Rambo*, once again it's a *Readers' Digest* Oscar-hunter type of film rather than a big hit type of film. *Absolute Begin-*

ners is a very English film which I think will work in the more open parts of America but it won't do a mega-sell in Middle America which would be necessary to get Goldcrest out of trouble. I blame them for making films without regard for paying for them. There is an inbuilt attitude in the higher echelons of the sandcastle that you make a film for Oscars, for good reviews; quality in the middle-brow sense of the word is what it's all about.

They think that the dirty business of getting the kids in to see a film in Newcastle or Liverpool isn't very important as long as it does well in the Odeon Haymarket. Films are very expensive. You can't have a film industry without pushing people to go and see the films. You have to be aggressive as we have been with *Absolute Beginners* and say 'this is a film that you must see'.

There is a generation that has held on to power for too long in the film industry. It's a pity because there are a lot of younger people whom I'm sure could make very good films if they got control.

But your film has not been trouble-free as a production?

It's probably been one of the most difficult films in the history of the British cinema to make, largely because we were trying to do

something that people didn't really want us to do, and all with a young producer, a cameraperson who had never done a major film, and unknown actors. On top of this it's a film about race riots - burning cars rather than Olympic torches - and it was about this slightly sordid thing, pop culture. It wasn't necessarily the kind of England that would win an Oscar.

When your teenagers flock to the Odeon in Newcastle to see the film, do you think they will be watching it in a different way from the pop promos on The Tube?

It's certainly going to be different - it's going to be about 300 times bigger and louder. That's the point. If you get 600m people to see it then a *percentage* are going to think about it.

Why do you like film so much as a medium to work in?

I believe very strongly in the cinema. I hate television and I don't think it's an entertainment medium. I hate the fact that it's aimed at a strange thing called a 'viewer' who is slumped in an armchair in their millions. Making movies for television avoids the main challenge of selling, which I think is part of the artwork of movie-making.