

# No./14

## "He was the Holy Grail of filmmaking"

[IN MEMORIAM]

Friends, fans and fellow filmmakers remember **SIR ALAN PARKER**, the legendary British director, who died last month

ILLUSTRATION STUART MANNING



**MATTHEW MODINE**  
ACTOR, *BIRDY*

"I met Sir Alan in 1983. I was just one of hundreds of actors vying for a role in his next film, *Birdy*. Parker was kind, soft-spoken. He had a handheld video-camera and moved about my chair as I auditioned. Sometimes, he would be just inches from my face and eyes. It was like a physical examination by a doctor who was searching for something. What that was, only Parker knew. "Months later, I received a call from Parker. 'Congratulations! You're going to be in my movie.' I was thrilled. 'You're going to play Birdy.' 'What?!' I said, 'No. That's impossible. I auditioned for Al. I'm not right for that.' He replied: 'You're going to be great. Can't wait to see you get started.'"

"Once we began filming, Parker became quite a different person from the soft-spoken man I'd met at my audition. While Parker sometimes used blunt force on the artists he was collaborating with, we knew his impatience only came from his desire to make a great film, his passion for excellence.

"The film transformed my life. I consider Parker one of the top directors of all time. It was my honour to have worked alongside my dear friend, the working-class kid who rose to the pinnacle of his profession."



**DEXTER FLETCHER**  
ACTOR, *BUGSY MALONE*

"I first met Alan when I was nine years old. I remember filming the wonderful scene as Baby Birdy. 'What?!' I said, 'No. That's impossible. I auditioned for Al. I'm not right for that.' He replied: 'You're going to be great. Can't wait to see you get started.'"

Face [in *Bugsy Malone*]. I distinctly remember Alan saying to me after one take, 'Okay, do it again, but this time say: "I'm going to be a big movie star!" and look right at the camera as you say it.' As a child actor, it's drilled into you to never look at the camera because of course, kids have a terrible habit of doing that. Only Alan had the power and the imagination to break the fourth wall with a group of children.

"He obviously knew how to get the best out of children because I've done it myself as a director and it's really difficult. He did that so successfully because there's not a single bad performance in the film. I don't think people give him enough credit for how hard that must have been.

"Parker was the Holy Grail in terms of

making films that were artistic, had a message, were commercially viable, won awards and were films that audiences almost always loved. Those filmmakers are very few and far between."



**BRONAGH GALLAGHER**  
ACTOR, *THE COMMITMENTS*

"I attended three auditions for *The Commitments* and met Alan at the second. His presence was extraordinary. When I got the part, it was just pure joy to be on set with him. He always had laser focus because of his extensive experience, talent and knowledge of this business. He was a master filmmaker. He always knew exactly what he was doing every morning when he walked on that set.

"He rehearsed with the actors before he even turned a camera on, which was such a luxury. He was like a wise owl on set, very economical,

very precise with his directions, and he always had great authority. You felt so safe in his hands because he knew what he was doing but he was also great fun, too. All days on set were wonderful, just full of laughter and kindness.

"He always took on brave and diverse subjects, making extremely thought-provoking films in the process. Even when dealing with the most challenging of these subjects, he did so in a beautifully artistic way. He will be remembered as a true master artist and filmmaker."



**ALEC BALDWIN**  
ACTOR, *ALAN PARKER FAN*

"Like a lot of people in the States, *Fame* was the first film I knew Alan Parker from. I was still in acting school when the film came out. Alan Parker cast people who were all imperfect in some way. They are all just real people and he captured

their dreams and frustrations in a very authentic way. *Fame* is one of the best movies ever made. "You often hear people talk about directors 'getting a performance out of an actor' and that's normally complete bullshit. Ninety-five per cent of the people who are directors have no influence whatsoever on the performance. Parker is someone who you can honestly say, he got performances out of people.

"In *Mississippi Burning*, Parker manages to be very effective in getting Gene Hackman to sit on certain impulses he had, where many directors were not. Hackman has so many great performances but often tries to charm the camera as if to immunise himself against the stakes of the scene. Parker succeeded in getting him out of that; it's one of Hackman's best performances as a result.

"Anybody that makes a great film occupies a very unique perch in this business. People who make multiple great films... well, that's a really



Clockwise from top left: *Pink Floyd* — *The Wall*, *Evita*, *Midnight Express*, *Birdy*, *Angela's Ashes*, *Fame* and *Bugsy Malone* — a selection of the movies directed by Alan Parker (centre).

rare place to go. Any guy that did *Midnight Express*, *Fame*, *Birdy*, *Mississippi Burning* and *The Commitments*... that's an amazing legacy."



**GURINDER CHADHA**  
FILMMAKER AND MENTEE OF PARKER

"Alan was a big fan of my first film; he was very excited when I came on the scene. He was chair of the BFI and then the UK Film Council and he made a big push to make sure that I was on the board. Things like that go a long way, pushing for inclusivity in an industry where that was rare. "I loved that he never made the same film twice. He just kept changing genres and that was a big inspiration to me. The mark of a good director is when from the opening scenes you feel relaxed; you feel you can sit back and know you're in good hands.

"I looked at him and thought he really knew how to tell stories and I think we connected because we were both about telling stories and using a populist approach. We were also both from backgrounds where filmmakers weren't supposed to come from and that connected us too.

"One of the last times I saw Alan for lunch, he was telling me about how he was struggling to get a film made. He was definitely frustrated that he wasn't being given a break. In light of all he'd achieved, [that] felt really sad."



**LORD DAVID PUTTNAM**  
PRODUCER AND LIFELONG FRIEND

"I first met Alan at the advertising agency at which I worked. He was there for an interview. He was a bit younger than me, and I remember thinking that for his age he was amazingly lippy! He came across as almost unbearably confident — which never really left him.

"We had hundreds, maybe thousands of meals together over 55 years and they would inevitably consist of a dozen hysterical laughs, a couple of minor squabbles, and at least one fundamental disagreement over some recent aspect of our lives. Every meal was a bit of a rollercoaster but, looking back, I wouldn't have missed any of them.

"I think it's fair to say Alan and I genuinely loved each other. Our relationship transcended friendship. For me he was the brother I never had, and I'd like to think he felt the same. That's why I'm finding it so hard to adjust to the fact that I won't see him again.

"The very last text I received from him, we'd got cut off on a FaceTime call. He wrote, 'Damn, damn, damn, we had so much left to talk about.'

"As usual, he was right."

AS TOLD TO ELIZABETH AUBREY