

WOMAN IN A DRESSING GOWN

Followed by a Q&A with [Sylvia Syms](#) OBE and [John Willis](#)

BFI ARCHIVE

PETER BRADSHAW REVIEWS *WOMAN IN A DRESSING GOWN**The Guardian*, Thursday 26 July 2012

J Lee Thompson's unmissable proto-kitchen-sink drama goes all the way where *Brief Encounter* loitered hesitantly.

PRODUCTION YEAR: 1957

COUNTRY: UK

CERT (UK): PG

RUNTIME: 93 mins

DIRECTORS: J Lee Thompson

CAST: Andrew Ray, Anthony Quayle, Sylvia Syms, Yvonne Mitchell

Terence Davies's recent film *The Deep Blue Sea* returned audiences to Britain's lost postwar world of dingy flats, unhappy marriages and sing-songs in smoky pubs where adulterous couples are to be seen hunched in corners staring silently into their drinks. The rerelease of this brilliant proto-realist kitchen-sink drama from 1957, written by Ted Willis and directed by

J Lee Thompson, is from just this world. Anthony Quayle and Yvonne Mitchell are Jim and Amy, a married couple: they are middle-aged, though modern audiences might find their mannerisms much older. The stars were respectively 44 and 42 years old. Amy is a superficially cheerful chatterbox, and Jim seems tolerant of her scatterbrained inability to keep the flat tidy, her habit of leaving things burning on the stove and often never getting out of her dressing-gown all day. Amy clearly has undiagnosed depression: the Russian word is *halatnost*, literally dressing-gown-ness. Jim is also depressed, despite and because of a passionate, though apparently still unconsummated affair with his beautiful secretary Georgie (Sylvia Sims), who is pressing him to make a choice. Perhaps this movie has some of the era's sentimental loyalty to unhappiness (*Billy Liar* is another example), but the confrontation scene is genuinely thrilling. When Georgie whispers: "I love these Sundays" during one of their illicit meetings, it is electric. Hearing Tchaikovsky on the radio, Amy pauses to remark that it "makes me want to cry – it's so sad!" But it is her husband who is having the brief encounters, and unlike David Lean's film, this one shows people saying the relevant things out loud. An unmissable rerelease.



SYLVIA SYMS OBE

One of Britain's best-known actresses, Sylvia Syms won a Shakespearean scholarship to train at RADA and was already performing on stage by the time she was spotted by director Herbert Wilcox and his wife, the British star Anna Neagle, whom she starred alongside as the problem child in *My Teenage Daughter* (1956). She has appeared in some of the key British movies of the '50s and '60s and starred in many memorable partnerships with the likes of Laurence Harvey, Dirk Bogarde, Tony Hancock, Sir John Mills and Anthony Quayle. Many of her early films confronted such ground breaking issues as racism (*Flame In The Streets* (1961)), homosexuality (*Victim* (1961)) and touching on the theme of lesbianism in *The World Ten Times Over* (1963). Other credits include: *Ice-Cold In Alex* (1958), *No Trees In The Street* (1959), *Conspiracy Of Hearts* (1960), *Expresso Bongo* (1960), *The World Of Suzie Wong* (1960); *The Punch And Judy Man* (1962), *The Tamarind Seed* (1974), *Absolute Beginners* (1986), *Shirley Valentine* (1989), *I'll Sleep When I'm Dead* (2003) and *The Queen* (2006), to name but a few. More recently her film credits include: *Is Anybody There?* (2007); *Bunny & The Bull* (2008); *Booked Out* (2009); *The Long Lonely Walk* (2009) and the short film *A Cake For Mabel* (2012). Sylvia has received three BAFTA nominations including for Best British Actress in *Woman In A Dressing Gown* which was the first of four films she made with Ted Willis. Sylvia's television work is equally as prolific and as well as such classics as *The Romantic Young Lady* (BBC tx 1955) which was her first major role, *A Bat Out Of Hell* (BBC tx 1966), *Armchair Theatre* (ABC Weekend Television) and ITV Playhouse, her other recent credits include BBC's *EastEnders*, *Case Histories* (2011), *Turn Back Time* (2010), *Doctors* (2010 & 2006), *Casualty* (2009 & 2006) and *Bouquet Of Barbed Wire* (2009) to name but a few.

TED WILLIS

Born in London 1914, Ted Willis first began writing for the Unity Theatre at St Pancras during the war. As an original screenwriter for film and television, playwright, adaptor of his own and other's work and a novelist, Ted was a prolific and immensely talented writer. At the start of Ted's career, television was arguably still a relatively new medium and he embraced the creative opportunities this offered. *Dixon Of Dock Green* (1953), which ran for twenty years, was the first British police series to be screened on television, with the character of Dixon first appearing as a character in Ted's 1950 film *The Blue Lamp*. *Woman In A Dressing Gown*, a kitchen sink drama before the phrase was even coined, and *The Young And The Guilty* both began as television plays and later adapted by Ted for screen. He wrote thirty-nine film scripts and created forty-one television serials including *Virgin Of The Secret Service*, *Hunter's Walk*, *The Adventures Of Black Beauty*, *Copper's End*, *Sergeant Cork* and *Mrs Thursday*. He adapted three of his novels for radio and received three BAFTA nominations for Best British Screenplay, including *Woman In A Dressing Gown*.

JOHN WILLIS

John Willis started his career at Yorkshire Television where he directed a string of award-winning documentaries,

including the BAFTA-winning *Johnny Go Home* (1976) and the acclaimed *Alice – A Fight For Life*. He's also the recipient of four other BAFTA nominations. In 1983 John became Controller of Factual Programmes at Channel 4 and later, in 1993, Director of Programmes. Under his tenure, Channel 4 enjoyed unprecedented success with titles such as *Trainspotting*, *Four Weddings And A Funeral*, *Cutting Edge*, *The Big Breakfast*, *Father Ted* and *True Stories*. From Channel 4 John moved to United Productions, as their Chief Executive where they made *Hornblower* and Alan Bleasdale's *Oliver Twist* to name but a few. In 2003 John moved to the BBC as Director of Factual and Learning and during this time the phenomenally successful *Planet Earth* series was born. In 2006 John joined Mentorn where he's currently Chief Executive. In 2012 John became Chairman of BAFTA.

MATTHEW SWEET

Matthew Sweet presents *Night Waves* and *Free Thinking* on BBC Radio 3 and *The Philosopher's Arms* and *The Film Programme* on BBC Radio 4. His books and television programmes include *Inventing The Victorians*, *Shepperton Babylon*, *The Rules Of Film Noir* and *Silent Britain*. His most recent book is *The West End Front: The Wartime Secrets Of London's Grand Hotels*.



Left to right: J. Lee Thompson, Frank Godwin and Ted Willis behind the scenes on *No Trees In The Street* (1959)

