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## **Typist Artist Pirate King (12)**

*Dir:* **Carol Morley**

*with:* **Monica Dolan, Kelly Macdonald, Gina McKee**

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**Synopsis:** Carol Morley's film is a road-trip buddy movie, loosely based on the life and work of neglected artist Audrey Amiss. When Audrey spots a newspaper call-out for an exhibition, she dupes her mental health careworker Sandra into driving her - and carrier bags full of art - the near 300 miles from London to Sunbderland so that she can take part.

The films of Carol Morley are infused with a relentless curiosity. *The Alcohol Years* (2000), for example, sees Morley sifting through her own history as she attempts to fill in the gaps in her teenage drinking days, while for 2014's mystery-drama *The Falling*, Morley conducted research into fainting epidemics amongst teenage girls. Watching them is like sitting with a friend who wants to tell you about the cool thing they've just discovered. Even when tempered with sorrow, as in 2011's *Dreams of a Life*, her enthusiasm is contagious.

And so it is with *Typist Artist Pirate King* – the result of Morley's time spent digging around in the Wellcome Collection, having been granted a Wellcome Institute Screenwriting Fellowship in 2015. It was here that Morley came across the archival collection of Audrey Amiss, a once-promising young artist whose career was forestalled by mental illness, but who until her death aged 79 continued to create and document original works of art, mostly drawn from her daily life. From this vast archival collection, Morley has created a collagic tribute to Amiss, pasting scraps of artworks, diary entries and anecdotes into a fictionalised portrait of the artist as an older woman as she makes her way to her native northeast for one final exhibition.

The finished work gives a sense of what it might have been like to spend time in Amiss's company: it is warm, funny, chaotic, and a little frustrating. Cantankerous Audrey hoodwinks her frazzled careworker Sandra (Kelly Macdonald) – a woman who has never driven on the motorway – into chauffeuring her the 300-odd miles to Sunderland in a tiny yellow Nissan Leaf via A-roads and country lanes, setting the stage for a scrappy and occasionally surreal road movie.

As Audrey, Monica Dolan is a riot, careering between childish petulance and regal condescension, delivering snortingly funny one-liners in Amiss's sing-song Mackem accent. "I've left the

bathwater in for you... I did a wee in it," she announces grandly to poor old Sandra, whose full name – Sandra Panza – is a nod towards Amiss's quixotic nature – this is, after all, a woman who gives her occupation in her passport as "TYPIST, ARTIST, PIRATE, KING". Audrey's grip on reality is tenuous to say the least – she mistakes a yogi for a former teacher, and a hitchhiker for an old art-school nemesis. Sandra, meanwhile, is potentially on the verge of her own nervous breakdown, furiously blinking back tears as she tries and mostly fails to wrestle some sense and civility out of her charge. The film veers between Sandra's matter-of-fact perspective and Audrey's flights of fancy, marrying social critique and magic realism, to occasionally jarring effect.

Beautifully lit and shot by DoP Agnès Godard, the film is as much a love song to Amiss as to the North of England. Here is Anthony Gormley's Angel of the North; here the windswept beaches of Roker and Seaburn. Here are Morris dancers and medieval reconstructionists; fields of green and gold; Stockport's Guy Garvey singing of angels and drunks and the stars that guide him home. For Audrey these things are no more or less beautiful than the stippled golden curve of a cheesy snack, the vibrant wrapper of a KitKat. Lingering shots take in Amiss's paintings and sketches, as well as the scrapbooks of sweet wrappers that constituted her 'avant-garde phase'.

Like *Dreams of a Life* or *The Alcohol Years*, *Typist Artist Pirate King* is an act of recovery and restoration. Throughout, the film hints at a formative trauma that rent Amiss in two: something to do with her father's death, perhaps, or an art school attack, or an incident that took place at Heber's Ghyll. But there is no great revelation. Like Joyce Carol Vincent, whose death at home went undiscovered for two years and whose existence became the subject of *Dreams of a Life*, Amiss was a likeable and talented woman who through no fault of her own fell by the wayside. There are brief glimpses of horror here: of a girl confined to a psychiatric ward, unable to speak to ask to be taken home, of a care system that disappoints both its staff and its patients. For the most part, though, Morley swerves these more sombre considerations, instead giving Audrey the happy ending that life denied her. It's a noble gesture, if a little saccharine. Still, exhibitions of Amiss's work may well follow. Thanks to Morley, Audrey might yet get her second act.

## Credits

<b>Audrey Amiss</b>	Monica Dolan
<b>Sandra Panza</b>	Kelly Macdonald
<b>Dorothy</b>	Gina McKee
<b>Gabe Patier</b>	Kieran Bew
<b>Joan</b>	Christine Bottomley
<b>Yoga teacher</b>	Judith Chandler
<b>Vicar</b>	Gary Bates
<b>Clairvoyant</b>	Orla Cottingham
<b>Waitress</b>	Dawn Butler
<b>Pouting Pamela</b>	Kya Brame
<b>Jimmy Cragg</b>	Anand Toora
<b>Woman in tweed</b>	Pauline Whitaker
<b>Motorhome driver</b>	Neil Barry
<b>Hitcher</b>	Issam Al Ghussain
<b>Policeman</b>	Gavin Kitchen
<b>John</b>	Paul Hamilton
<b>Knitting Nelly</b>	Joanne Allen
<b>Girl on beach</b>	Georgie Foley
<b>Cafe Owner</b>	Christine Anderson
<b>Director</b>	Carol Morley
<b>Screenplay</b>	Carol Morley
<b>Cinematography</b>	Agnès Godard
<b>Editing</b>	Alex Mackie
<b>Music</b>	Carly Paradis
<b>Production design</b>	Janey Levick
<b>Costume</b>	Natalie Ward
<b>Casting</b>	Shaheen Baig

## Another View

Let's be frank: nine times out of 10, biographical films about artists are total, hagiographic pap. When you're making a film about the life of a famous person, there's so much baggage relating to legacy, image, historical record, and how to amply elicit the meaning of vital events in their lives in a way that's both diplomatic and creative.

To even up the odds, though, you can always spend a bit of time searching for a subject who feels truly worthy of cinematic celebration, which is exactly what Carol Morley has done with her wonderful new film, *Typist Artist Pirate King*. The strange title refers to the occupation printed on the passport of one Audrey Amiss. It's a document that was discovered during efforts to inventory the vast and bizarre artistic holdings she left upon her death in 2013.

As essayed in a tremendously committed and complex performance by one of Britain's greatest actors, Monica Dolan, we meet Amiss in her pokey Clapham bedsit which is bursting at the seams with scrapbooks stuffed with lovingly mounted junk food packaging and whimsical annotations. She wails, curses and monologues about a life pockmarked with breakdowns and missed opportunities, yet a certain plucky spirit prevails, and the film kicks off proper when she coerces her exasperated care worker Sandra (Kelly Macdonald) to take a road trip back to her birthplace of Sunderland for an exhibition of her work.

The chemistry between Dolan and Macdonald is pure Withnail and I, with Amiss presented as a tragic chatterbox whose splenetic rants are peppered with moments of droll poetry. Sandra, meanwhile, is on the constant verge of slamming on the breaks and leaving Audrey on the hard shoulder of a motorway. Indeed, Morley reveals a heretofore unseen knack for comedy, not just in the surreally witty dialogue, but in the deadpan staging and framing which references (but never speaks down to) the kitsch artefacts present in Amiss'

own work. This road trip framework is used as a way for Audrey to work through various life issues, as she (more than Sandra) knows that this epic voyage needs to end with a mass purging of personal demons via a visit to her level-headed sister, Dorothy (Gina McKee).

This is a film that ends up comprising much more than the sum of its picaresque parts, as Morley filters in a damning, yet subtle commentary on England's woeful mental health provisions, arts funding cuts in the north, the Catholic church's inability to amply console its flock, and the weird beauty that we potentially miss from dismissing eccentric people at face value.

The larky tone is punctuated with spartan montages of Amiss' work, presented in a way that is both dryly ironic and true to the artist's mischievous spirit. Not everything in the film works, and there's the odd rough edge here and there. But these are easily forgiven in light of the fact that it's so clear that Morley is pushing to make a shrine that her subject may have appreciated as well as a statement about an England in decline that is bold, angry but never once cynical.

**David Jenkins: Little White Lies**

**Our next screening: Friday 9 February, 2024. 7.30pm  
Scala!!! (18)**

Our first documentary for a long time is the story of the infamous and legendary Scala cinema in London. During Britain's post-punk Thatcher years, it showed a diverse range of films, from high art to cult classics, sexploitation, horror, Kung-Fu and LGBTQIA+. Nudging boundaries of convention, it became an inspiration for future famous creatives. With interviews from nearly 50 contributors, previously unseen archive footage and film clips, *Scala!!!* is an anarchic, uproarious film telling the riotous inside story of the cinema, with an original soundtrack by celebrated musician Barry Adamson.

**Advisory:** this film contains brief scenes of adult content