

Safer

UK : c2000 : dir. Rachel Tillotson : Film Four : 20 min
 prod: Hannah Wiggin : scr: Lucy Floyd : dir.ph.:
[Joseph Aston](#)
 Nicholas Gleaves; Jenny Downham

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Radio Times (wholly inaccurate) listing:

“Mark Kermode presents the short film showcase. Tonight’s theme is kids. A boy is trapped at home with a killer.”

[no listing in "Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide 2001"]

Broadcast in the Channel 4 “**Shooting Gallery**” slot for short films November 12th 2001. The *Radio Times* nine-word summary contrives to be wrong in every important respect. What follows contains a plot spoiler. Battered woman moves into tenement flat with her son of 7-9, instructing him urgently on locking himself in and out of the flat whenever she’s at work. Christmas is looming, and when a knock at the door insists the boy sign for a parcel in his own name, he unlocks the door and his mother’s latest ex-boyfriend bursts in with an armload of presents and alcohol, announcing that he and the boy’s mum have “got together again”. Over the evening he drinks himself into an angry stupor, playing good cop/bad cop with the boy. Ultimately he sets fire to the place with a discarded cigarette while ransacking the mother’s bedroom in a jealous rage. The boy, seeing his chance, bolts from the flat and, remembering his mother’s strictures, locks the door firmly behind him. Lest there be any ambiguity this is a deliberate act of homicide, the film contrives to have the boy run into his mum on her way back from work and cajole her into taking him for a Big Mac, the sound of fire engines rising in the background.

If woman-battering is a “hate crime”, and it certainly is, then what are we to call a film made by a woman producer, woman writer and woman director which is so infused with hatred of men? If the roles were reversed, critics would quickly denounce such a film as misogynist. But in the lunatic politics of our time, while misogyny is a recognised thought crime, androphobia is merely a case of “women speaking out”. This is not to say, of course, that spouse-battering is not a valid social concern for film-makers to address. The problem is that this one arrives as only the latest of many hundreds of male-bashing films from the same quarter, all of which portraying men – heterosexual and otherwise – as unregenerate brutes or sexual marauders. In this one “**Shooting Gallery**” clutch of five separate films, every one which featured men at all cast them in an unfavourable light, and “**SAFER**” was followed immediately by “**DONUTS FOR BREAKFAST**”, a New Zealand short (from another woman director) in which a young overweight girl is sexually exploited by a doughnut store owner. The session was rounded off with “**FOOTBALL**” (also from a woman director) which pokes fun at the male obsession with spherical objects.

Channel 4 resident film buff Mark Kermode briefly interviewed Tillotson on the shooting of her film, but naturally such an on-message media type would only see in this a vehicle of empowerment for female victims everywhere. He was concerned to know how she trod the fine line between how much violence in the child's presence would be permissible to show and how much would not. She replied that Lucy Floyd's wonderful script resolved all these problems for her, and spoke in glowing terms of the ugly tenement block where she shot her film. It's significant, from the archive's point of view, that although Kermode trailed these five shorts as detailing the child's view of the world (actually none of them did that at all well), his interviews concentrated entirely on the adult perspective. The children were scarcely mentioned at all.

The man in "**SAFER**" is a jealous alcoholic lout who makes a half-hearted bid to win the boy's favour (bringing him a car racing game to get in the door) and alternately barking viciously at him, so that we're clear the boy would be maltreated sooner or later. The script then has **the boy** murder the lout on his mother's behalf, exonerating her of blame for the killing. One male commits an act of violence on another violent male to protect a woman from further violence. A muddled message, to say the least of it. Or not, if one is proceeding from a viewpoint hostile to males in general. The boy too has the germ of a thug in him, we see.

I have not written so harshly on many another title, where a son comes to the aid of his mother against a violent father or stepfather, but on television these last fifteen years we have been simply inundated with tales of "sexual abuse", violence against women, "sexual abuse", alcoholism, child-battering and "sexual abuse", so that one would need to be blind not to recognise a social agenda at work, constantly throwing males onto the defensive. It is no accident that scarcely any films at all have detailed comparable cases where women are the "perpetrators". To make such a film would require a misogynist outlook, and perhaps would not so easily acquire funding from the B.F.I. or Film Four. When any group in society is so constantly described in stark black-and-white terms, always accentuating the negative, we call that "propaganda", don't we?

See also "**DONUTS FOR BREAKFAST**", to reinforce the point, and subject index under **ALCOHOLISM, CRIME / DELINQUENCY** and **SHORT FILMS**.