

To Kill a Day

UK : : dir. : c10 min
prod: : scr: : dir.ph.:
[Adrian Clarke](#)
Adult cast unknown

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Radio Times listing:

“Short film, first shown in “Shooting Gallery“, about two boys play a game that treads the thin line between life and death.”

Broadcast Channel 4 (at 04.20 a.m.) June 28 2002. The person who wrote that blurb for the *Radio Times* evidently hadn't seen it. One of the two boys, for example, is of the female sex (always a bit of a handicap for boys). Her name is Jo, to confuse things, and the actress playing her is Adrian Clarke, to confuse things further, but she's definitely a girl. And a sadist.

Jo (±12) is bunking off school with a friend, a fat boy called Nathan, out in the country (hard to place the location from her accent – maybe Dorset). She seems to take a delight in humiliating him, testing the boundaries of his obedience to her – giving him wrist-burns, ordering him to drink from a butt of foul water. Chased away by one fellow, they find themselves at a farm, where she dares Nathan to kill a chicken. The dare is defused by larking around in the henhouse, where they're discovered by a smaller boy, Tony, from the farm. He takes them to his secret place (the barn) and they play there amiably awhile.

As they're about to leave, Jo and Nathan are worried Tony might tell on them, though he insists he wouldn't. Jo conceives a proof of gang loyalty. She throws a rope over a roof beam and fashions a noose at the other end. First she puts her own head in it and pulls funny gagging faces, then hands the noose to Nathan. He knows Jo, and is very wary about putting his neck in. “We **all** have to do it, Nath' ” she says disarmingly. He darts his head quickly in and out, watching her closely. Then she hands the noose to the smaller boy.

Tony puts his head in the loop, and immediately Jo lunges for the free end of the rope and tugs the kicking boy off the ground, choking. Seizing his chance to be a co-tormentor rather than a stooge, Nathan grabs at the rope too, and together they haul the boy higher into the air. When his gasping stops, and his legs go limp, they release him. Jo kneels contemplating the lifeless body, while Nathan panics, blurting repeatedly “We didn't mean to **kill** the boy did we Jo?”. She snaps at him to stop whining, and they make their way home. After they leave the barn, Tony begins to rasp and stir, not quite dead after all.

The final scene has Jo at home in her pyjamas, watching TV with dad. He offers to show her a trick, something about a squealing pig, and when she comes closer to see it, he grabs at her finger and twists it till she squeals in pain – she is the pig, you see – and then consoles her by sitting her on his lap. “You have to be tougher than **that**, Jo” he remarks gently, “You're not going to cry on me, are you?” “No” she replies flatly. “Good girl” says dad.

The first observation to make is that this film crams more incident into its ten minutes, and poses more questions about its characters, than most **"Shooting Gallery"** exhibits I've seen, a good number of which have focused on children. The director has a good command of the economy of the short film, though I did not catch her name.

Jo is a tomboy, clearly, or what used to be called a tomboy, but though a certain level of arbitrary spite or meanness is present in all children's play – it's largely how they establish the order of precedence – there seems to be more implied in her psychological game with her sidekick Nathan, and this is confirmed when she sets out, quite purposefully, to murder the younger boy in the barn, wringing his neck in place of the chicken's. She doesn't know he wasn't killed. She's spared that disappointment. The film then seems to hint – if you could call it a hint – that her disturbed state of mind is the result of her father. His disquieting alternation of cruelty and intimacy – the girl being in her pyjamas is no accident – darkly suggests the possibility of, you guessed it, incest.

If that's a false reading, and the film only sets out to show the kind of child personality who could encompass a Jamie Bulger-style murder, then the final sequence with dad becomes a strange non sequitur. Does she bully other children because dad bullies her sometimes? Would that compel a daughter to kill another child on a whim, and then not report it?

So much for the questions. It's a technically polished short, with very competent playing from the two child leads. The only significant gripe would be that some of their dialogue is inaudible. I'm wary of the short film format these days, because several seasons of the **"Shooting Gallery"** have demonstrated that young film-makers – and women especially – tend to use the format to make propagandist points. Ten minutes or so gives little scope for subtlety or context, no shades of grey, and so any political points it makes will be polemicist, to say the least. This one, all the same, was intriguing and well done. It would be interesting to hear the director on what she was about with it. Pity the title sounds like a forthcoming Bond movie.

See subject index under **BULLYING, CRIME** and **SHORT FILMS**.