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Article Title: Sparrows Can't Sing: East End Kith and Kinship in the 1960s

Year of publication: 2009

Link to published article:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.3366/E1743452109000922>

Publisher statement: © Edinburgh University Press

Sparrows Can't Sing: East End Kith and Kinship in the 1960s

Amy Sargeant

Sparrows Can't Sing (1963) was the only feature film directed by the late and much lamented Joan Littlewood. Set and filmed in the East End, where she worked for many years, the film deserves more attention than it has hitherto received. Littlewood's career spanned documentary (radio recordings made with Ewan MacColl in the North of England in the 1930s) to directing for the stage and the running of the Theatre Royal in London's Stratford East, often selecting material which aroused memories in local audiences (Leach 2006: 142). Many of the actors trained in her Theatre Workshop subsequently became better known for their appearances on film and television. Littlewood herself directed hardly any material for the screen: *Sparrows Can't Sing* and a 1964 series of television commercials for the British Egg Marketing Board, starring Theatre Workshop's Avis Bunnage, were rare excursions into an area of practice which she found constraining and unamenable (Gable 1980: 32). The hybridity and singularity of Littlewood's feature may answer, in some degree, for its subsequent neglect. However, *Sparrows Can't Sing* makes a significant contribution to a group of films made in Britain in the 1960s which comment generally on changes in the urban and social fabric. It is especially worthy of consideration, I shall argue, for the use which Littlewood made of a particular community's attitudes—sentimental and critical—to such changes and for its amalgamation of an attachment to documentary techniques (recording an aural landscape on location) with a preference for non-naturalistic delivery in performance.

In her autobiography, Littlewood described Stephen Lewis' 1960 play for Theatre Workshop, *Sparrows Can't Sing*, as 'gentle and nostalgic'. Its characters, she said, were 'amiable layabouts, bird fanciers, gamblers and their offspring, just the way our locals saw

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themselves' (1994: 559). Lewis himself was raised in the East End and had worked as a bricklayer before joining Littlewood's Company as an actor (Goorney 1981: 113-4). The play ran to great acclaim at Stratford East and was well received in East Berlin. The Berliners were returning a compliment: while Littlewood's practice was firmly grounded and dedicated to a specific London borough, she drew inspiration from the work and politics of Bertolt Brecht's Berliner Ensemble. Littlewood's practice was informed by a knowledge of both popular British culture and of world theatre and, in turn, enjoyed an international reputation. However, *Sparrows* was less successful when it transferred to London's West End. Its characters and down-to-earth humour, suggested Howard Goorney, were too deeply rooted in their locale to survive the journey and 'did not appeal to more sophisticated tastes' (1981: 121). This may account for the 'softening' of the story for the film version, again scripted by Lewis. Certainly, there is less, even cursory, political critique. Marshall McLuhan reported that the film was subtitled for its release in America (1968: 309). Here, I intend to discuss a number of interconnected and interdependent aspects of the play and film: the presentation of a conventional model of a particular urban community; the documentation of, and commentary on, a changing urban landscape; and the theatrical use of locations. I shall place this discussion in the context of earlier and subsequent British film-making and against Young and Willmott's seminal 1957 sociological study of working-class culture, *Family and Kinship in East London*.

Both film and play are more concerned with settings, character and performance than with plot. Character and performance, I shall argue, contribute as much as physical locations in establishing setting. The *Spectator* critic Alan Brien described the show as '1930s music hall, preserved and pickled by Joan Littlewood, but with genuine emotion which just runs underground' (Goorney 1981: 121). Both film and play are accompanied by song and dance numbers with Maggie (Barbara Windsor) singing Lionel Bart's theme tune for the film. Charlie (James Booth) returns from two years at sea and his arrival is quickly reported around the neighbourhood by a trio of gossips (with whom there may have been carryings-on in the past—and it's not out of the question now or in the future) and a chorus of salacious children who cheer on the protagonists in the hope of seeing some action: 'there's gonna be murders'. Efforts are made by friends and family to forestall an encounter between Charlie and his wife Maggie, who is now living with another man, bus-driver Bert (estranged from his own wife), an older son, Johnnie, and a toddler, Christabel, who may or may not

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be Charlie's. Meanwhile, Charlie and Maggie have lost touch. In the play, the reason given for Charlie's absence is more ominous (his years away are counted in races—seven Derbies and an Aintree) as he has been serving time in prison for beating Maggie over the head with a poker—but, dramatically, it serves a similar function. In both versions, Charlie asserts that he would not have hit her, had he not loved her. While, on stage, Charlie's exits and entrances postpone their meeting, the film cuts between parallel action, with characters endeavouring to get to Maggie before he does. Others (including his brother, Fred (Roy Kinnear)) simply try to avoid him. But 'He's bound to find her before the day's out', Fred's wife, Bridget, admits, providing impetus to the characters' and the audience's sense of anticipation.

Film space

Littlewood had wanted her film to be photographed by David Watkin, who worked on British Transport's *Holiday* (1958), shot on location in Blackpool, the London Transport films, *Under Night Streets* (1958)—like *Sparrows*, shot in monochrome—and *All That Mighty Heart* (1962), progressing to Dick Lester's 1965 features *Help!* (in which *Sparrows*' Victor Spinetti and Roy Kinnear reappear) and *The Knack... and How to Get It*. As editor, she preferred Hugh Raggett, who had also worked on British Transport documentaries, with John Schlesinger on *Terminus* and with Watkin on *The Blue Pullman*. Other interests intervened and the film was partly shot by veteran Max Greene (Mutzi Grünbaum). However, Littlewood found his professional fastidiousness unnecessarily cumbersome (wanting to turn every location into a studio, she said) and Greene was duly replaced by Desmond Dickinson. The usual scheduling and editing process proved equally wearing, with Littlewood once falling off her chair with boredom as she looked on (Littlewood 1994: 649, 672–3). There are other reasons why Littlewood was thought to be a 'difficult', paradoxically uncooperative director on film after *Sparrows*. Barbara Windsor has recalled that: 'A cameraman told me I was doing too much with my face in the close-ups. He said, "This is a movie, not theatre." But Joan said to him, "Fuck off. Don't tell my little actress what to do"' (Leach 2006: 121). This could well explain why the Littlewood filmography is now significantly smaller than some of us might have hoped.

The cinematography of *Sparrows* exploits the play's transfer to the actual locations to which it originally referred. Lewis' screenplay responds directly to the locations. A long shot shows isolated tower blocks looming over an empty space where terraces once stood; a

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pan takes in the derelict shards of buildings, 'historical dwellings' and houses in a wan state of semi-demolition, their soft, once private, domestic innards now exposed to the elements and to public scrutiny: 'Fancy sleeping with that wallpaper', comments Charlie to a stranger – 'Better than my old woman', comes the swift riposte. In the absence of an elaborate or substantial narrative drive, much of the pace of the film is dependent upon nippy verbal exchanges, movement within the frame and contrasts in movement between frames. A sense of urgency is conveyed in brisk tracking shots, frequently of Maggie, in ruffled nylon blouse and blonde bouffant, trotting like a frisky show pony on her spiky white heels, on her way with Christabel to the pub – where she initially languorously feigns nonchalance about Charlie's return.

The play and screenplay use place names (Cable Street, Frazer Street, Barking Creek, the Woolwich Ferry) to establish setting and preconceived, fine distinctions between close locales – it's enough simply to say that Maggie comes from Bethnal Green. As Young and Willmott noted, although onetime villages had been submerged and their boundaries obliterated, they lived on in people's minds (1957: 111). With its parochial rivalries, the film exemplifies what Charlotte Brunsdon has called 'Local London' (2007: 57–8). Likewise, the film takes us, by way of sets and locations, to the docks, the Regent Canal (heftily signed and dramatically thwarting Maggie's progress), a deserted fairground, a couple of parks and a pub (The Red Lion), a street market and the Kray twins' Kentucky club. As in Lorenza Mazzetti's 1953 Free Cinema project, *Together*, also made in the East End, the film shows children playing on the street and on wasteland. The action is located specifically, but the locations also serve to place the film generically among others, both fictional and non-fictional, in which various London neighbourhoods are shown as a village within the city and as a model of a larger society. I am thinking of, for instance, Humphrey Jennings' 1943 *Fires Were Started* and Sidney Gilliat's 1945 *Waterloo Road*. Here, particular, distinct regions (East or South-East) are shown as self-contained, as opposed to the general East–West (the 'other end') contrast of Robert Hamer's *It Always Rains on Sunday* (1947) and Barney Platt-Mills' 1969 *Bronco Bullfrog* (for which Littlewood's Playbarn provided the young cast) (Brunsdon 2007: 110–11; Sargeant 2003: 352–6). Even the fiction films employ a written prologue, a voice-over or a custodial, narrator figure (in *Waterloo Road*, this role is assigned to the local GP) presenting the material as quasi documentary. These model societies are identified as much by a network of personal and communal interactions as they are marked

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by territorial boundaries: 'They certainly are fine houses, the whole length of the street', concludes the narrator of Gilliat's 1948 *London Belongs to Me*, intending the community rather than the architecture.

Social space

Young and Willmott's study of Bethnal Green was based on extensive interviews conducted with current residents and former residents who had then moved away to new housing estates in Essex. Many of the attitudes incorporated into and voiced in *Sparrows* and *Sparrows* endorse those expressed by these earlier interviewees. One of the most significant features of the Young and Willmott case-study neighbourhood was its 'matrilocality' (1957: 44–64), a site nostalgically revisited in such recent films as *The Krays* (1990) (set in the past) starring Theatre Workshop's Billie Whitelaw in a pinny and directed by *Sparrows*' assistant director Peter Medak, in Gary Oldman's *Nil By Mouth* (1997) (set in Deptford and supposedly in the present) and in BBC TV's ongoing *EastEnders*. In all of these, strong, unselfpitying and selfless women assume prominence. Even when 'it's a struggle to stay alive', 'we mustn't grumble, must we?/ We couldn't be worse off, I suppose', agree 'Gran' and Lily in *Sparrows*.

Lewis' play presents us with a community where individuals survive through mutual support; it also narrates Charlie's back-story, prior to his arrival on stage: 'Gran' has taken this sparrow under her wing, just as elderly neighbour Jack cares for his caged canaries. 'Hard times they was – Hard, they was bloody cruel. Nobody wanted a little orphan boy'. He has been, she says, 'more sinned against than sinning', 'knocked from pillar to post'. Meanwhile Bridget maintains that he's just 'a stray she took in' and 'the biggest rotter on the face of the earth'. In the film, mum lives next door to Bridget, Fred and Nell but frequents (to the extent that she also inhabits) the same space. Charlie returns to mum, evicting Jack (and his birds) presuming that he will be able to persuade Maggie to move back in with him.

While the play (like *Fires Were Started*) recalls the East End's mixed community of a previous generation (Chinese laundry shops), the film documents both old and new patterns of immigration (the Jewish bakers for whom Maggie decorates bar mitzvah cakes; the Africans, Indians and West Indians visited by Charlie in his search for Maggie). Churches feature large in the screenscapes of *Sparrows* and *It Always Rains on Sunday*. Robert Vas elegiacally recorded cockney and Yiddish voices in the almost contemporary *The Vanishing Street* (1962). Klezmer strains here provide the opening soundtrack and Hebrew is recited in

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the school and synagogue. On the Hessel Street market stalls, comics and toy plastic dolls rub shoulders with seven-branched candlesticks. Barbers, machinists, kosher butchers, poulterers and fishmongers continue to ply their trade but one shop already announces the last few days of a closing-down sale.

A recent survey of the East End, following the example set by Young and Willmott, comments that:

Many longer-term as well as newer residents are from overseas, of different races, cultures and creeds. But people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds have often been born and bred in the East End. Who is or is not an 'outsider' is itself no longer clear in many inner-city neighbourhoods. (Mumford and Power 2003: 2)

Equally, *Sparrows Can't Sing*, as if bringing together the cast for a curtain call, ends in Queenie's Club, with various generations of neighbours (including mum, Jack, the three gossips, Rosie and her put-upon son, even Bert and the curmudgeonly caretaker Sparks) gathered for a drink, a dance and a song. The gathering descends to fisticuffs, while Maggie and Charlie spar playfully outside.

Physical space

Charlie's interim absence allows him to serve as a distanced observer of the new human and built environment. 'Where's all the houses?' he asks; 'This used to be my street'. He's told that they have been pulled down before they fell down but that, equally, people are now afraid to go out. In *The Vanishing Street*, the dilapidated dwellings and a derelict church are due for demolition: a planner with a theodolite gestures towards the crisp model housing blocks by which they will be replaced and the film ends with the arrival of bulldozers. As Michael Thompson has observed, slum status is socially determined (1979: 35). In general, British films of the 1960s take a dim view of urban renewal schemes especially (as in *Life at the Top* (1965) and Albert Finney's *Charlie Bubbles* (1967), both set in the North of England) where they are shown to benefit private and speculative investors (as in the London of Clive Donner's *Nothing But the Best* (1964)) rather than residents and the larger community. Architects and planners are at best over-ambitious and uncaring and at worst (which is often) corrupt (Marwick 1996: 179; Sargeant 2005: 283-7).

In *Sparrows*, Yootha tells Charlie that old people get put on the top floor to kill them off—it saves on the pensions. The line was immediately incorporated in the script when volunteered by a resident

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on location (Leach 2006: 164). *Sparrrers* reiterates the opinions of Young and Willmott's Bethnal Green interviewees and the reservations expressed by Richard Titmuss in his *Essays on 'the Welfare State'* (1963: 240), harsh criticisms which Young and Willmott forcefully amplify in their preface to the 1986 edition of their survey: 'For twenty-five years government and municipal authorities were united in a gigantic folly. Criticisms like ours were bulldozed aside, together with the consistent evidence from opinion polls that most people dislike flats and high flats in particular' (14–15). 'The remarkable fact was how long it took for anyone to see that it was wrong', adds Peter Hall (2002: 244). In Willmott and Young's survey, flat-dwellers are often thought 'snobbish and spiteful'. I don't like them myself', says 'Gran' to Charlie in *Sparrrers*:

It ain't natural, people balanced on top of one another like that. No, give me the little old houses every time. We're supposed to be getting re-housed but I reckon it'll be feet first when they takes me out of this alley. You know, people round here what brought up whole families on the R.O. before the war, and when they gets in them new flats they don't want to know you anymore.

Working-class discontent with flat-dwelling (in spite of the well-meaning enthusiasm of Arthur Elton and Edgar Anstey's 1935 *Housing Problems*) had been reported by George Orwell as far back as 1937. In England, resistance to flat-dwelling was long established:

The simplest solution is flats. If people are going to live in large towns at all they must learn to live on top of one another. But the northern working people do not take kindly to flats; even when flats exist they are contemptuously named 'tenements'. Almost everyone will tell you that he wants 'a house of his own' and apparently a house in the middle of an unbroken block of houses a hundred yards long seems to them more 'their own' than a flat situated in mid-air When you walk through Manchester you think that nothing is needed except to tear down these abominations and build decent houses in their place. But the trouble is that in destroying the slum you destroy other things as well. (Orwell 1975: 61–2)

'People get's funny when they moves to flats', says mum in *Sparrows*, intimating that figuratively and literally they get 'stuck-up'. This sentiment is reiterated in *Bronco Bullfrog*, where teenager Irene's mum, separated from her dad, has moved to Green Point, a housing block. Bert, in *Sparrows*, worries about payments to his wife and hire purchase payments on the telly (an expendable luxury, as they never watch it, smirks Maggie). The film mocks over-assiduous and

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precious enforcement of council regulations, servilely delivered by Sparks (the caretaker). 'We're trying to civilise people like you', he informs Georgie (Murray Melvin), ordering him not to lean his bike in the portico, nor on the 'hieroglyphics' nor on the nondescript mural in the tower block foyer, thereby acknowledging working-class resentment at middle-class do-goodery and attempts at social 'improvement' by means of physical intervention through architecture and design. Sparks has opinions on anything and everything and is all too willing to volunteer them: 'that baby ought to be covered up, 'n' all'. The film disparages his attention to the tenants' comings and goings. Nell, Charlie's niece, with her suitors, 'tea-leaf' Chunkie (Griffith Davies)—so called, he explains, because he has a head like a pineapple—and gorgeous Georgie—dapper in his narrow-slacked, high-lapelled mohair suit—arrive at the flats in pursuit of Maggie. Chunkie is happy to find himself alone in the lift with Nell and briefly is afforded the opportunity to press his advantage. Georgie lives in the new block, but, as Nell's foreman, works in the East End's traditional clothing trade ('trousers tomorrow, Nellie!'). East Enders, notes Peter Hall, needed to live close to work which was often casual and low-paid, leaving little spare cash for transport (2002: 19, 76). Here, again, Lewis provides dialogue and banter matched to the specific location used for filming:

Caretaker: Well, you see that flat up there with the Venetian blinds up, what are down?
– when the blinds are up and the lights are out, they're out
– when the blinds are down and the lights are on, they're in
Course, if the blinds are down and the lights are out [sniggers] they might be out.

Chunkie: Might just be a blind . . .

Chunkie is obviously punning deadpan on 'blind', while simultaneously pointing out that Sparks is a nosey parker.

Performance space

Ruby Grierson had recorded East End voices for *Housing Problems* while Littlewood was working with Ewan MacColl. London Transport's *Under Night Streets* documented local accents and banter: 'the fun and games we do 'ave'... 'that ain't bad going and no flannel'.

Authentic accents endorse the setting of *Sparrows*. Littlewood insisted on the casting of locals ('May from the Angel café, Rosie from Goide's bakery... Queenie from The Iron Bridge... who could act such characters?') alongside such Theatre Workshop regulars as Yootha Joyce, Babs Windsor (since an *EastEnders* regular), Victor Spinetti and Harry Corbett (better known, much to Littlewood's disappointment, as Steptoe junior on television and on film) (Littlewood 1994: 645). Barbara Ferris again appeared as Nell while Kinnear (reproducing his Oliver Hardy gait), Davies and Melvin transferred from stage to screen, albeit in different roles. The script and customary ad-libbing in rehearsal contributed to the pace, delivery and atmosphere of both play and film. Slang serves as the basis for *double entendre* verbal jokes: 'How's your birds?', Charlie asks Jack; 'How's yours?', Jack asks Charlie – 'queueing up', he is confidently informed. 'A key to cockney humour', advised Lewis, 'would be to consider that when characters are serious they tend to be rather ironical or very often make a joke of it outright. On the other hand, a funny remark is more often than not made seriously' (Lewis, 1961: intro.). General chat, with particular bursts of quick-fire patter, occur in both play and film. Indeed, flirtatious exchanges between Charlie and Maggie (as she niftily dodges past him around a pub table) say as much about the strength of their relationship as their frolicking in the park. There's form on both sides: 'When I say it was all my fault, it was all my fault', asserts Charlie; 'Not always', replies Maggie, quietly humbled; 'If I say it was it was', he insists. 'Apart from his boozing and going off with other birds he was always very good to me', Maggie admits to Bert. Bethnal Green is here created and conveyed performatively in the actors' use of idiom and voice.

Lewis' rewriting of his play script to accommodate specific film locations and Littlewood's sustained theatrical choreography of action are aspects which I find attractive in *Sparrows Can't Sing*. In the supermarket, Maggie and Bridget hurriedly swap conversation from aisles either side of a shelving fixture, alternately peering over it and bobbing down to face each other through an opportunely placed hatch. Slapstick comic episodes of the play are matched in the film. I am thinking here of Strudel, rabbits and ladders and of Maggie caught on the bridge. Prop gags (the double bed which Charlie buys to inaugurate his re-coupling with Maggie) transfer from stage to screen. In the same way that the stage set employed its double levels, the screen version cuts briskly from street fronts to the backs. The street, like John Bury's set for the production at Wyndham's Theatre, becomes an interior, with characters shouting across and down its length as

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furniture is delivered and offloaded. Private affairs are shamelessly conducted in public, with friends leaning out from their balconies and windows to obtain a better purchase on the spectacle below, as opposed to the flats, with their echoey, long corridors, where 'you got to whisper because of the neighbours', cautions Maggie.

The stage play called for a swanky new motorbike, which Georgie ineptly employs in his courtship of Nell. But Chunkie is reluctant to leave Georgie alone in Nell's company and, in the film, he laboriously circles them on Nell's bicycle, filling the screen with movement as they walk on. Nell's minxy game is to keep them both guessing and tagging along – and she leaves Queenie's, at the end, between the two of them, hand in hand, both in tow.

Sparrows Can't Sing, on Littlewood's own admission, perpetuates a mythology of East End character types and community which its participants nevertheless continued to feel as real and which continues to be voiced in contemporary surveys. In its very texture, it reproduces and revels in those aspects of life which Young and Willmott reported as felt to be missing from the lives of East End migrants to the then new high rises of Essex. However, this relatively underrated film also records a 'new' terrain, distinct from the West End of the more famous Swinging London films of the later 1960s. It also, I think, successfully traverses two areas of British cinema often regarded as distinct if not antagonistic, translating a theatrical text to documented, actual locations. Buildings are here not simply the subject of social debate but are also shown to shape and participate in the life of a particular community.

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