



BORDERLINES FILM FESTIVAL

BLUE JEAN (15)

Director: Georgia Oakley

Starring: Rosy McEwen, Kerrie Hayes, Lucy Halliday

UK, 2022, 1 hour 37 minutes

Writer-director Georgia Oakley was nominated for a BAFTA award in the category of 'Outstanding Debut by a British Writer, Director or Producer' for *Blue Jean*, which premiered at the Venice Film Festival in September 2022 and has been released in cinemas on 10 February this year. The film is set in the north of England in 1988. Its storyline derives from the imposition at that time of Section 28, which forbade 'the promotion of homosexuality' by schools and local authorities, a prohibition which was to be in force until 2000 in Scotland and 2003 in England and Wales. Jean, compellingly acted by Rosy McEwen, is a secondary-school PE teacher living and working with the intolerable tensions that the Act, and its social, political and legal implications, have brought to the fore for her.

Oakley left school in 2006 and has said in interviews that she was unaware of Section 28 during her schooldays. Her interest was provoked by reading about lesbian activists abseiling from the balcony into the House of Lords chamber in protest. In developing the script she came to know a number of women whose own teaching careers had absorbed the impact of Section 28, and who have endorsed her thoughtful and sensitive depiction.

The sense of period in *Blue Jean* is beautifully achieved in a number of ways, including the soundtrack of 80s pop music, the use of 16m film to give graininess and saturated colour, and countless details of day-to-day life. The film proceeds through a number of pivotal moments, with intimate camera shots of Jean's expressions. One such pivotal moment early in the film is her television viewing of Cilla Black's *Blind Date*. It is the occasion for a debate between Jean and her lover, Viv, posing the crucial question of how anything can not be political - indeed how everything has to be political.

Such debates were widely current at the time, and the film evokes that period specificity astutely. Nevertheless, there are further layers. Jean's immediate dilemma - her position as a teacher and her responsibilities to some pupils in particular - is broadened out to become a portrait of the difficulty of living at ease with oneself in an environment of societal hostility, and the dispiriting quest for authenticity for many, if not all, queer people. *Blue Jean* refuses, too, to fully propose a notion of progress or improvement for the viewer. The film tacitly reminds us, perhaps, of parallels today, with laws recently introduced in a number of countries. The heteronormativity of Cilla's *Blind Date* may be cringeworthy nowadays, but mainstream media still gives primetime status to *Love Island*.

Notes compiled by Catherine Neale