

Film

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Picking up the pieces

The brilliant 'Ray & Liz' has been decades in the making. Director Richard Billingham reveals how he finally got there

'RAY & LIZ', Richard Billingham's intensely personal film about his dysfunctional childhood, is a work that has had a long gestation. 'It goes back 30, 40 years,' the Turner Prize-nominated artist-turned-filmmaker says. 'It's probably taken that long to understand all the context.' Back in 1996, Billingham published 'Ray's a Laugh', a book of photographs that centred on his alcoholic father Ray – in various states of dishevelment – and his fearsome mother Liz, usually smoking and/or shouting at Ray. In their squalid Midlands tower-block flat, surrounded by dogs, cats, birds and fish, the pair sprang off the page and seemed trapped within it: how did their lives come to this?

'Ray & Liz' tries to answer that question. Adding Billingham's neglected younger brother Jason and learning-impaired uncle Lawrence to it broadens out the story into a depiction of hopelessness, both personal and social. Ray loses his job, then the family home. There are hints of the England of the 1970s: National Front graffiti on a wall, casually racist comments. Billingham sees resonances with Britain's current identity throes, though he insists that he's not out to make a statement. "I, Daniel Blake" is an excellent film, isn't it?' he says. 'I couldn't make something like that. It's polemical. There's politics embedded in "Ray & Liz", but I didn't want to make it explicit.'

It's not an easy watch, though it often looks ravishing, particularly the lingering,



Fractured lives
Liz (Ella Smith).
Below: Billingham
(kneeling) on set

Rembrandtesque shots of the aged Ray. 'We shot on 16mm film,' says Billingham. 'I thought it was easier to use the medium of the time. I always had the intention to make a short film on 16mm for a gallery installation called "Ray": two or three days of my father's existence in this room, set in about 1990. At that time I was living with my father and



same reason I use film to depict an era I only know through history
I often saw him lying on the bed, and it was quite a powerful, tragic motif.'

He talks about the strangeness of casting actors to play his family: 'We had the same casting agent as "Peaky Blinders", so she gets the Midlands accent,' he says. 'She would pick people she thought looked like my family and had a similar energy. I knew if someone was right, because the hairs on the back of my neck would stand up.'

The film is full of what Billingham calls 'a sense of goodness towards the subject', something he discovered in library books of famous paintings when he was a child. Though he is aware of the inherent conflict in revisiting the past: 'It's almost like you're bringing someone back to life who has been forgotten. It begins to supplant your own memory,' he says. He pauses. 'They haven't really been brought back to life, though. It's just art.'

→ 'Ray & Liz' is in cinemas from Fri Mar 8.



By Chris Waywell
Who loves a jigsaw of a tiger and tea & a Sunday morning.