



A respect for adolescents

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'What I'm trying to put down is the idea of the film director as genius. I've never believed that. So I absolutely don't buy the mystical approach to film-making. I always believe that the more people know about what's going on, the better the film will be. I don't believe it's a great mystery, known only to me and a few other directors', says Michael Apted, discussing his film *Firstborn*.

Although he is British, Apted has gained the reputation of being one of the most perceptive chroniclers of American life. *Coal Miner's Daughter* established his uncanny talent for dealing with subject-matter that was completely alien to his own experience. *Firstborn*, to be released early next year, is another essay in Americana, describing the precocious maturing of a first-born son who is obliged to take on the responsibility for the household when his divorced mother (Teri Garr) falls in love with a disturbed character.

Apted explores the problems that a child faces when the moral order of an institution, be it home or school, disintegrates. He had seen his own two sons unable to deal with the chaotic atmosphere of California schools. He says that he eventually decided to send the boys back to England to be educated. 'The older boy retreated into himself, and I was afraid that the younger would become a surfer. I also became paranoid about the drug-orientated style of the schools.' His children were not faced with the disintegration of their home, for Apted has been safely married for 17 years and describes himself as leading 'an emotionally sheltered life'. But he was severely shaken by seeing the distress his sons went through when they were moved from an English school to the unruly playground of one in California.

Perhaps his feeling of sympathy for his children gave him a basis for understanding the character of Jake, the first-born son. Apted decided to shoot the film as seen through the eyes of the young boy. He appears in every sequence, and the story is known to the audience only to the extent that the boy knows it.

'It is a genuine point-of-view film. And they can be very constricting. It means that every single situation had to be carefully worked out before-hand by the scriptwriter and me and the boy, Chris Collet, so that his response to everything was represented.

'What really attracted me to the material was the way the two boys forge a relationship. They just start in the film as two kids who are kicking the hell out of each other. Suddenly they develop a love for each other. I can't identify with the thrust of the story, but I can remember my brother and myself knocking the hell out of each other. Then we became close, not through any great crisis, but just as part of growing up.'

Apted spent many months casting *Firstborn*, searching for a young boy who had experienced the situation described in the film. Whilst he finds it necessary for a director to have personal experience relevant to his subject-matter, he has often preferred to use non-professional actors who are actually playing themselves.

'It was a nightmare casting this particular role for many reasons. If you cast a child wrongly, then you're sunk, because children have very little range. I do find that children come with fewer preconceptions. And maybe they can sometimes come with more basic truthfulness. They respond directly to what is in front of them. I enjoy directing children a great deal.'

On many levels, Apted continues to draw on documentary techniques for the making of his Hollywood features. He says that he was given the chance to direct his feature, *Triple Echo*, because Glenda Jackson (who co-starred) had a busy schedule and the film had to be made in record time.

He was known already for being a reliable, efficient television director who could make a film to schedule and would not go over budget.

He started as a researcher at Granada Television, after graduating from Cambridge with a degree in law and history. Soon he became an investigative reporter for *World in Action* and then moved on to direct *Coronation Street* as well as a wide variety of television dramas. He was brought to Hollywood by the producer Ray Stark to direct a feature that was never made. Instead he ended up directing *Coal Miner's Daughter*.

Apted feels that it is impossible to judge a director on the basis of his latest film.



'I work equally hard to each film I make. But some work and some don't and I try to analyze why, but it's impossible to know. And I think it happens like this to all directors.'

Apted may have learnt that he cannot be in complete control of his final product, but in every area where he can have control he takes it. Unlike many directors, he tries to be absolutely clear about the storyline, and the themes. During our conversations he kept attempting to explain the core of *Firstborn*. He dislikes improvisation, and he even decides in advance on the way he will treat the actors. In the case of *Firstborn*, he decided to keep his feelings in check, and adopted a rather disciplinarian stance towards the young boys.

'My concern is to maintain a distance between me and the boys. I think that, if you are too close to them and too familiar with them, then, there can be lack of respect. I like to be hard on them and I like having people around on the set who are very soft with them. Because I want them to think that they are doing a job for me and I'm not necessarily their friend.'

Apted's attempts to reduce the emotional dramas on the set, in order to concentrate on the job at hand, may give him a lucidity unclouded by passion. But he wonders whether his approach may prevent the actors from reaching inspired heights of emotion.

'When you improvise, there are moments when an actor does something he has never done before. But I don't care to improvise while I'm shooting. I don't feel confident enough in my abilities as a writer and I tend to get very bored when I watch improvised films'.

Apted hopes that *Firstborn* deal with the theme of adolescence in a respectful way. He feels that it is time for the Hollywood industry to see a film about adolescents that does not exploit them.

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