



BORDERLINES FILM FESTIVAL

BENEDICTION (15)

Director: Terence Davies

UK, 2021, 2 hours 17 minutes

Benediction was filmed during September and October 2020, and had its world premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival in September 2021. Written and directed by Terence Davies, with cinematography by Nicola Daley, it was funded by BBC Film and the British Film Institute, as well as other production companies. The cast includes Jack Lowden as Siegfried Sassoon, Matthew Tennyson as Wilfred Owen, and Simon Russell Beale as Robbie Ross, with some roles doubled for scenes from Sassoon's later life: Peter Capaldi plays the older Sassoon, and Gemma Jones takes over from Kate Phillips as Hester Gatty, for example. Davies is a favorite with Borderlines' programmers and audiences, *Sunset Song* screening in 2017 and *A Quiet Passion* in 2018. In many ways, *Benediction* is a counterpart to *A Quiet Passion*, and once again, Davies presents with empathy a creative individual outside the mainstream of their society who must deal with disappointment.

The film contains narrative voiceover, newsreel material, battlefield footage, conventionally acted scenes and poetry. It contrasts the younger and older Sassoon, becoming 'a restless dialogue between stages of youth and old age, trying in vain to pin down the period at which a man is most himself' (**Guy Lodge**).

Benediction begins with Sassoon's life just before and during World War I. Sassoon's heroism, his disillusionment with the war and his admission to Craiglockhart War Hospital in 1917 where he met Dr W.H.R. Rivers and Wilfred Owen are well-known. This series of events and reversals was to be defining for the rest of Sassoon's long life. The subsequent issue of his own survival and direction when so many others had died was compounded by his sexual identity as a gay man. In later life, Sassoon married, and later again, converted to Roman Catholicism. The 'painfully beautiful closing sequence' (**David Ehrlich**), in which Jack Lowden, the young Sassoon, reads Wilfred Owen's poem, 'Disabled', leaves the viewer with much to contemplate.

In an interview about the film, Terence Davies has said, 'what I found was that Sassoon was always searching for redemption. None of us can find redemption in other people or in other things. You have to find it in yourself. At the end of his life, I think he was actually quite unfulfilled. That touched me enormously. All my films are about outsiders because I'm an outsider. . . . I don't think Sassoon even knew what he was searching for, which makes it feel crueler in some way.' In a moving review in *The Guardian*, Peter Bradshaw wrote, 'Sassoon is an opaque figure in this film . . . *Benediction* is not an easy experience and some of the caustic, brittle dialogue scenes with Sassoon's celebrity acquaintances are grating – yet deliberately so. The sadness is overwhelming.'

Preview courtesy of Vertigo Releasing

Notes compiled by Catherine Neale