

Last summer
was too
beautiful
to forget
...and too
painful to
remember.

Emanuel L. Wolf presents AN ALLIED ARTISTS FILM
A Frank Perry-Alsid Production



LAST SUMMER

with BARBARA HERSHEY, RICHARD THOMAS, BRUCE DAVISON and CATHY BURNS
Screenplay by ELEANOR PERRY From the novel by EVAN HUNTER Produced by ALFRED W CROWN
and SIDNEY BECKERMAN Associate Producer JOEL GLICKMAN Directed by FRANK PERRY In EASTMAN COLOR

Last Summer

Frank and Eleanor Perry's forgotten masterpiece returns with a rare 35mm screening

Once seen never forgotten, *Last Summer* is a penetrating, disturbing film about four teenagers exploring friendship, romance, drugs, and sex during a hot summer on the beaches of Long Island. A painfully accurate depiction of late adolescence, teenage mores, and casual cruelty, it's a coming-of-age drama like no other. Controversial upon release and as powerful today, it's the ultimate loss-of-innocence movie.

Last Summer was the fourth collaboration between independent filmmakers Frank and Eleanor Perry, a then husband-and-wife team responsible for *David and Lisa* (1962), *Ladybug*, *Ladybug* (1963), and *The Swimmer* (1968). Eleanor developed the screenplay based on Evan Hunter's bestselling novel and with Frank attached as director they engaged Allied Artists to produce it. The film was shot in late 1968 on Fire Island New York with a young cast including Barbara Hershey, 18, as the complex, pretty girl Sandy, Richard Thomas and Bruce Davison, both aged 19 as friends Peter and Dan, and Cathy Burns, a little-known stage actress and the eldest at 22, as shy outsider Rhoda. The film opened in June 1969 to positive reviews and modest commercial success, bolstered when Burns was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress.

The film opens with two clean-

cut teenagers, Peter and Dan meeting a bikini-clad Sandy on the beach as she crouches over an injured seagull. Sandy flirts with them as she asks for help, and they immediately become friends. They drink alcohol ("truth serum") and discuss "major truths" as Sandy casually removes her top. A visit to the cinema leads to a three-way petting session that makes Sandy feel "so sexy". They smoke pot and wash each other's hair in another quasi-sexual experiment. When all seems to be leading towards a consummation of their poly-amorous triangle an unexpected disruption occurs – a shy,

primal rituals of late adolescence. The film captures how teenagers actually behave, talk, and think. It places the viewer inside their heads while simultaneously dissecting them from the outside. Dan is the smart-ass - a carefree jock, self-centred and seemingly lacking in conscience. Peter is more sensitive - a worrier who questions his own behaviour and sometimes feels guilty. Sandy is mature beyond her years and claims to have an IQ of 157, but she's insecure, controlling and cruel. She leads the group to humiliate Anibal, a lonely Puerto Rican she tricks into a computer date, and continually



The cast of *Last Summer*, L to R: Bruce Davison, Cathy Burns, Richard Thomas and Barbara Hershey

frumpy fifteen-year-old girl, Rhoda they'd previously met at the beach, seeks to join the group.

Last Summer is an extraordinarily well-written, directed, and acted film not least for its unflinching look at the raw, almost

belittles Rhoda for her looks and apparent naïveté. Rhoda's character isn't fully revealed until much later when we hear the tragic story of her mother's death, a revelation that transforms her in the eyes of the group and finally leads to her acceptance. Cathy Burns

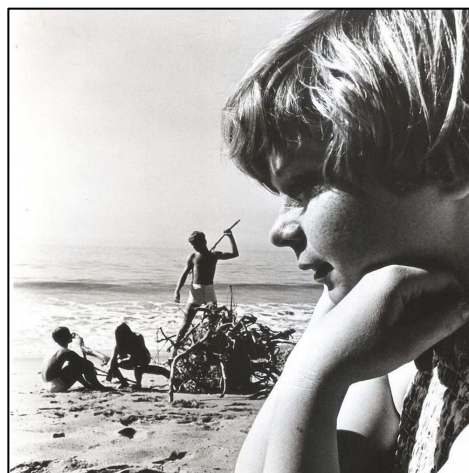
performance is remarkable here, not only for the four-minute monologue describing the incident, but for how she shifts from plump, awkward and mildly irritating, to sweet, attractive and vulnerable.

An important aspect of the film is its surreal, almost fable-like quality. It isn't *Lord of the Flies* exactly, but the characters seem to exist in a similar hermetic bubble. There are almost no adults in the film. The only grown-up we see up close is 'Snow White' – the lecherous boyfriend of Sandy's mother – and then only briefly as an object of mockery. The adult world barely seems to exist, as if the teens were alone on the island. Left to their own devices they create their own society and decide for themselves what the rules are.

Rhoda's acceptance into the group at first seems a good thing but before long we realise it has disrupted a sensitive balance. Relationships become frayed, characters less predictable, and before long we know we're on a path to something dark and ugly. When this materialises, it's as raw and disturbing as anything in 1960s American cinema. Contemporary audiences were stunned by the film's visceral climax and it has the same effect on viewers today. *Last Summer* became briefly notorious and was first screened with a US 'X' rating before trims were made to reduce it to an 'R'. The film pushed the boundaries of 1969 censorship in other ways. In addition to the profanity, drug-taking, and sexual experimentation there's a daring scene where two gay men are seen making love in the sand dunes.

Despite its contemporary success and Oscar® nomination *Last Summer* fell out of circulation and has been virtually impossible to see for more than forty years. Available only as an out-of-print VHS release, the film is a 'holy grail' among missing movies. The original negatives are rumoured to be lost. When Allied Artists dissolved, *Last Summer* was acquired by Lorimar Productions and then Warner Bros, yet Warners have never released the film or stated publicly what film elements they possess. When one of the film's most ardent devotees, screenwriter Larry Karaszewski organised a revival screening in Los Angeles in 2012 he was forced to use a 16mm print sourced from the National Film and Sound Archive of Australia (NFSA) because it was the only one he could find. This led the *LA Times* to suggest the NFSA print was the only remaining film element in the world, an eye-catching assertion fortunately untrue, yet the scarcity of material is bewilderingly real. My own research has uncovered only a handful of prints with the 35mm materials held by the BFI Archive among few to exist. All of this means this latest screening of *Last Summer* is something very special. The NFSA print employed for all recent US screenings is 16mm and partially censored, so the BFI event will not only be the first UK performance of the film in decades, it will also be the first 35mm revival screening of an unedited print anywhere in the world.

As a longtime admirer of *Last Summer*, I'm absolutely thrilled to be presenting this special showing of the Perry's lost masterpiece in collaboration



"It isn't Lord of the Flies exactly, but the characters seem to exist in a similar hermetic bubble"

with the BFI. Not only is it an honour to bring this underseen film back to UK audiences but the rarity of the title and print serve to highlight the critical role the BFI National Archive plays in film preservation.

After the film's traumatic climax, the final shot sees the camera rising high above the ground to survey the deserted, lonely beach on which the characters have spent the entire summer. It's dusk and they are only pin-points in the frame. As we absorb the image we can't help but feel the sun is setting not only on them but their whole pre-adult lives. It's a devastating conclusion. The party is over, the loss of innocence complete, and something in all of them has just died. It's a great film.

Geoffrey M. Badger
June 2025
LostReels.co.uk

LAST SUMMER

Special 35mm presentation



Special Thanks to
James Bell, Simon Duffy, Sonia Genaitay, Kimberly Sheehan, Mark Truesdale,
Claire West, Jason Wood, BFI National Archive

This film print is from the collections of the BFI National Archive

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