

The Towers of Ilium

A film by Lynn MacRitchie

Origin

Ilium is another name for Troy, the site of the legendary Trojan war. It is a real place, in the Dardanelles, in what is now known as Turkey, very close to the site of another tragic campaign, Gallipoli, which took place during the First World War. The "Iliad", Homer's story of Troy, has become one of the greatest tales in western literature. Written about 750 BC, it tells in powerful detail about the conflict between the Greeks and the Trojans and the deaths of many warriors, but above all that of Hector at the hands of Achilles. Lynn MacRitchie, visiting the area, was moved by the proximity of these two sites, their battles fought over a millennium of years apart, to make a film. The result, the "Towers of Ilium", suggests that war is always present and often close to home.

Location

Seeking a location close to London which in some way resembled the Gallipoli Peninsula, the artist was directed to Coalhouse Fort Park, East Tilbury, Thurrock, a site on the Thames Estuary long associated with military history. Known as a defensive site on the river since the 15th century, the current fort was completed in 1874. The radar tower was built during World War Two. To disguise its true function, its structure mimics that of a water tower.

Concept

Local stories were combined with passages from the "Iliad" to form the core of the film. The radar tower became the pattern for a model tower which is carried in procession by a group of "warriors", a re-imagining of the Tilbury Trojans, a notorious skinhead gang formed in Tilbury in the late 1960s. On a specially prepared site, they take part in a series of stylised fights, a reference to the funeral games with which both the Trojans and the Greeks honoured their dead warriors. The character of Achilles appears, commenting on the futility of such combat, which can have only one outcome - death. A second, large-scale model tower is burned, the spectacular blaze intended to suggest that the real radar tower has been destroyed, the destiny Achilles predicts for all such structures and the societies which rely on them. Is it inevitable that the young, present-day boy who appears at the beginning and at the very end of the film must also be destined to experience such conflict?

Production notes

From September 2012, local volunteers worked with a team of arts professionals to realise the project. Movement and costume workshops were held throughout February and March and the film was shot on location in Coalhouse Fort Park over three days in April 2013.

The procession movement sequences were devised in workshops with the volunteer performers led by Charlie Morgan and held at The Beehive in Grays. The volunteers were joined by students from the East 15 Acting School in Southend, who play the parts of the Trojan warriors. The fighting sequences are based on wrestling, boxing and the ancient martial art of pankration, all of which formed part of the funeral games held for warriors which became the origin of the Olympic Games. Pankration is still practised in Greece.

The costumes were designed by Lesley Ford and made by a team of volunteers working under her direction at the Royal Opera House Production Park in Purfleet. The designs reference skinhead clothing and the logo of Trojan Records, which the Tilbury Trojans skinhead gang adopted as their own symbol. Volunteers applied the Trojan-style helmet motifs on to the T-shirts worn in the procession and stencilled the motif on to the T-shirts of the fighters.

The model towers were designed and made by Steve Taylor of Four Fish Designs in his workshop in Whitstable. A small model was made to represent an iconic impression of the radar tower in the park. A much larger model was made as an exact detailed replica of the real radar tower. The pyro-rigging for the burning of the large model tower was designed and carried out by John Kennett of brightFX.

Much of the park is a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), and Ray Reeves, the park ranger, had to identify a place where the grass could be cut down to hold the fights and the large model tower could be built and burned. The fire sequence could only be filmed during April in order not to disturb the birds which migrate to the park every winter. Different bird songs can be identified on the soundtrack, thanks to the skill of sound recordist Len Usselman. Voles and bees are also protected on the site, and the buzzing of a bee forms a motif on the sound track for the scenes with the young boy.

A very different sound can be heard in the last two scenes with Achilles - gunfire, from a firing range on the other side of the estuary. The first shots rang out just as Mark Bell, the actor who plays Achilles, began to speak, providing an unexpected but highly appropriate accompaniment to Achilles' final words.

Richard Carlton, director of photography, and his camera team took great care to capture the special visual quality of the location - the high skies filled with light reflected from the river contrasting with the stark, military buildings scattered across the landscape. The camera used was an ARRI ALEXA fitted with a classic Cooke zoom lens, all supplied by Feral Equipment in London.

The music was composed by Charlie Skelton and Mark Elliott and refers both to the music of Homer's time and to the skinheads' favourite music, ska, brought to England from Jamaica by the Trojan record label, whose name the Tilbury Trojans took for themselves. When Homer first recited the "Iliad" he is likely to have been accompanied by the music of a lyre, which was certainly played in later centuries when recitations of the "Iliad" had become the evening entertainment at the Olympic Games in Athens. For the soundtrack, Charlie Skelton researched, designed, built and then played his own version of a lyre - perhaps the first to be heard since ancient times!

The dialogue spoken by Achilles was adapted from the "Iliad" and the voiceover to the fight sequences is based on an archive interview with a young skinhead.

Local liaison was by Jules Easlea, who organised everything to do with the performers, both volunteers and professionals, including finding rehearsal premises and the headquarters for the procession shoot, St Catherine's Church, East Tilbury, used by kind permission of Canon Robinson. Jules also co-ordinated the press and publicity for the project.

Thurrock Council gave generous support to the project in kind, including the use of the Thameside Theatre for workshop rehearsals and the screening facilities for the premiere.

The Towers of Ilium

Synopsis

- The film opens with a shot of two squat towers of stone and brick, looking threatening under a grey sky. The camera pulls back and the towers are seen to be sited on the battlements of a fort, situated on a green hill beside a lake.
- The scene shifts to a wide panorama of the other side of the lake, early on a bright, sunlit morning. A young boy is riding along on a bike. He stops and looks out over an area where the otherwise long grass has been cut short, as if for some special purpose. Unaware of what this might be, the boy rides his bike onto the short grass and performs wheelies. He then rides off, along a pathway leading towards a tower on the horizon.
- The scene shifts to a group of stone batteries, similar to those in the first scene but constructed some distance from the fort, on a low hillside. From one of them, a man emerges. His head is shaved, and he wears the Crombie overcoat, jeans and Doctor Martens boots of a skinhead. The clothes are of good quality, however, and his manner is commanding. He is Achilles, the Greek champion, but he speaks as a man tired of fighting and questions what makes men turn to conflict.
- The scene shifts back to the pathway beside the lake. A procession is making its way slowly along, to the sound of a drum. The participants are carrying an object, shoulder high. The scene cuts to a close up of the advancing group. Now it can be seen that they are carrying a model tower, an iconic replica of the tower seen in the distance when the boy on the bike rides away. Like Achilles, the participants in the procession are dressed in skinhead clothing, but the logo of a helmet on their T shirts identifies them as Trojans.
- The group turns on to the area where the grass has been cut. As they do so, a young man's voice is heard on the soundtrack. "With a few mates, you walk along..." he says, quoting the words of a skinhead youth. He explains that the group likes people to look at them, that it shows respect and makes them feel proud. They also like to fight - "We fight all the time" - and that it is fighting which unites them. The model tower has been set down on a trestle table and two men emerge from the group, which has formed into a circle around the grass area.
- The men begin to wrestle. The group cheers them on. The fight is hard, but the atmosphere is good humoured. A second couple, a man and a woman, emerges from the circle. They begin to box. At first, the atmosphere is almost comic, but it begins to change as the man knocks the woman down. The upbeat ska music which accompanied the earlier fights fades as the third couple, again a man and a woman, square up to each other in silence and the combat, this time the ancient Greek martial art of Pankration, begins. The man yells as he hurls the woman to the ground but she brings him down with a kick. As they rise to their

feet, panting, to face off once again, we realise that this time the fight is in earnest, and it is not going to stop.

- The scene shifts back to the batteries on the hillside. Achilles, sitting inside one of them, questions this lust for fighting "On and on, no end". For the fighters, he suggests, there will be no thanks, only death, when the last breath "slips through a man's clenched teeth."
- The camera pans around the landscape, from the fort on the left, past the batteries on the hill, along the stream at its foot and finally stops facing the distant tower.
- Achilles is shown outside, in close up: over his shoulder, the top sections of the tower can be *seen*. As he speaks straight to camera, gunfire is heard in the background. He warns against becoming involved in war, which can have only one outcome.
- Achilles walks away, along the same path on which the young boy had cycled towards the distant tower. The gunfire continues.
- A close-up of the top of the tower shows a small opening in its surface, from which a flame starts to flicker.
- A second close-up shows the inside of the top of the tower, where more flames begin to break out.
- The camera pulls back to a long shot. The whole tower can now be seen at the centre of the screen, with flames beginning to emerge from its topmost section.
- The flames take hold, bursting into a great plume of fire.
- As the tower burns, ska music, now no longer upbeat but dark and menacing, begins. A voice sings of "Respect", which the young skinhead had so desired. As Achilles predicted, however, trying to gain respect by fighting has led to only one end - the destruction of the "sturdy citadel" built by society to protect itself.
- As the flames die down, the drifting smoke gives way to a close up of a young boy's face. It is the boy who rode his bike along the procession route, around the fighting arena and finally along the path which led to the tower. Now standing in the same pose as Achilles when he issued his final warning about the inevitable destruction brought by war, the tower is visible over the boy's shoulder. We have witnessed its destruction by fire, but now, it seems, it has risen again. As the boy gazes directly at us, blinking a little in the bright morning light, we can only wonder if he is destined to share the same fate as those ancient warriors and their more modern counterparts.

The end

A Thousand Ships Production 2013

Funded by Arts Council England

Financially supported by the Towers Supporters Group

With thanks to Thurrock Council

The Towers of Ilium Credits

Written, produced and directed by
Lynn MacRitchie

Director of Photography

Richard Carlton

Movement Director

Charlie Morgan

Costume Designer

Lesley Ford

Performance Co-ordinator

Jules Easlea

Tower model design

Steve Taylor

Pyrotechnic design

John Kennett

Sound recordist

Len Usselman

Music composed by

Charlie Skelton

Mark Elliott

Video editing and post production

Michael Cheetham

Cast

Boy on bike

Rcilly Tripp

Achilles

Mark Bell

Voiceover

William Uden

Tilbury Trojans:

Gul Badan

Maggie Hatch

Steve Hatch

Brian Last

Stephen Mazza

Mike Ostler

Christopher B Page

Oriana Jade Page

Jeff Prescott

Julie Rawson

Trevor Rawson

Bob Tilbury

Tina Tripp

Denise Wakeling

Bradley Wadwell

Cara Wadwell

Michelle Wadwell

Paul Wadwell

Trojan fighters:

Victoria Franks

Patrick Hancock

Matthew Johnson

Leanne Lester

William Uden

James Weal

Camera team

Focus pullers

Rupert Hornstein

Tristan Haley

Camera assistants

Nicky Vegas

Matthew Tregonin

Special effects team

Tower model construction
Steve Taylor
Jasmine Aidi
Art Hewitt

Pyrotechnic rigging
John Kennett
Glen Downs

Photographer
Tina Carter

Costume team:

Costume assistants
Janice Hall
Carlotta Zeitelhack

Costume makers

Tina Arnett
Carol Bennett
Alexandra Block
Linsey Block
Amanda Game

Jane Hainsborough
Margaret Hall
Caprice Joseph
Lesley Rob
Wendy Sawings

Jenny Sawings
Jacqueline Tongue
Amber Tongue

Musicians

Charlie Skelton
Mark Elliot
Chas Sludden

Phil Burdett
Roy Mette

Recorded and mastered at EMP Studio

With thanks to: Mark Allinson, Jonathan Catton, Sean Dupont, Gabrielle Foster-Still, Gill Hedley, Simon Hunt, Ray Reeves, Canon Paul Robinson, Steve Starr, Mick White, East 15 Acting School Southend, Royal Opera House Production Barn Purfleet, St Catherine's Church East Tilbury, Thurrock Council.

Filmed on location in Coalhouse Fort Park, East Tilbury.

Financially supported by: Arts Council England The Tower Supporters Group

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