

***Mr Burton* and Accessibility to the Arts in Wales**

Joshua Jones (he/him) is a queer, disabled writer from Llanelli. *Local Fires*, his first work of fiction, was shortlisted for the Dylan Thomas Prize & Polari First Book Prize.

The steelworks dominate the lives — and skyline — of Port Talbot’s residents, and yet, it’s a shadow of its former self. The decades of managed decline and Britain’s lack of future-proofing industry, and jobs, means there is an epidemic-level lack of opportunity for today’s youth in Wales. This wasn’t always the case — Welsh steel boomed during and after both World Wars, massively contributing to the rebuilding of housing, transport and infrastructure. Before Thatcher, before neo-liberalism, miners and steelworkers could be in a job for life that would provide for their families.

Mr Burton opens with sounds of a ticking clock, kettle whistle, and a news report of a German aircraft raid over Britain. Just two and a half minutes in viewers receive the first look at Port Talbot; in 1942, of a church surrounded by lush greenery, with the smouldering steelworks pumping grey plumes of smoke into the sky. Industry and the significance of work is prevalent in almost every scene.

Richard Burton was born Richard Jenkins Jr. in Pontrhydyfen, on November 10th, 1925, just 15 minutes on the bus north of Port Talbot. He was taken in by his sister Cecilia in Talbach, a suburb on the east side of the town, shortly after the death of his mother, Edith Maude Jenkins, when he was only two years old. In the film we first see Burton (Harry Lawtey) as a quick-witted schoolboy, complaining about homework, but also watching cinema with the same rapt attention he gives to reading. He’s a worthy rugby player but can also memorise Shakespearean verse by heart.

Port Talbot was where he went to school — and almost didn’t complete his studies due to his family’s financial pressures. Port Talbot is where he played rugby, where he learned to drink, worked his first jobs, and where he was tutored by Phillip Burton (Toby Jones) — radio and theatre producer, local schoolteacher, also mentor and drama coach to the young Richard. Later in life he may have left Port Talbot for the streets of London, New York and the film sets of Los Angeles, but this was his home, the place that made him.

How important local cinema and theatre was to those too young, too old, or otherwise unable to join the war effort abroad, “in the absence of theatre” (as quoted by Phillip Burton in the film), is expressed excellently. Whether as a morale-boosting exercise or a viable community space, entertainment and propaganda are interchangeable. In one scene where Phillip clocks Richard a few rows in front, is an older woman to the left of the image, with her knitting in her lap. Richard had his first forays into acting in these local spaces, including an acting group at the YMCA, and minor roles such as in George Bernard Shaw’s *Pygmalion*, a school production directed by Phillip.

In the film a familiar battle presents itself, one that many young, working-class creatives face; the desire to make something of themselves, which very often means leaving home. Amongst the pull and demands of home and family expectations, the need to get a job and begin

providing, is the very real desire to create and express oneself. Even now the arts can be seen as a lucrative career path. Burton's father was a drunk, Elfed, a miner, hardworking and proud as so many coal workers — and today's industry workers — are. Yet it was from within his uncle-in-law's home that the pressure to quit school and begin work was felt.

Alongside this very real territory is the expectation of young Welsh, working-class people to cast off both their Welshness and class if they have any ambition of making it in the arts. Phillip teaches Richard how to speak "properly" ('here' instead of 'yer', the correct pronunciation of 'gate') and Ma Smith, Phillip's landlady, teaches Richard how to correctly eat with a spoon — by bringing the spoon to his mouth rather than the other way round. In all this, there's a tender scene where Elfed reminds Richard that he, as a miner, knows his place in the world, and the aspiring actor should never lose sight of who he is.

Richard Burton was made for greater things than coal and steel, that much is true. He could have easily "fallen into place" like so many of his fellow Welshmen, after serving in the RAF, and at a time where Welsh steel and coal had its golden days in the war years. Richard Burton's film career gave back to Wales just as mining did, because he had access to education and mentorship as a young, ambitious actor. How many Richard Burtons will slip under the radar if the future of Welsh art, film and music isn't secured?

The proposed closure of Cardiff University's School of Music is one example of the growing inaccessibility to arts education. Cuts to humanities and arts course is felt moreso by students from underrepresented backgrounds — therefore having a knock-on effect on Welsh story-making, and preservation of lived experiences in cinema and the arts. What *Mr Burton* highlights is the genuine importance of arts education and experienced, spirited teachers to mentor working-class creatives. Wales is rich with the latter, but there is a growing concern for the future of the arts and working-class perspectives in Wales.

[Mr Burton](#) is coming to cinemas across the UK from 4th April 2025, distributed by [Icon Film Distribution](#).

This article was commissioned by Film Hub Wales as part of our Made in Wales strategy, which celebrates films with Welsh connections, thanks to funding from Creative Wales and the National Lottery via the BFI.