

'Fire in the Night' reviewed by Gilda Williams for *Sight & Sound*, August 2013

United Kingdom 2013

Director: Anthony Wonke

Would you prefer to die by 1) being burnt alive by a 700°C fireball; 2) plunging 115 feet into the dark North Sea, where you will probably freeze and drown; 3) inhaling a toxic, boiling mix of oil fumes and gas; or 4) having red-hot metal scaffolding, falling from a collapsing 143,000-tonne oil-rig, crush you to pieces? Many of the survivors of the Piper Alpha oil-rig disaster interviewed in *Fire in the Night* faced that harrowing split-second decision: which imminent death seemed least painful? In recounting the terror, guilt and trauma of that night 25 years ago, when a routine maintenance operation sparked an explosion that escalated into a flaming two-hour deathtrap, witnesses are remarkably composed. They describe in detail the onboard confusion that delayed their evacuation, and how the fire grew so large and hot that rescue boats and helicopters could not attempt approach. A blueprint cross-section tracing the men's final desperate moves through the doomed rig -- uncomfortably reminiscent of the moving-dot monster-tracker in *Alien* - effectively communicates how a random guess whether to head right or left down one of the rig's smoke-filled hallways spelt safety for a few, and an excruciating death for most.

From the copious archive material gathered here, it seems that the Piper Alpha -- the first platform of its kind, steadily pumping out oil and gas from the bottom of the sea -- was an accident-on-stilts waiting to happen. Pre-disaster footage shows brave rig-men ducking to narrowly avoid swinging hunks of machinery, or giant waves crashing over barely protected decks. At first, director Anthony Wonke seems oddly fascinated by the strange beauty of the disaster, opening with a stream of evocative archive stills that show the glowing heart of the burning rig against the blue-black sea and purple sky, or immense shape-shifting mountains of billowing smoke that look positively sublime. But his focus quickly shifts to the survivors themselves and their blow-by-blow accounts of the inferno they somehow escaped while their colleagues perished.

The occasional arty touch -- a brief operatic soundtrack, slightly overacted reconstructions, the hallucinatory image of a watery bride as a survivor explains that a promise to his daughter to provide her dream wedding pushed him to survive -- can jar with the mostly down-to-earth interviews. But Wonke is a generous interviewer, giving each man the time to tell his tale, and he mostly avoids upstaging their words with filmcraft.

A quick internet search reveals how much dirt Wonke chose not to dig up, such as the fatal design flaw whereby all the rescue boats were concentrated in a single area virtually inaccessible to the men because of the fire's location. Although the uneasy trade-off between safety and profit is briefly introduced, and our inevitable conclusion is that the 226 men on board served as boiler-suited canaries testing the gas-laced corridors of the North Sea oil trade, Wonke decided not to produce a grim tale of capitalist realism but to offer instead a dignified commemoration to the crew. The disaster's after-effects were also devastating, as traumatised survivors -- many severely burned -- struggled to return to normality. One particularly miraculous survivor, who came out alive despite not knowing even how to swim, admits that he turned to heavy drinking in the wake of the wreck, and was only redeemed when chosen to be sculpted as the central figure in a monument commemorating the accident, now standing in an Aberdeen city park.

That artwork seems to parallel the aims of Wonke's film: to heal and memorialise, not reopen old wounds. In the final scenes, Wonke films the interviewees as they watch on an iPad the same pre-wreck footage that we've just witnessed, often showing smiling workers making the best of a tough job. Expressions of relief, nostalgia and even happiness momentarily cut across the survivors' faces as they remember lost friends. Wonke has attempted here mostly to offer the heroic survivors some solace and to pay tribute to the victims, and in this he abundantly triumphs.

Credits and Synopsis

Producer Anthony Wonke

Based on the book by Stephen McGinty

Director of Photography Mike Eley

Film Editor Steve Ellis

Art Director Tayyaba Irtizaali

Composer Andrew Phillips

Sound Recordist Luke Wheaton
@STV Productions Ltd and Berriff McGinty Films Ltd
Production Companies STV Productions & Berriff McGinty Films In association with Creative Scotland STV
Productions & Berriff McGinty Films for BBC Scotland
Executive Producers Alan Clements Michael McAvoy
In Colour [1.78:1]
Distributor Soda Pictures

A documentary about the worst ever offshore oil-rig accident, the Piper Alpha disaster off the coast of Scotland, where on 6 July 1988 a single gas explosion grew into a vast fire that took the lives of 167 men and left just 61 survivors. Archive footage, reconstructions and testimonies (conducted primarily with rig-workers and a couple of rescuers) document the two hours aboard the burning rig and its aftermath. A post-accident inquiry resulted in 106 recommendations, all taken on by the oil industry, which have improved rig-safety records ever since.

Horror at sea: 'Fire in the Night'