



Stockbridge Community Cinema

Programme Notes 20 March 2025

The Ballad of Wallis Island

UK | 2025 | 100 min | Cert 12A

Director: James Griffiths

Screenplay: Tom Basden, Tim Key

Starring: Tim Key, Tom Basden,
Carey Mulligan



The Ballad of Wallis Island is a quietly captivating British drama that blends humour, melancholy, and music into a story about reconnection, regret, and the fragile hope of second chances. Expanding on the award-winning 2007 short *The One and Only* Herb McGwyer Plays Wallis Island, the feature reunites the original creative team to explore what happens when two people with a shared past are brought together in the most unlikely of circumstances. The result is a film that feels intimate yet expansive, modest in scale but rich in emotional detail, and deeply attuned to the rhythms of human relationships.

At its heart, the film follows a once-promising folk duo who have long since gone their separate ways. Years earlier, they were partners in both music and life, performing songs that carried the promise of a future they never quite reached. Time, disappointment, and unspoken hurts have left them estranged, each carrying their own version of what went wrong. Their lives now look very different from the ones they imagined in their youth. The creative spark that once defined them has dimmed, replaced by the quieter routines of adulthood and the lingering ache of unfinished business.

Their unexpected reunion begins with an unusual offer: an eccentric lottery winner, living in self-imposed isolation on the

remote Wallis Island, wants to pay them handsomely to perform a private gig. The fee is too generous to ignore, even if the emotional cost is less straightforward. Reluctantly, they agree, setting the stage for a journey that forces them to confront the past they've avoided for years.

The island itself becomes a central presence in the film — not merely a backdrop, but a character in its own right. Rugged, windswept, and hauntingly beautiful, Wallis Island is a place where time seems to stretch and fold, where the outside world feels distant and the inner world grows louder. The cinematography captures this atmosphere with striking clarity: the shifting light, the restless sea, the quiet corners of the island's landscape all mirror the emotional terrain the characters must navigate. It's a setting that invites reflection, and the film uses it to create a sense of suspended reality, as though the characters have stepped into a space where old wounds can finally be examined.

As the duo settle into their temporary island home, the awkwardness of their reunion is palpable. Their conversations are halting, their rehearsals tentative, and their shared history hangs in the air like an unfinished chord. Yet beneath the discomfort lies something more tender — a recognition of the bond they once shared, and perhaps a curiosity about whether it might still exist.

The film excels in these small, understated moments: a glance that lingers too long, a half-finished sentence, a familiar melody that stirs something neither of them is ready to name.

Music plays a vital role throughout the film, not only as a plot device but as an emotional language. The songs they once performed together carry memories of who they were, what they hoped for, and how they lost their way. Rehearsing these pieces forces them to confront the gap between past and present, and the film uses these musical interludes to reveal what words cannot. The performances are understated and sincere, allowing the music to act as a bridge between the characters' guarded exteriors and their deeper, unspoken feelings.

The film's tone is one of gentle melancholy, but it is far from bleak. There is humour woven throughout — sometimes wry, sometimes awkward, sometimes unexpectedly warm. The eccentric island host adds a layer of unpredictability, his quirks and earnestness providing both comic relief and emotional grounding. His presence highlights the film's interest in the ways people seek connection, even when they don't quite know how to ask for it.

What makes *The Ballad of Wallis Island* particularly resonant is its refusal to rush its characters toward resolution. Instead, it allows them the space to sit with their discomfort, to revisit old memories, and to acknowledge the ways they have changed. The film understands that reconciliation — whether romantic, creative, or simply human — is rarely neat or straightforward. It is a process of listening, of recognising past mistakes, and of deciding whether the future might hold something worth rebuilding.

The performances at the centre of the film are quietly powerful. The leads bring a lived-in authenticity to their roles, conveying years of shared history through subtle gestures and understated dialogue.

Their chemistry is complex — affectionate, strained, familiar, and uncertain all at once — and it gives the film its emotional depth. They feel like people who once knew each other intimately, who still carry the imprint of that closeness, and who are unsure whether reopening old doors will lead to healing or further hurt.

Visually, the film is a pleasure to watch. The Welsh coastal setting is captured with a painterly eye, its shifting weather and rugged beauty lending the story a sense of place that is both grounding and evocative. The cinematography favours natural light, quiet compositions, and moments of stillness, allowing the landscape to echo the characters' emotional states. It's a film that invites the audience to slow down, to observe, and to appreciate the subtle interplay between environment and emotion.

Ultimately, *The Ballad of Wallis Island* is a story about the possibility of renewal — not in a grand, transformative sense, but in the small, human way that life sometimes offers us a chance to revisit what we left behind. It's about the courage to face old wounds, the tenderness of shared memories, and the quiet hope that creativity and connection can be rediscovered. The film doesn't promise easy answers, but it offers something more honest: the recognition that relationships evolve, that people change, and that sometimes the past can be a doorway rather than a weight.

Gentle, thoughtful, and beautifully observed, *The Ballad of Wallis Island* is a film that lingers. It invites viewers to reflect on their own histories, their own unfinished conversations, and the music — literal or metaphorical — that still echoes from earlier chapters of life. For audiences who appreciate character-driven storytelling with emotional nuance and a strong sense of place, this is a quietly affecting gem.