

Margate Exodus, a film collaboration between Artangel and Penny Woolcock, puts the desolate British seaside town in a new perspective. It's now a magnet for artistic and architectural exploration, says *Peter Kelly*

For 40 years the British seaside has been viewed as a symbol of decline. From John Osborne's *Sixties'* play *The Entertainer* to Morrissey dragging John Betjeman's Slough to the coast in *Every Day is Like Sunday*, seaside towns have stood for a loss of British pride and identity.

According to *Margate Exodus*, a collaboration between art collective Artangel and filmmaker Penny Woolcock, this is changing dramatically. The piece was commissioned by Artangel but conceived by Woolcock, based on her idea of retelling the Bible story of the Exodus, drawing parallels with the current issue of immigration. *Exodus Day* itself, at the end of September, was a series of set-piece events involving Margate folk. Much of it will form part of Woolcock's film to be screened on Channel 4 next year.

The film's plot centres on an unscrupulous politician, Pharaoh Mann, who gains power through an anti-immigrant policy, and once elected embarks on a campaign of rounding up outsiders, dissidents and other 'undesirables' who are penned inside a disused fairground called Dreamland. Ultimately Mann is rejected by the local population, which – as a collective expression of will – builds and burns an enormous

human figure made of rubbish from their homes.

Much has been made of *Exodus Day* as a piece of coherent public art – the uneasy conflict between producing a narrative film and engaging the general population of Margate. As Maddy Costa commented in *The Guardian*: 'It is not designed as a piece of integrated street theatre, so audiences have no narrative to follow, no sense of how each scene fits in with Woolcock's story.' Even the burning of Antony Gormley's *Waste Man*, by far the most spectacular and unifying moment of the day, felt like a self-contained artwork uncomfortably dropped into an unclear narrative.

With its defiant, open hand thrusting into the air and strange features made from old wooden beds, tables and chairs, the remarkable structure, designed by Gormley with structural engineering firm Elliot Wood, captured the imagination partly because it was dramatic without being overtly didactic.

Margate Exodus has much more significance, though, than just one day. Firstly, it marks another impressive stage in Artangel's 20-year development into an internationally significant force in art. Having been behind some of the most successful pieces of British public art in the



past two decades, including Rachel Whiteread's *House*, this is its most ambitious work to date. It has been in development for four years and brings together performance, sculpture, music and the involvement of thousands of local residents.

More broadly, *Exodus* revealed that seaside towns are no longer seen as just Britain's atrophying limbs. It presents them as a battleground between an old and a new world. As Gormley says: 'Margate is a place where many immigrants are temporarily housed in these first-world seaside hotels. The combination of a declining holiday destination for the British public, and it being replaced by an identity where globalisation and mass population movement is being felt, make it a very interesting place.' A similar sense of this conflict is depicted in the recent film *Children of Men*, where Bexhill-on-Sea is the setting for a future mass uprising and exodus.

This is the most extreme element of a more widespread re-evaluation of the coast that is less dramatic but equally significant. Peter Murray, who commissioned Thomas Heatherwick's *East Beach Cafe* (*Blueprint* November),

Above: The Waste Man, created by Anthony Gormley and engineering firm Elliot Wood, was dramatic without being overtly didactic

Below left: The populus of Margate rebels against anti-immigrant policies in Woolcock's film

in Littlehampton, with his wife Jane Wood, says: 'The only reason seaside towns declined is because everyone bugged off to the Costa Brava.' Now, as budget flights abroad are seen as environmentally unsustainable, people will have to see the British coast as a destination once more. They are also unique places for architects and artists to work. 'Because of a long-term lack of investment these places are preserved in aspic, so they are actually interesting places to look at,' says Murray.

In the North, *Urban Splash* is using this as the basis for its redevelopment work in Morecambe – rescuing the Midland Hotel, a derelict art deco building overlooking the bay. Murray is now organising a conference on seaside architecture for March 2007, examining developments such as those in Morecambe, which have been made since CABE's *Shifting Sands* report in 2003.

When *Margate Exodus* is screened, Woolcock's story will become clear, and *Exodus Day* itself will just be a memory for Margate's residents. What is already certain, though, is that a new narrative for the British seaside has arrived.

