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Review

## Ritz-Barr, Stephen (2017): *Classics in Miniature – Joan of Arc. (Film)*<sup>1</sup>

**Leslie Burton**

1. <https://doi.org/10.33178/scenario.13.1.9> – Note that all views and opinions in this book review are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the SCENARIO editors.

The story of Joan of Arc has been told in every possible medium for over 600 years, and Stephen Ritz-Barr's latest instalment *Classics in Miniature*, a series of short films featuring marionettes, is one of the latest takes on the legend. His previous projects present clear dramaturgical justification for the use of puppets; *Faust*<sup>2</sup> (2008) has been a staple story in the repertoire of European puppet theatre for centuries, and so presents the story in a traditional format, while *Quixote*<sup>3</sup> (2010) features a famous scene in which the Don single-handedly massacres an army of marionettes, and so takes a satisfying meta-theatrical turn as the central puppet himself encounters puppetry. The justification for the use of puppets in *The Legend of Joan of Arc* (2019) is less direct. While stories of saints' lives have been told through puppetry since at least the Middle Ages in Europe, and while it can certainly be argued that Joan's character is a metaphorical puppet, under the control of god, king, and country, the piece relies more heavily on the possibilities afforded by *film*, and the cinematography of Philip Klucsarits, than the possibilities afforded by puppetry. The framing, editing and visual effects are carefully crafted, at times cohering beautifully with the puppets, as when the camera focuses, chillingly, on the motionless features of Joan's Inquisitors during her execution. More often, however, the film seems to rely on these things to smooth over the limitations inherent in marionette theatre rather than highlighting the strengths, or exploring the potentials, of the medium. The question remains, throughout the film: why use puppetry to tell this story?

It is clear from the production notes (available at [www.classicsinminiature.com](http://www.classicsinminiature.com)) that Ritz-Barr had determined to portray a female protagonist in his third film before considering Joan of Arc in particular. Because *Faust* and *Quixote* both feature male protagonists, the intention to create balance by focusing on a female character in his third major project is laudable, and the team is to be

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<sup>2</sup>Reviewed in Scenario II/2: <http://publish.ucc.ie/scenario/2008/02/beug/09/en>.

<sup>3</sup>Reviewed in Scenario IV/2: <http://research.ucc.ie/scenario/2010/02/boyd/05/en>.

commended for producing a multifaceted, strong, sympathetic, fiery heroine whose characterization does justice to the legendary figure upon whom she is based. Ritz-Barr's team spent five years researching Joan, ultimately deciding to draw their story primarily from Mark Twain's last complete novel, *Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc* (1896). Joan had become a popular character in the English-speaking world in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, when Jules Michelet dedicated an entire volume of his seminal *Histoire de France* to her story. She appeared in works by everyone from Schiller to Dickinson, but Twain, in an effort to tell her story as faithfully as possible, spent many years researching Joan's life and portrayed her lovingly, almost reverently, in *Personal Recollections*. First appearing as a serial in *Harper's Magazine* in 1895, the novel was presented as a "translation" of the "memoirs" of a fictionalized Louis de Conte, Joan's page, who did indeed provide testimony at the hearing to clear her name 25 years after her execution. *The Legend of Joan of Arc*, following Twain's novel, is based on a three-act structure comprising Joan's early life in the French village of Domrémy during the Hundred Years' War, her ascent to the position of divinely-inspired army commander leading successful campaigns against the English, and her ultimate capture, trial, and execution by the French Inquisition.

This film, then, is quite self-consciously, a puppet adaptation of a speculative fiction novel taken largely from inexact recollections from the 15<sup>th</sup> century. It is the slipperiness of her reality, the combination of fact, fiction, and cultural projection, that has fueled her fame across the Western world since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and this film embraces the quality of magical realism that has collected like dust over her story through its many incarnations. Were it not for the humanity with which Ritz-Barr chose to portray her, it would make sense to suggest that the use of puppets emphasizes the way that Joan's humanity has been overtaken by her symbolic status. As it is, it certainly reifies the disconnect between anything resembling historical fact and the legend that we have inherited. Over the centuries, Joan has been a symbol of bravery, strength, purity, faith, and national pride; the women's suffrage movement in the UK used her image, and so became an icon for early feminism. As a figure with so much historical resonance, and about whose internal life relatively little is known, Joan's image has been coopted and invoked, 'puppeteered', to suit vastly different agendas. Something about seeing Joan as a literal puppet, an object in a drama, highlights the way history has treated her, and paradoxically works to restore some specificity to the symbol that is Joan of Arc.

The 25 intricate puppets, designed and handmade by Russian master craftsman Eugene Seregin, are marvels to watch. The painstaking attention to detail in these creations is matched in all of the film's design elements; each setting is based on actual locations in France in which Joan lived, fought, and died. String marionettes have a limited, and quite fluid, movement vocabulary, and the puppeteering here is at its finest in the subtle moments, in slight movements of the head and hands that foreground the innate expressiveness of Seregin's creations. The visibility of the puppets' strings and the quality of their motion adds to the fragility of the characters in such moments. However,

the action-heavy sequences in *The Legend of Joan of Arc* do suffer from a lack of sharp, dramatic movement. There is no sense of physical weight to the puppets or their actions, even with the occasional addition of rod-controls; everything moves lightly, trippingly even. This is most distracting in the battle sequences, in which the quick cuts and close-up shots recognizably mimic techniques from films featuring live actors. Because the ‘puppet-ness’ of the characters is so prominent, these moments are visually jarring, and they lean heavily on the music from composer Philip White for dramatic tension.

Some moments in the film are truly beautiful, however. One of these is at the very beginning, when we watch an elderly Louis waken, look up in awe, and see Ritz-Barr, as puppeteer, standing above him. The specificity of the puppet’s movement and the gentleness of Ritz-Barr’s handling are breathtaking to watch together. It might have been more satisfying if the filmmakers had played more with this conceit throughout, particularly given Joan’s connection to forces beyond herself. However, after the frame is set up, we are meant to accept the ‘reality’ of the puppet world for the duration of the film, until the moment of Joan’s execution, when human hands appear and gently pull her up and out of the set, into a bright light. Because Joan was burned at the stake, I wondered throughout whether the filmmakers would sacrifice such a beautiful marionette to flames as part of the film. As a puppeteer who has made marionettes and understands the amount of time and care that goes into the process, the idea of burning a marionette gave me pause (to say the least), but it seemed like an opportunity to play with the materiality of the puppets powerfully and effectively. The approach they ultimately chose to take is a respectful one that neither sensationalizes nor shies away from the reality of what took place.

Overall, *The Legend of Joan of Arc* provides an excellent introduction to one of the most enigmatic and compelling characters in modern history without pinning her to a particular cause or agenda. It presents key moments of Joan’s story in a series of well-paced dramatic beats, the storytelling showing a sense of integrity in both the history and the mythos of Joan of Arc. The dynamic camera work that treats the puppets like live actors is innovative, but does at times distract from the art of puppetry that is clearly so close to the team’s heart. It will be fascinating to watch the *Classics in Miniature* series grow and evolve, and to see what kind of influence it may have on the future of puppetry-on-film.

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