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Review

Classics in Miniature
Faust. A Film by Steven Ritz-Barr

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> *Die Faust-Idee.* – Eine kleine Nähterin wird verführt und unglücklich gemacht; ein großer Gelehrter aller vier Fakultäten ist der Übeltäter. Das kann doch nicht mit rechten Dingen zugegangen sein? Nein, gewiß nicht! Ohne die Beihilfe des leibhaftigen Teufels hätte es der große Gelehrte nicht zustande gebracht. - Sollte dies wirklich der größte deutsche "tragische Gedanke" sein, wie man unter Deutschen sagen hört?
> Friedrich Nietzsche: Menschliches, allzu Menschliches
>
> *The Faust-Idea*. – A little seamstress is seduced and made wretched. A great scholar of all four disciplines is the culprit. Surely this could not have happened under ordinary circumstances? No, certainly not! Without the assistance of the devil incarnate the great scholar would never have pulled this off. – Could this really be the greatest German "tragic idea", as one can hear among Germans?
> Friedrich Nietzsche, Human all too Human

A reviewer of Ritz-Barr's 'Faust' might be forgiven for thinking that this 'Faust in miniature' production sets out to support Nietzsche's profoundly cynical comment on Goethe's 'Faust'.

To be sure, the team of puppeteer, filmmaker and composer of the score have created a strong and versatile medium for their ambitious project; to produce 'classics in miniature' – versions of works of world literature, including 'Don Quixote', 'Orlando Furioso' and 'Moby Dick'. Their 'Faust' is the first completed production in the series, released this year on video. (For more information and orders see www.classicsinminiature.com) The achievement is to be commended and further productions should be encouraged.

There are strong and memorable scenes in this film, performed by the marionettes and imaginatively filmed and staged. For example: Faust dancing a waltz with the devil in his study, (is this the confirmation of the deal?), or Faust and Mephisto sitting on a roof by moonlight, like two randy tom-cats ogling the girls below, or Faust's 'angst' dream with the hand of the puppeteer intervening and shaking him vigorously. This device of breaking the illusion is used again at the end when Gretchen, her baby and Faust have died in the snow and are

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picked up and wiped off by this 'deus ex machina' hand. (How to read this last scene is another matter.)

Recognizing the accomplishments of this first production and the potential of the project as a whole, some critical and, hopefully, constructive comments should be worthwhile:

The decision to dispense with dialogue or voice-over or, perhaps, a narrator figure, poses an important difficulty. In order to get the story across which, in the case of Goethe's 'Faust' is certainly not a simple task, the score, as versatile and inventive as it is, with its use of the 'leitmotiv' for the different characters and moods, goes only so far in clarifying the plot. One look at a good silent film will confirm the necessity of tight sequencing of shots in order to achieve narrative cohesion and clarity. The device of 'intertexts' is often used in silent films to help explain what's going on. In this 'Faust' film the few rather difficult quotes from Goethe that appear in between scenes do not, in my view, serve this function well, particularly not in their English or French translation. It might be an interesting and, perhaps, useful experiment to show this film to an unprepared class of high-school or university students and ask them to tell the story, or, even to ask them to write the dialogue of – say – the pact scene.

According to the text on the video case, "this film is a visual interpretation inspired by Goethe's Faust part one." It would be possible to produce a visual interpretation of 'Faust I' or to make a film inspired by 'Faust I'. Either would, of course, be justified; but an interpretation inspired by Faust suggests a fuzzy concept.

It is also questionable whether the team were well advised to base their work on Goethe's play, given that there are several original puppet plays from the earliest phase of the Faust reception which follows the publication of the 'HISTORIA von D. Johann Fausten. . . ' in 1578. It is evident from information on the above website that Barr and his team were aware of the puppet-tradition of 'Faust'; but it is not clear that they made good use of it. Those old puppeteers had a very solid understanding of their craft and its possibilities. They needed to attract and hold on to their audiences in order to make a living. Not surprisingly they introduced the arch puppet figure of 'Hanswurst' into the Faust play for baudy amusement and comic relief in the tragic story.

But whatever version of 'Faust' might have been chosen as 'pretext' for a 'classic in miniature' film, the fable hinges on two fundamental issues, closely linked to each other: firstly the deal or pact with the devil, its motivation and, most importantly, its conditions, and, secondly, the question of Faust's damnation or salvation at the end. Neither of these seems to be presented here with the necessary clarity and plausibility. An old lecher, lusting for a blond girl is insufficient cause for a pact with the devil; and no woman of any kind played a role in Goethe's pact scene. While it has to be said that attempts are made in this film to convey the single most important aspect of the Faust figure, his insatiable thirst for knowledge, the deal is only struck here, when Mephisto shows and, presumably, promises him Gretchen.

As regards the question of Faust's damnation, Goethe's 'Faust I' does, of

course, offer no solution at all. Goethe left that decision to the end of Part II, finished some thirty years later. The blurb on the cover explains that "in the end, in the face of his failure to love, he transcends his worldly desires to achieve immortality." Whatever this statement is supposed to mean, it certainly suggests, as does the actual ending of the film, that the devil has lost interest in Faust completely. Are we to assume he helped Faust in seducing Gretchen out of the goodness, or perhaps the badness of his heart? How on earth can the evil-doer, responsible for Gretchen's and her child's death in abject misery, simply transcend his desires to achieve immortality? Another 'headline' on the video cover, "How do you renegotiate a deal with the devil?" is not helpful either. There is no evidence of any such renegotiation in the film, and as far as I know the devil, he is not one to go back on his deals!

The director/cinematographer faces another important decision: Is he making a film with marionettes instead of human actors, or a recording of a puppet play on film? The evidence points to the former, but, nevertheless, this issue is worth thinking about. In this film, some of the longer shots, uninterrupted by frequent cuts, where the marionettes can work their magic, are for me among the strongest. As someone who spent several days on the set of the famous Faust film with Gustav Gründgens, I can report that there were passionate arguments between the director and the actors about the challenges posed by trying to transport a highly successful theater production into the medium of film. One side argued strenuously for an abstemious camera which would simply record the full stage and let the play get on with it. Others wanted to fully embrace and exploit the medium film with all its possibilities of emphasis, of directing attention through zoom, close up and lighting, not to mention the all but limitless potential for special effects. The result was a compromise, not always a happy one.

Finally, the question of the audiences envisaged for the project 'classics in miniature' might be addressed:

Since it is in the nature of puppet theater to appeal to virtually all ages, the scope for this project is great. Simplifying without trivializing is, of course, no easy task but the immense success of 'The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (abridged)' written and performed for over nine years in London by the Reduced Shakespeare Company shows what is possible.

More specifically though, the educational potential of this project must be emphazised. In the context of language and cultural studies and in particular in language and theater studies, short dramatizations of seminal works of literature through the medium of puppetry could be used in a variety of ways; far more than could be mentioned here. The absence of spoken words could be an advantage in such contexts because these films could be used in just about any language environment. The absence of dialogue and verbal storytelling could be turned into tasks for the learners: Tell the story! Write the dialogue for this scene! Put into words what Faust is thinking while dancing with the devil! This could be done in the target language in foreign language courses.

It is the combination of the appeal of puppets and the openness of silent film

that makes this project particularly interesting and valuable for teachers and learners.

Vivant sequentes!

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