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Daniel Doronda

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Daniel Deronda (BBC1) and George Eliot: A Scandalous Life (BBC2) (November-December 2002)

The classic novel provides a tempting invitation for the contemporary film-maker: almost certainly it will have period costume, indoor amusements – preferably a dance, even better a ball – lavish, preferably country-house settings, consonant with outdoor amusements like a hunt or at least two or three riding sequences, and moral dilemmas which are often sexual and can be presented in modern terms – the only terms the viewing public is thought to accept. Then there is the plot, which can easily be altered or adjusted – modernized is the cosmetic word – to appeal to viewers who haven’t read the novel but like to be associated with its cultural ambience, and viewers who have read it but wish to experience this alternative mode and exercize their critical judgements at the same time.

Daniel Deronda the novel meets all the above criteria, and the adaptation opens with a gambling sequence, graduates to an archery meeting introduced by an overhead Busby Berkeley-type shot, then a ball, a ritual dance being sexual prelude in both. It is concerned with a search for identity, thus mirroring the current vogue for family investigating family, and has layers of morality and sexual coercion calculated to integrate George Eliot into twenty-first century viewing criteria. The deliberate historical setting is changed while retaining the period’s visual and cosmetic appeal. In the television film of Daniel Deronda George Eliot’s 1864-66 (with British Empire and European Nationalism references) becomes 1874 (what’s in a decade?), a gifted musician volunteers the fact that he is a Jew (in the novel he is multi-racial, ‘being a felicitous combination of the German, the Selave, and the Semite’), minor characters with plot importance disappear at the blink of a lens or the drop of a chapter, the Princess becomes the Contessa, and in the third of three episodes there is a rush to get everything in with excisions and explanations effectively making for incoherence. Did we really need a very clean and very brief Hand and Banner sequence of static irrelevance? Can anybody believe that George Eliot intended Sir Hugo Mallinger to be just ham and not a contextualized committee man of ‘splendidly null’ effect? George Eliot’s dialogue does not require adjustment or updating or, worst of all, filling in, as with the screen Grandcourt’s ‘It’s my turn now’ to the shockingly traumatized and hysterical Gwendolen, presumably about to be forced on their wedding night and certainly subjugated thereafter.

On the plus side of the adaptation is the sheer competence of colour, scene, and dramatic exchanges, with some creditable acting from Daniel (Hugh Dancy), Gwendolen (blessed with the convenient forename of Romola Garai), a fine Mirah (Jodhi May), and a non-operatic but menacing, minimally verbal Grandcourt (Hugh Bonneville), the latter occasionally upstaged by the nuances of the toadying Lush (David Bamber) or a convincingly anguished Lydia Glasher (Greta Scacchi). The first two episodes held together well and promised much in terms of crisp ongoing movement, but the deepening complexity which is the major part of George Eliot’s art was, like George Eliot, missing. There is a distinct irony in the fact that Mirah and Daniel, superbly directed and sensitively responsive, came over more fully as characters in the drama than they do in the novel. This may derive from the cutting (there was no full psychological integration of Gwendolen because early revealing sequences were excluded) made in the interests of dramatic immediacy, which were kinder to the Jewish sections than to
the indolent English ones (though I did wonder how long it would be before Mordecai coughed). The fact is that the novel is too big for the small screen, and too outreaching - and intellectually stringent - for director, screenwriter and actors to encompass, given limited screen time.

Running in tandem with Daniel Deronda is the mistitled George Eliot: A Scandalous Life, which employs the modern - and cosmetic - walking-talking technique of the serious documentary, with the curious choice of a brilliant actress (and witty author of Thank You for Having Me and How Was It for You?) as narrator: there is too a gratuitous chorus of over-dressed caricatures doubtless meant as a Grundyesque trio but in fact a misplaced, unhistorical embarrassment, and this did much to debase the factual and visual currency; there were other warts, like unchecked research, dislocated sequences and an unugly G. H. Lewes, but the whole was redeemed (that simple keyword to Daniel Deronda) by a performance of underplayed originality from Harriet Walter as Marian Evans. As far as we can know, she looked the part: more than that, much more, she had an inward realization, something approaching a complete transference of sympathy (perhaps empathy would be a better word) which made her movements and her silences as vivifying as her speech. She convinced on every level, in other words the translucent integrity of her personality told us, what the unironic title had lied to us about, that this was not a scandalous life, but a life of suffering, of irradiation through love, of artistic, intellectual and human growth, of weakness, uncertainty, inward questioning, admission and self-discovery. I thought back to Sheila Allen’s memorable one-woman performance for the small screen in a distant past, just as I thought back to the Daniel Deronda of thirty years ago, buried in the archives and kept under wraps by the BBC. Each was a distinguished artistic contribution to the medium in which the twentieth-century George Eliot had her visual life and creative being. Do we really need the gimmickry, the pandering to modernity - itself a degradation - the paraphernalia of contemporarily-correct titillation when we are presenting, in dramatic or allegedly biographical form, the works or life of a great writer? At the end of his interview with the Radio Times Andrew Davies, who wrote the screenplay of Daniel Deronda, says that he hopes it will “warm up” Eliot’s image. “She’s always been respected for long enough,” he says, adding fondly, respectfully, as if talking about a favourite aunt, “Now it’s time she was enjoyed.” Ignore the condescension, the botched or inadvertent pun and the cosy-coy interviewer’s stance. The fact is that George Eliot has always been read for her warmth, sympathy, deep and wise appreciation of human nature: her novels are tremulous with life and instinct with intellect; they embody the deep and timeless truths of sadness and joy, the gamut of experience in the medium she chose, which so clearly reflects the movements of mind and emotion in men and women. They elude ephemeral critical terminologies: located in time, they are timeless and unchangeable. A digital posterity will perhaps decide whether today’s pop-classic is an art form or a soap spin-off, and future critical perspectives will doubtless address the crises of the Rovers’ Return and those of, say, Offendene, Kew, and Genoa. George Eliot’s Daniel Deronda is in print: the video of Daniel Deronda will probably be available. You pays your money and you takes your choice, and one may send you to the other.

Graham Handley