

# Weak and weaker

## David Walsh reviews Hilary and Jackie and Gloria

David Walsh  
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Hilary and Jackie, *directed by Anand Tucker, screenplay by Frank Cottrell Boyce*; Gloria, *directed by Sidney Lumet, screenplay by Steve Antin*

*Hilary and Jackie* is a film about the relations between the remarkable British cellist Jacqueline du Pré (1945-87) and her sister, based on the 1997 book *A Genius in the Family* by Hilary and Piers du Pré.

Jacqueline's story is a tragic one. Endowed with an extraordinary musical gift, her active career lasted little more than a decade. Her signature piece was Elgar's Cello Concerto in E minor. In October 1973, at the age of 28, she was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis and died from the disease on Wall Street's "Black Monday," October 19, 1987.

The film shows Jackie (Emily Watson), born to an ordinary middle class British family, as a small girl driven by the need to compete with and eventually surpass in talent her sister Hilary (Rachel Griffiths). She is aware and makes her sister aware of her own "specialness" and Hilary's "ordinariness." Jackie is threatened when Hilary marries Kiffer Finzi (David Morrissey). In turn she marries the pianist Daniel Barenboim (James Frain) and theirs becomes a union much celebrated and commented upon in the media. After the first signs of illness and an instance of Barenboim's apparent insensitivity, she shows up on Hilary's doorstep in the country and demands to share her husband, to which her sister eventually accedes. The last part of the film traces her worsening condition as, unable to perform, she is confined to a wheelchair. She dies in Hilary's arms.

It's more interesting to talk about the real musician than this poorly conceived and poorly made film, which attempts to explain Jacqueline's genius as the result of a desire at a young age to supplant Hilary as her parents' favorite. Emily Watson and Rachel Griffiths are fine,

but the film is flat and weak. There's almost nothing to it.

I'm ill-equipped to judge, but commentators credit du Pré not only with a rare talent and love of music, but, if anything, an even rarer joyousness in performing it. Barenboim remarked, "Of all the great musicians I have ever met in my life, I have never encountered anyone for whom music was such a natural form of expression as it was for Jacqueline."

Du Pré had the opportunity to work and study with a number of the great cellists of the twentieth century, including Paul Tortelier, Pablo Casals and Mstislav Rostropovich, with whom she studied in Moscow from January to May in 1966. Her final examination at the Conservatory was conducted by Rostropovich, who remarked later that he had the feeling of having found someone who would continue his work. One critic notes: "Her time in Moscow was probably the summation of her self-doubt, faced by the incredibly rigorous Russian School, with talented virtuosi in abundance, not least Mischa Maisky, Natalia Gutman and David Geringas. At this time she writes home, 'Whether I can stand up to such an arduous life is another thing, and my technical limitations worry me a lot.' But all of Rostropovich's students were stunned by du Pré's emotional eloquence. Maisky describes 'the music flowing from her directly and spontaneously. One might say that some had a better technique ... but none of them possessed her quality of natural expression.'" This is high praise indeed.

Praise of another kind comes from her recording producer: "She was the ideal recording artist, undemanding, understanding of other people's problems and with no outbursts of what is called 'temperament.'... For the engineers she was the perfect artist who never complained, however long it took to

get the right sound through the microphones. For me, the all-too-brief six years in which we worked together are a golden memory of spontaneous, unaffected, joyous music-making."

After she could no longer play the cello, Jacqueline commented: "I find I adore words. Never having had to use them to any great extent, I am finding beautiful new things about speech I never knew existed. Recently I had to make a reading from the Old Testament for the Branch of the MS Society, of which I am a patron. I found that everything is the same as in a musical performance. The psychological emphasis, the structure and timing is all the same. I am also reading poetry for the first time in my life and I love it so much."

None of this is intended to counter the film's vision of Jacqueline as selfish and emotionally needy. (Although it has been noted that her behavior in regard to Hilary and her husband came after she had had premonitions of an eventually crippling and fatal illness and was experiencing some sort of a nervous collapse.) Such qualities can certainly exist with musical genius, and even overall generosity and kindness. My response to the supposedly shocking and "controversial" revelations about du Pré's personal life and failings is--so what? Nor do I care that *A Genius in the Family* may have been motivated by jealousy, self-pity or the desire, perhaps unconscious, to exact revenge on a powerful, perhaps overpowering sibling. The problem is that almost entirely missing from *Hilary and Jackie* is any sense of the *personal and intellectual depth* that must somehow be associated with genius, musical or otherwise. The brief reference above to her studies in the USSR, among members of "the incredibly rigorous Russian School," should alert anyone with the vaguest sense of musical history to what must have been her remarkable gifts and strength of character.

The different elements that must come together in precisely the right combination and form to produce genius or the potential basis for genius are, for all intents and purposes, impossible to trace with any exactitude. They involve too many subterranean processes at work. The film, however, abandons any attempt at an explanation whatsoever and simply waves its hand ineffectually at the problem. One has to find out on one's own, for example, that Jacqueline's mother was a fine pianist who taught at the Royal Academy in London and composed some pieces. One suspects that

the filmmaker, as in all things, takes the least line of resistance in presenting the family and background of Hilary and Jacqueline du Pré.

Sidney Lumet's *Gloria* is not really a weaker film, it simply has no elements, such as the life of a renowned musician, hovering around its margins to make it a subject interesting enough on which to spend any time. It is the story of a gangster's mistress (Sharon Stone), just out of prison. She rescues a seven-year-old boy from the clutches of her former boyfriend and cohorts, members of the Irish-American mafia, who have murdered the child's family. She discovers she has tender feelings, and so on.

The new film is loosely based on a work of the same name directed by John Cassavetes in 1980, starring Gena Rowlands. I always felt *Gloria* was one of Cassavetes' lesser efforts and this film is three times weaker than that one. Again, it is flat and insubstantial. And the acting is not the problem. Sharon Stone is obviously looking for serious things to do.

Lumet has been directing films for more than 40 years, including *Twelve Angry Men*, *Long Day's Journey into Night*, *The Pawnbroker*, *The Group*, *Bye Bye Braverman*, *Serpico*, *Dog Day Afternoon*, *Network*, *Prince of the City*, *The Verdict*, *Daniel and Q & A*.

Andrew Sarris may have been a little unkind when he wrote, years ago, "At its best, Lumet's direction is efficiently vehicular but pleasantly impersonal... Only his innate good taste saves him from utter mediocrity." Lumet's liberal and humanitarian outlook and artistic competency have produced certain memorable and even inspired moments in the past. What *Gloria* exudes more than anything else is exhaustion. Something has been worn away, by events perhaps, by disappointments. One senses that the filmmaker is simply going through the motions. Everyone is acting up a storm and almost nothing is going on.

It's risky to write off anyone who has ever done honest work. Let's hope something will occur to resuscitate Lumet's interest and talent.



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