

A comment on Zeffirelli's Tea with Mussolini

Tea with Mussolini, directed by Franco Zeffirelli, written by John Mortimer

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12 July 1999

Franco Zeffirelli's motives for creating *Tea With Mussolini* may have been decent ones, and this film has a talented cast of actors and is set in one of most beautiful and historic places in the world, among great and timeless works of art. Despite all that, it comes off as a sentimental and trite piece of work.

The film's time-frame extends from June 1935, when Benito Mussolini's fascist regime ruled in Italy, until 1944, when the northern Italian city of Florence is retaken by Allied troops. The central characters are a group of older émigré English women living there. They immerse themselves in the arts and cultural history of the historic city. One of this group, Mary, played by Joan Plowright, takes in a young illegitimate Italian boy (based on Zeffirelli as a child), Luca (Charlie Lucas), when his businessman father finds it inconvenient to reconcile the child's existence to his new wife. Mary is hired by Luca's father to help run his business and to teach the boy to become an "English gentleman." This aspect of the film is drawn from events in the director's own life.

Perhaps Zeffirelli wants to make amends for the disrespect he had as a youth for the haughty British spinsters of Florence, whom he called "Scorpioni" (the scorpions). Maybe he is presenting what he feels should have been the fate of these women, many of whom probably met a more ignoble end at the hands of the Italian fascists. More likely, his intent is to pay homage to these ladies, one of whom, Mary O'Neill, made a great impact on him as a child. In any case, *Tea With Mussolini* really doesn't do much of value for the rest of us. It suffers from a mawkish story-line and reflects Zeffirelli's own confused social outlook.

The period the film treats was an era of extreme

political crisis leading up to the war, but this all seems no more than a backdrop for the story. The viewer keeps expecting at any moment to be immersed in the horrible realities of the war. This never happens, because as it turns out this isn't really a film about World War II, at least in the way that it was experienced by masses of people. It is a personal fantasy about a relatively privileged stratum of society.

Zeffirelli has, in the past, employed the film medium to popularize classics of literature and music. His films include adaptations of operas such as *La Bohème*, *Cavalleria Rusticana*, *I Pagliacci*, *Turandot* and *La Traviata*. His 1967 version of Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* starred Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton. In his 1968 production of *Romeo and Juliet* he sought out young and unknown actors Leonard Whiting and Olivia Hussey to make the film appeal to youth, which it did with a large measure of success. His 1982 film production of Verdi's *La Traviata*, starring Teresa Stratas, harked back to the work he staged in 1958 in Dallas with the legendary Maria Callas. His 1990 production of *Hamlet*, starring Mel Gibson and Glenn Close, was an engaging while austere production of Shakespeare's dark work. In 1996 he released his adaptation of *Jane Eyre*.

He is less successful when he strays from productions of works by established artists like Puccini, Verdi and Shakespeare. *Tea With Mussolini* is a clear example. The film simple-mindedly counterposes the human passion for art to man's inhumanity to his fellow creatures in a rather banal statement on the relationship of art to society.

Despite their arrogance and bourgeois manner, the "Scorpioni" are portrayed by Zeffirelli as rising above

the level of the common Italians because of their adoration of art and culture. While the masses were swept into the boiling cauldron of politics and war, these ladies refused to be swayed from their passion for art. Their refusal to leave the country when the xenophobic fervor sweeping Italy made it unsafe for them to stay is presented as an act of heroism rather than a grossly stupid miscalculation. Their survival of the war is the triumph of humanity over itself, of the highest and noblest attributes of man over his most bestial. The film refers to “the world of art” as opposed to the “real” world of brutality and indifference. Life does not allow us to make such a separation.

It is rather a cheap shot at history, encouraging the viewer to embrace the Scorpioni's rather ignorant and limited view of World War II as just “some idiots who want to make war.”

Now that current events in the Balkans, just across the Adriatic from Italy, are showing that World War II did not solve the underlying tendencies which led to both world wars in this century, such a complacent historical outlook can only help to disarm anyone seeking the truth.



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