

ARTS

Arts Editor: Mark Greaves
Tel: 020 7448 3603
Fax: 020 7256 9728
E-mail: mark@catholicherald.co.uk



And When Did You Last See Your Father?, starring Jim Broadbent, left, and Colin Firth, is so understated you forget what is being stated in the first place

Excessive realism fails to move



And When Did You Last See Your Father?
12A CERT, 92 MINS

FILM REVIEW
Freddie Sayers

What do you do, as a critic, when you know something is perfectly good but you don't happen to enjoy it? This happened to me for *And When Did You Last See Your Father?*, the new film from director Amand Tucker, and, dear reader, I confess I thought about fibbing. It is a classy film, well written, very well acted; it is poignant and true and sad and all the rest of it, so it would have been very easy to sell it to you as a must-see; but I would have been neglecting my duty. The fact is that despite all its merits it left me quite unmoved, and rather than brush it under the carpet I owe it to you to try and understand why.

Based on the bestselling memoirs of Yorkshire poet and writer Blake Morrison, it is the history of a father-son relationship. Arthur Morrison (Jim Broadbent) is a well-to-do GP from the Yorkshire Dales who gets through life with charming bluster and a loose rela-

tionship with the truth. To his young son Blake (Bradley Johnson), this is the sign of a true hero – the opening scene is filled with all the exuberance of childhood, as the doctor drives his young family down the wrong lane, past five miles of traffic, waving a stethoscope and shouting: "I'm a doctor! I'm a doctor!" Aged 10, however, in a seminal moment, he discovers his father in the back of a car with his mother's sister, Auntie Beatty, and nothing is quite the same again.

Fast forward to Blake (Matthew Beard) as a skinny, intellectual teenager, going to study literature instead of medicine and lusting after the housemaid. By this time his father has become a hate figure – seen as insensitive and fraudulent, and unforgivably unfaithful to Blake's beloved, downtrodden mother (Julie Stevenson). There is anger, but still great warmth as Arthur delights in provoking him – forcing his teenage son to camp in a stream to test his new waterproof sleeping bags, teaching him to drive on a deserted beach, substituting whisky for beer in his glass while on holiday in Blackpool.

Fast forward once again to the present day, and Blake is a successful writer with two children and a sophisticated wife. He is also unlikely, stuck-up, depressed, uncommunicative – and so a perfect part for Colin Firth. We begin and end with the news that his father is dying of cancer – news that takes Blake home and, through flashbacks, across his life as he tries to mend bridges with Arthur and "put

things in order". The story is totally convincing. It is understated British drama which doesn't appear hammy for a moment. All three Blakes are good (particularly teenage Matthew Beard), and Jim Broadbent is solid as ever. The dynamic of the relationship is also utterly believable – the unspoken hurt, the paralysis that Blake feels when addressing the past, his father's reluctance to go over it. And it is sad to watch the gradual diminishing of such a big life – the question of the title is the question asked at a funeral, too.

Blake is unlikeable, stuck-up, depressed and uncommunicative – so perfect for Colin Firth

which Blake's answer ("When did I really see him, in all the fullness of his being?") is: "A long time ago."

So why was I not moved? First – and I never thought I'd say this – I think it is too realistic. The big movie, father and son, Oscar-winning, tears and shouting, thrashing-it-out scene never comes, and I feel strangely cheated. It is so understated that you forget what they are stating in the first place. If you come all the way to the cinema to see a film about a father and son, and fork out your £10, you need more than just a realistic, muted portrayal which doesn't offer up any answers: we've got that in real life. The

best bits, tellingly, are the most unconventional and surprising: the affair with the nanny, the hint of high drama at the suggestion of a love-child with Auntie Beatty, the larger-than-life moments with Arthur. These are the moments that keep the whole thing afloat, and they are actually the least realistic.

Second, the focus is too disciplined on the father and son; you can fit a lot into a two-hour movie, and it rather feels like a single plot strand of a larger family piece, padded out. The fact that it only stretches to 90 minutes – and it is not snappy – is evidence of this. I wanted to know more about the Scottish nanny who is Blake's first love – what happened to her in those intervening years? And I wanted to find out how Blake turned out to be such a stick-in-the-mud: surely he can't lay it all at the door of his ebullient father?

With any good movie there is a certain amount of sleight of hand. If you are telling a sad story, you have to throw in some upbeat scenes and a bit of dancing – that way it will feel like an enjoyable, sad story; if you are after the real-life feel, you can get away with quite an outlandish, dramatic story as long as you keep the emotion understated; and if you are telling a story about one person, make sure to fill it with lots of other people to keep it interesting. *And When Did You Last See Your Father?* is too strict, and so ends up feeling rather mean.

How the Lateran Pact helped artists find God



ART REVIEW
Cicely Gouldner

PIETY AND PRAGMATISM: Spirituality in Futurist Art

ESTORICK COLLECTION, LONDON

I confess, I've never really taken to Futurist art. The manifestos shadow the brush palettes and wilfully disjointed formations of the art itself. I'd always thought of Futurism as an ideology – more so than as a self-standing art movement with a closed set of aesthetic rules – which grates dreadfully in a postmodern, multicultural society. Fascism and nationalism were not great ideas for starters, but then, to top it off, there was spiritual Futurist art in the 1930s, with all its pig-headed ideas about aeroplanes as future gods.

It seems that the Futurists were not satisfied by merely condemning the established Church and ridiculing its values. As they lost their youthful spunk they suddenly wanted to embrace God in the midst of a mid-life moral crisis. Over 20 years later therefore, just as Futurism's force was dwindling, a wealth of Futurist art began to address sacred themes – on its own terms, of course. An interpretation of the Ascension, for example, came in the form of Nino Vitale's expansive painting of Jesus propelled into the sky with the wings of a Spitfire.

Although religion and Christian morality had been rejected by the Futurists in Italy because of its association with papal power and repression, an element of it was later filtered out from within the dogmatic confines of the Church and reinterpreted under the more Future-friendly terms: spirituality. Initially, perhaps, it seemed like a good idea to banish all connection with a stifling and out-dated institution like the Church, which prevented progress and a "new religion-morality of speed" for "the Italy of tomorrow". But later the Futurists realised that if their ideals were going to encompass all aspects of everyday life, up to and including culinary pursuits, then they would have to factor in some aspect of the supernatural. Slowly Catholic imagery started to re-emerge in the works of staunch Futurists such as Filla, Gerardo Dottori and others, and it gathered together for the first time in this fascinating exhibition.

I am advised by curator Christopher Adams, that it doesn't hurt to remain cynical in view of the spiri-

tual efforts of these artists. It is no coincidence, he says, that this flowering of Futurist sacred art coincides exactly with the signing of the Lateran Pact in 1929. Thus, the alliance of Mussolini's regime and the Papal States, which seemed to bring Church and state into fleeting harmony, is also reflected in this unique and unusual pocket of art history.

It is also interesting to read some of the Futurist manifestos on sacred art, which, up until now, have similarly not been exhibited. In comparison with the earlier purist manifestos on "universal dynamism", which explain that "movement and light destroy the substance of objects", it is not too difficult to see the development into a sacred form of Futurist art. According to F.T. Marinetti, signatory of the *Manifesto of Futurist Sacred Art* in 1931, only Futurist artists, due to their perception of this dynamism, "are able to express so clearly, the simultaneous dogmas of the Catholic faith, such as the Holy Trinity, the Immaculate Conception and the Christ's Calvary". One only wonders why it took them 20 years to discover such a startlingly obvious source of Futurist artistic inspiration – what subject better deals with the dynamism of movement and light than Christian commandments such as transubstantiation or the Ascension?

The stylistic variety within the paintings clearly demonstrates the paradoxical, and at times violently conflicting, ideas of Futurist sacred art: modernity and machinery on the one hand, and antiquity and religion on the other. This is not to say that soul and machine cannot be united – it is clearly attempted in these paintings – but only that there is a tension between the two. Some of the bolder, and even gaudy, images offer sentiments that are more reminiscent of the religious glorification of machinery and war, although Giuseppe Preziosi's sensitive portrayal of the dogmatic confines of the Annunciation, with its swelling vortex radiating out from Gabriel's halo, wonderfully captures the early 20th century's fascination with speed and movement, at the heart of the Futurist's search.

The exhibition explores the socio-political, practical and mysterious aspects of these works, reflecting the tenuous relationship between art as sacred and art as functional. It also guides you more broadly through spirituality's rocky journey into the 20th century. So even if you are a cool pragmatist and see this collection as something created by a group of artists trying to acquire favour and government commissions in the middle of rapidly changing policies and regimes – who is to say that one can't glimpse the transcendental through the Madonna and Plan? I think it's well worth a try.

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The theatre of scandal

THEATRE REVIEW
Rough Crossings
LYRIC, HAMMERSMITH

The transatlantic slave trade lasted approximately 300 years. During that time 10 to 12 million West Africans were forcibly displaced from their homes. Caryll Phillips's adaptation of Simon Schemm's epic novel is a fictional account of real events and looks at some of the leading personalities, black and white, who fought to abolish slavery. The American slaves who fought alongside the British in the War of Independence had been offered their freedom and land but after the war the British reneged on their promises. The play traces the journey of those slaves from the Deep South to the frozen wastes of Nova Scotia, to London, and then to Sierra Leone and the establishment of Freetown in 1792.

In Africa the major conflict was between the governor, a British naval officer, Second Lieutenant John Clarkson (Ed Hughes), trying to do his best in impossible circumstances, and Thomas Peters (Ben Okafor), the articulate and unsympathetic African-American leader who refused to accept a white man as governor. Clarkson was the younger brother of Thomas Clarkson, a founder member of the abolitionist movement and

as important to the crusade as William Wilberforce. Director Rupert Goold is always arresting and his production, which is set on top and underneath a tilting platform and enhanced by video footage, music and live performances, gives Phillips's film-like script the pace it needs. *Rough Crossings* is a fitting contribution to the 2007 celebrations of the abolition of the slave trade 200 years ago and the best history lesson in town.

Life after Scandal
HAMPSTEAD THEATRE

This is Robin Soan's fifth verbatim play. Last time he interviewed terrorists; this time he interviews the likes of Jonathan Aitken, Lord Montagu, Edwina Currie, and Neil and Christine Hamilton.

Scandal is a form of theatre: the prurient public likes nothing better than to watch people being hounded, humiliated and torn to pieces. Soan's collage, entertainingly strung together, is an attack on the invasion of privacy by the media and the establishment. A former jailbird is even willing to break into prison to take compromising photographs. Lives are shattered and reputations are destroyed, sometimes, as in the case of Foreign Secretary Robin Cook and ambassador Craig Murray, merely for political ends. The most moving performance is by Tim Precece as Lord Montagu. Aitken

(played by Philip Bretherton) gets the biggest laugh when he says: "You know I sometimes say in my prayers: 'Thank you God for sending me to prison, because without going through the depths of defeat, disgrace, divorce, bankruptcy and jail, I wouldn't have started to change direction and begun a spiritual journey...'"

The Member of the Wedding
YOUNG VIC

American novelist Carson McCullers wrote about misfits in the Deep South. It was Tennessee Williams who persuaded her to turn her novella into a play. A lonely, irritating, tomboyish 12-year-old girl convinces herself that her brother and his fiancée will take her with them on their honeymoon and is hysterical when they don't. Since there is no action McCullers has to rely entirely on the acting and the atmosphere. Flora Spencer-Longhurst, a young actress in her early 20s, is a convincing child, but exhausting to watch and listless. Seven-year-old Theo Stevenson is amazingly confident and there is an admirable performance by Portia as the servant, but the novella is better value than the play.

Robert Tanitch
Robert Tanitch's London Stage in the 20th Century is published by Haus Publishing this month.

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