

ARTS



Harry Potter, played by Daniel Radcliffe, appears to be in a spot of bother. The latest instalment of the franchise is marred by a sloppy hodgepodge of references

A badly thought out con-trick



Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix

CERT 12A, 138 MINS

Perhaps it is just me, but the process of losing interest in something is often quite instantaneous. One moment you are paying close attention, engaged and stimulated, and the next moment you realise that whatever it is so crushingly boring that you cannot bear to hear another word. You may be halfway through a book, or a conversation, or one of your own anecdotes, but from that moment you would rather do anything – read the washing machine manual, listen to the shipping forecast – than waste another precious second on such puff.

I had just such a moment about 10 minutes into *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, the fifth movie instalment of this seemingly interminable franchise. By that stage there had been nothing particularly wrong with the film (in fact the first 10 minutes are some of the better of the 138 available). Potter is more grown up, and with the surprising arrival of demoneers in a griffawid

suburban train station, and Harry's threat of expulsion for performing a spell in the presence of a muggle, the whole thing seemed different and quite interesting. It is always cool to escape from angry foster parents on a broomstick, after all.

But then comes Harry's trial at the Ministry of Magic. It is a sloppy hodgepodge of references, borrowed from random places and times, and I suddenly realised I was being conned. The Ministry itself – accessed via a secret telephone box, plastered with giant posters of Minister Fudge and clad in shiny black tiles – is a cross between a fascist monument and a nightclub lavatory. The Minister's cross-examination of Harry from a great height, not allowing time for his responses, is clearly supposed to be reminiscent of a Soviet show trial, while the same Minister's desire to turn Hogwarts into a "secure, risk-free environment", with an emphasis on theoretical knowledge and exams, seems to be a swipe at New Labour. Dolores Umbridge, the ministry envoy who will shortly be sent to Hogwarts to oversee matters, is a saccharine pink, passive aggressive, Victorian nightmare, whose teaching methods are described as "medieval". Rather than carefully selected to make a point, all these competing references are just shoved in so that, half-noticed by we unthinking punters, they will lend the project a (quite undeserved) aura of grandness and wider relevance.

Suddenly, the whole of the Harry Potter phenomenon made sense as the same kind of ill thought-out sleight of hand. Think about it. Harry Potter is

supposed to be the triumph of the little guy against the forces of the establishment, but it is also a celebration of a kind of Elton-on-speed in the form of Hogwarts School; he is supposed to be the unluckiest of heroes, succeeding despite all the odds and giving hope to less privileged children everywhere, but he is also the chosen one, marked out for greatness by a prophecy, purely by virtue of his parentage; he constantly gets into scrapes and relies on his powerful friends to rescue him, and yet he is supposed to be so all-powerful himself

Daniel Radcliffe is a disaster. He may have been sweet as a child, but he has grown into a charmless young man

that Lord Voldemort couldn't even kill him as a baby. It is an intellectual con-trick, sustained by noisy special effects and grandiosity.

Its hero, while we're at it, must rank as one of the most unattractive in modern cinema history. The character itself is tiresome enough – sober, prickly, frightened, never colourful or fun – but Daniel Radcliffe is a disaster. While he may have been sweet as a gelsky child, he has grown into a totally charmless young man, his somewhat too-close-together eyes staring manically ahead into the middle distance, raspy voice emanating like fingernails on a blackboard from a pale, expressionless face. I

am sure he is a lovely chap, but a movie star he is not; the Harry Potter series would have been very different indeed if its lead actor had possessed, if not sex appeal, then at least a glint in the eye.

The Order of the Phoenix is the episode where Hogwarts is taken over by the Ministry of Magic, in the form of Miss Umbridge. The good guys know that Lord Voldemort (Ralph Fiennes) is back, but the Minister of Mystery refuses to accept it and begins a propaganda war against those who do (Dumbledore and Harry Potter). Harry finds himself a pariah at his own school, which becomes an increasingly authoritarian and sinister place as Umbridge gradually constricts the pupils' freedom.

The usual structural problems are particularly acute. The 300-page book doesn't condense well into a film – there are too many characters and there is too much happening. The waste of talent is, as usual, profligate, with actors like Richard Griffiths, Ralph Fiennes, Maggie Smith and Alan Rickman all getting about two minutes' screen time each. The climax is, as usual, brief and unsatisfying after two hours of suspense and build-up. There are some wonderful special effects, and there are fun moments from Emma Watson (as Hermione) and Imelda Staunton (as the wicked Miss Umbridge). But, as for the lengthy 14-year-old-on-screen "snog" (their word, not mine) between Harry and young Korean witch Cho Chang, it is so horrific, so toe-curlingly embarrassing, that I will try very hard never to think about it, or the whole Harry Potter enterprise, ever again.

Eden is not usually quite so seductive



ARTS REVIEW
Christopher Lloyd

Temptation in Eden

COURTAULD INSTITUTE, UNTIL SEP 23

The appreciation of German Renaissance art, with the exception of Albrecht Dürer, is not a popular pastime in this country. A beautiful exhibition at the Courtauld Institute of Art Gallery in Somerset House in London breaks the mould. It is devoted to Dürer's contemporary Lucas Cranach the Elder, who lived to the considerable age of 81 and ran a singularly busy studio. *Temptation in Eden: Lucas Cranach's Adam and Eve* is an exemplary display based on the 1526 painting of Adam and Eve owned by the Courtauld Institute of Art. As befits a teaching institution with limited means and restricted space, this is a sharply focused scholarly exhibition incorporating new evidence and fresh observations about an artist who is most closely associated with the Reformation.

Such an exhibition deserves a large attendance on account of the outstanding quality of the works on view, which include drawings and prints, in addition to five key paintings. A sense of awe quickly overwhelms the visitor and it is impossible not to become totally absorbed by Cranach's technical accomplishments, as well as by the intellectual niceties of his treatment of the theme of the Fall of Man.

Grouped together with the Courtauld's *Adam and Eve* are *Cupid Comporting to Venus*, *Apollonia and Diana* and *A Faun and his Family*, all of which may have been made for the same patron, possibly Elector Johann Frederick on the occasion of his marriage to Sybille of Cleves in 1527. And, however improbable it might seem, these same pictures might also have been incorporated into the same ensemble.

As court painter to the Elector of Saxony at Wittenberg, Cranach was expected to deliver several different types of painting – mainly portraiture and secular works, mostly hunting scenes. But the artist also had close contacts with the university at Wittenberg, which was one of the main centres of humanist learning in Germany. Martin Luther was a personal friend and Philip Melancthon a close associate. Not surprisingly, Cranach's output reflects many of the ideas that gave rise to the Reformation even though he continued to be supported by Catholic patrons such as Cardinal Albrecht of Brandenburg. The religious divide was not as clear-cut as

is often assumed, at least not in art. The iconography of Cranach's paintings during the 1520s illustrates the intellectual turmoil of the times. *Adam and Eve* deliberately incorporates both religious and mythological elements, not simply in terms of its composition but also as regards the interpretation of its subject matter, which relies heavily on symbolism. The Garden of Eden as envisaged by Cranach is based as much on the "Golden Age" evoked in classical literature (Theocritus, Hesiod, Virgil, Ovid) as on any biblical description. Similarly, the primeval forests populated by numerous beasts or half-humans with distant views of castles precariously balanced on rocky promontories high above placid lakes can be equated with the historical Germany as described by Tacitus as much as with contemporary theories of primitivism. Cranach cleverly fuses these diverse points of reference together in his pictures, whereby Diana and Venus become prefigurations of Eve in the same way as the German forest is seen as the Garden of Eden. Such multivalence highlights the survival and revitalising of medieval preoccupations in the context of the new intellectual currents of the Reformation. The point is that these pictures were exalted like the printed word and not, as previously, viewed simply as aids to devotion.

The exhibition has other dimensions. It reveals Cranach's working practices with superb examples of his preparatory drawings for the animals that occur in these pictures, some of which are visible not to become totally absorbed by Cranach's technical accomplishments, as well as by the intellectual niceties of his treatment of the theme of the Fall of Man. Grouped together with the Courtauld's *Adam and Eve* are *Cupid Comporting to Venus*, *Apollonia and Diana* and *A Faun and his Family*, all of which may have been made for the same patron, possibly Elector Johann Frederick on the occasion of his marriage to Sybille of Cleves in 1527. And, however improbable it might seem, these same pictures might also have been incorporated into the same ensemble. As court painter to the Elector of Saxony at Wittenberg, Cranach was expected to deliver several different types of painting – mainly portraiture and secular works, mostly hunting scenes. But the artist also had close contacts with the university at Wittenberg, which was one of the main centres of humanist learning in Germany. Martin Luther was a personal friend and Philip Melancthon a close associate. Not surprisingly, Cranach's output reflects many of the ideas that gave rise to the Reformation even though he continued to be supported by Catholic patrons such as Cardinal Albrecht of Brandenburg. The religious divide was not as clear-cut as

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Crude but popular

THEATRE REVIEW

The Merchant of Venice

SHAKESPEARE'S GLOBE

The Globe is the number one London tourist attraction. There are queues for returns at every performance. People are even willing to stand in the rain. It is the theatre rather than the plays the tourists come to see.

The Merchant of Venice, a mixture of fairy tale and Machiavellian villainy, was inspired by the arrest of Dr Lopez, physician to Queen Elizabeth I, a learned Portuguese Jewish doctor, who was falsely accused of trying to poison Her Majesty. Convicted of treason for no other reason than that he was a Jew, he was hanged, drawn and quartered.

The play is one of Shakespeare's most accessible, but has lost its appeal in recent times because of perceived anti-Semitism. It was regularly staged in Nazi Germany to intensify hostility towards Jews. Today directors, deeply sensitive to Jewish sensibilities, go out of their way to make certain that the story of the "pound of flesh" is perceived as a play about anti-Semitism rather than an anti-Semitic play.

Shylock hates the Christians because they humiliate him daily. He hates Antonio in particular because he lends money

gratis and loses him business. The final straw comes when his daughter elopes with a Christian and sells the ring he gave to his late wife to buy a monkey. Mad with grief he determines to take his revenge by murdering Antonio in open court.

Why on earth would Portia want to marry a shallow, immature bankrupt sponge like Bassanio who only loves her for her money and can't even remember her name? The groundlings cheer and clap when he chooses the right casket and kisses the bride, but he doesn't come cheap. Fortunately Portia is so rich that she can pay a debt of 3,000 ducats, for which he is morally responsible, 20 times over without even thinking about it.

The quality of mercy is singularly absent during the trial when the Christians not only take all of Shylock's money and estate but also insist he become a Christian. The trial scene, as it always does, works a treat. The comedy coda with the rings, too, is delightful. At the Globe the humour is generally crude, vulgar and aimed at the lowest common denominator. Some of the acting is appalling but Peter McNery's low-key performance as Shylock is fine.

Kismet
LONDON COLISEUM
"I'm a stranger in paradise" – you can sing

that again. Baghdad in the 10th century is fictional at least, has always been the most exotic and romantic of cities. A thousand and a night in the Arabian desert with a sheik has been many female readers, theatregoers and cinema-goers' idea of absolute bliss.

Robert Wright and George Forrest listened to every Barotini composition they could obtain before they wrote the music and lyrics for such popular songs as "Bangles and Beads". *Kismet* has never been popular with the critics, but the Broadway premiere in 1953 ran for 583 performances. In London it ran for 648 performances. However, if you have ever wondered why it hasn't been seen for 40 years, you can go to the Coliseum and you'll find that ENO has reached rock bottom in its efforts to attract audiences which don't normally go to the opera.

No man can avoid his fate but he can avoid seeing this badly directed, badly designed and badly choreographed load of kitsch. (The original choreographer walked out due to artistic differences.) Michael Ball as the poet has to work very hard. Alfie Boe is not a romantic Caliph but he has a good voice. The one high spot, the one class act, is Sarah Tynan singing "And This Is My Beloved".

Robert Tanitch

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