

ARTS

Too scared to make a good film



FILM REVIEW
Freddie Sayers

United 93 has been spectacularly uncontroversial. As the first film about the attacks on America on September 11, 2001, it seems to have avoided completely the normally inevitable questions – is it too soon? Should people be making movies about an event like this anyway? What about the families of the victims? Universal Studios has got away with it – indeed has been met by a warm critical reception – by doing everything right. The whole project has been developed with the co-operation and input of the victims' families. There are no silly Hollywood stars involved. The British director, Paul Greengrass, is a credible film-maker who has made his reputation by producing intelligent films about factual events (eg *Bloody Sunday*) and who has even written articles on the constructive relevance of revisiting such tragedies in film. More broadly though, it seems to have become impossible to argue that as subject matter something like 9/11 should be fundamentally out of bounds. What is *The Passion of the Christ* except a means of meditating on the significance of a painful but massive event in the past? There have been films made about every disaster from Titanic to the Columbine Massacre – making movies has become a standard way to contextualise events and consign them to history. It gives us a feeling of control over the past. In the case of *United 93*, oddly, this has been done with such care not to offend that it ends up saying very little. It is an almost real-time enactment of the hours between 8am and 10am on that terrible



Passengers on the United Airlines flight 93 as they prepare to storm the cockpit

morning from a military control centre, the central air-traffic control centre and – most centrally – United Airlines flight 93 from Boston to LA, the only hijacked flight that morning to fail to reach its destination. Apparently headed for the Capitol in Washington, it crashed into a field in Pennsylvania and there were no survivors. *United 93* speculates that, in the final minutes of the flight, as passengers spoke on their mobile phones to loved ones on the ground and discovered that the World Trade Center had been attacked, they tried to regain control of the plane and in the ensuing chaos the plane crashed. Thankfully however, it is not told as a hero story, with handsome leaders and slow-motion action shots; the dominant impression of the film – and I think here it is most powerful – is the normality of the people involved and the strange

subduedness of the event. We tend to learn about great disasters through the press, once they have been digested already, yet on the ground the prevailing feeling is of confusion and uncertainty. The moment when I felt tears coming to my eyes was the 80-man air-traffic control centre all watching the CNN shot of the second plane hitting the World Trade Center and suddenly falling silent. The moment of quiet realisation that something sinister and frightening was happening sends a shiver down the spine. The additional political points, of which I could only make out two, both seem so carefully made as to rather disappear. The first is the humanisation of the hijackers. The film opens with their morning preparations in a Boston motel, as they shave their bodies and read the Koran. Omar Benson Miller, the Iraqi actor who plays the lead hijacker, has Western looks and

subdued features. He rings someone from the departure lounge and whispers "I love you" and once on the plane seems reluctant to go through with it. His three fellow hijackers seem tragically young – frightened, impetuous, stupid, teenage. On the other hand, perhaps to balance things out, the opening shots of America on that sunny day are overlaid with untranslated recitations from the Koran that sound like a hellish war-chant. The second point is even more modest, and consists really in one moment. As the plane spirals out of control and the passengers at the rear start saying the Lord's Prayer, we then cut to the cockpit where the hijackers are reciting the Koran. Typically, this theme is never touched on again – this director is, perhaps quite rightly, too afraid of his subject to make an interesting film about it.

MEDIAMATTER

Why we still love Sherlock Holmes

Regular readers will, no doubt, be relieved that this week I'm not going to bang on about David Cameron's performance – for there is no other word – on *Desert Island Discs*; for, if I may steal a stroke from Max Beerbohm, to give a full account would take a far less brilliant pen than mine. But Beerbohm was referring to the 1880s, and it is to that period that I have wistfully found myself drawn last weekend, which ITV3 devoted to back-to-back reruns of Sherlock Holmes adaptations.

Ah, a time when the masses were engaged by craftsmanship and diligence in the popular arts, greeted their betters with some measure of deference, and could recognise a gentleman simply through an eye for good tailoring! And no, I'm not referring to the late 19th century, but to the 1980s, when the Granada Holmes films were pulling in large audiences. Many actors have played the great detective, but none has done better than Jeremy Brett. The first TV version I remember was a BBC effort starring Peter Cushing, then freshly famous from *Hammer Horror* roles, which made the mistake of taking the stories far too seriously, riding on the back of the awful Basil Rathbone travesties in the cinema of a generation earlier. Conan Doyle has gyrated in his tomb more than most authors over the catastrophic misunderstanding of his work, and famously loathed the popularity of his most well-known creation among the reading public during his lifetime. For Holmes was always intended as a send-up of the penny-dreadful heroes of his time, but survived, as they have not, because his creator had a literary narrative gift and a wonderful imagination for improbable stories.

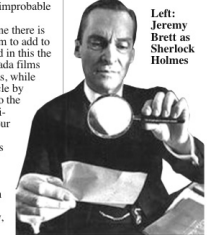
In our own time there is also period charm to add to the equation, and in this the wonderful Granada films scored full marks, while squaring the circle by remaining true to the spirit of the originals. None of our deer-stalker nonsense: Brett's Holmes is a gentleman in frock coat and top hat, absorbed in his obsessiveness. Victorian, metrosexually

camp, yet rivetingly watchable, a character who draws not just Watson (Conan Doyle's device as our narrator) but also the viewer into his bizarrely logical world. Absurd as they are, the stories are truly gripping drama.

Brett's performance as Holmes was one of the greatest ever seen on television. The popularity of the series was partly accounted for, of course, by Conan Doyle's own enduringly iconic status, though there were also many Holmes maniacs who picked holes in this or that aspect of the dramatisation. Then there was the received nostalgia effect, for an England that was still the heart of the world's greatest ever empire, though not for an England in which insatiable poverty was the lot of the majority, and in which women had a worse than acceptable chance of dying in childbirth. Rather, much of the appeal must be that of a pre-technological age (finger-printing was, for Conan Doyle, cutting edge), in which crimes could be solved by a great leader (a man unusually observant but also unusually sensitive to human foibles).

Ring any bells? All our modern popular detectives, Miss Marple, Jack Frost, Morse, even the ghostly Rosemary and Thyme, find their solutions through intuition, and although Holmes was a parody pioneer of forensics, it was always his world of deduction that got results. Most people are secretly terrified of the prevalence of CCTV and DNA testing, and of the innumerable of the ID card, not because they're guilty, but because bureaucracies get things wrong. That's why the clever individual will always be a hero.

Nick Thomas



Left: Jeremy Brett as Sherlock Holmes

My nerve ends tingled with a sense of evil



THEATRE REVIEW
Quentin de la Bédoyère

John Milton's *Paradise Lost* is dense, complex and so theologically rich that he had to provide a digest of the 12 books to be presented in a play. Who would ever have thought of presenting it for the stage? Well, Milton himself, actually. It was his original conception before writing it as a poem. Much of the audience would have seen the Oxford Stage Company production as a superb theatre: for me, it was a profound spiritual experience. The story in simple outline is no more than the determination of Satan to revenge himself on God, his success in

tempting Adam and Eve to eat the forbidden fruit, and the promise of eventual redemption. But I cannot recall any occasion when my nerve ends got tingled with an awareness of evil, and the play of it all. For that we have to thank a brilliant original production, but most of all Ben Power, who in adapting *Paradise Lost* for the stage has not afraid to manipulate the story, with full respect for Milton's poetry, so that its essence could be dramatised to such effect.

The play opens to a scene of chaos, where the Son (Charles Aitken) is toying ingeniously with an apple, infusing it with a sense of temptation. And on we move to some middle earth where Satan, before the creation of the world, is torn between anguish, pride and revenge. Jasper Britton creates a many-sided character who is all the more sinister for being both attractive and pitiable. He considers the idea of repentance, but knows that this is no longer open to him, and so he resigns himself: "Myself am hell... evil, be thou my good."

But he has heard rumours of the

creation of man, and with his diabolical consorts, plans the ultimate revenge: to capture this new creation. The scenes, following through with ingenious lighting, music (sometimes a little too loud for me), and different effects, are menacing. The second act opens with the Garden of Eden: Adam and Eve naked. Not nude, but naked as a baby is naked. There were no prurient thoughts to banish, because there was no prurience – only an innocence which conveys directly how God intended us to be. Their relationship, touching in its happiness, and if Eve (Vivette Robinson) appears something of a naïf, and clearly subservient to Adam, that was only to be expected in a 17th-century understanding. But of course Satan returns, and we are invited to explore the skill of his persuasion. Would you have resisted? I certainly couldn't be sure about myself. But the choice is made, and immediately, but subtly, the atmosphere begins to change. Adam (Christian Bradley) and Eve begin to distance themselves psychologically. They start to bicker, and in their conver-

sation we detect the seeds of discord which are still very much with us. What came to the fore was not separate sins but a state of sin, which has replaced innocence and brought little too much. The moment I will always remember was Adam and Eve slowly dressing into drab, modern clothes. I can't explain it, but it was the dressing, not the nakedness, that was obscene. And in those clothes I saw myself, and all of us. We are not innocent. Had I left the theatre then, it would have been in a state of deep depression.

But of course I didn't, because Milton gives us the promise of redemption. The Son pleads to the Father: "on me let thine anger fall; Account me Man." And he raises his arms. Is it a crucifixion or a welcome? We don't know, there are no clichés in this production. But there is a sense that somehow it all had to happen to make possible "the happy fault that merited no great redemption". The production tours Guildford, Dundee, Bath, Oxford, and London. (Box office: 020 7438 9940).

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Stamping out socialism

THEATRE REVIEW
ROBERT TANITCH

Maxim Gorky was almost certainly murdered by a Stalin in 1936. Thirty years earlier he had been involved in the events of Bloody Sunday in St Petersburg when hundreds of unarmed people, who were taking part in a peaceful demonstration outside the Winter Palace, were massacred. The revolution had been a long time coming – ever since the emancipation of the serfs in 1861. Gorky wrote *Enemies* while in exile in 1905. The play sides with the workers and is a passionate plea for compassion and humanity. Not surprisingly, it was banned. The bourgeoisie had no idea how to treat the proletariat. They saw only the dangers of leniency and ruthlessly stamped out anything that smacked of socialism. The liberal-minded landowner turned industrialist (Sean Chapman) wants to do the right thing by the work force; but, flabby and weak, he flounders. His wife (Amanda Root) finds the idea of socialism in a provincial backwater absurd. She thinks socialism is fine in principle, but not suitable for Russia. His brutal business partner (Sean Gilder) closes the factory of striking workers and is killed. Michael Attenborough's excellent production at the Almeida, based on a new version of the play by David Hare, has the finest ensemble

acting in London. The characters include an idealistic 18-year-old (Odie Whitaker), an unpleasant public prosecutor (Stephen Noonan), a drunken wastrel (Jack Davenport), and a smirking, subtly insubordinate agitator (Toby Kebbell). An actress (Amanda Drew) sums up the situation when she says they are all like some terrible amateur dramatic society putting on a play in which they have all been given the wrong parts. Michael Frayn, author of *Noises Off*, one of the best farces of the 20th century, has written two other plays in the same genre: *Clockwise* (the very funny 1986 film, starring John Cleese), and *Donkey's Years*, which has been revived by Jeremy Sams at Comedy Theatre and seems so much better than it did 30 years ago. The action takes place during an Oxbridge College reunion when boozed middle-aged men start behaving like the badly behaved undergraduates they once were. David Haig is hilarious as the Minister of Education who puts his back out and ends up with his trousers round his ankles. Frantically he tries to save a lady's honour, terrified that a non-existent scandal will get into the newspapers. Samantha Bond plays the Master's wife who slept around when she was an undergraduate. Myopic, she confesses her love to a former partner only to find she is talking to the wrong chap. Michael Fitzgerald plays a boring outsider who missed out when he was at university, wasting his time studying when he could have been drinking,

carousing, and having baths in women's colleges. He runs away, determined to live the life he never had. If you are looking for a pleasant, undemanding, and entertaining, look no further. Mark Rylance was always going to be a hard act to follow. Dominic Dromgole begins his tenure as artistic director of Shakespeare's Globe with an indifferent production of *Coriolanus* that is poorly cast, poorly spoken and acted for too many inappropriate laughs. The play has been never been popular with the general theatregoer and usually works best at times of national strife, when Left and Right can use its political arguments for their own ends. *Coriolanus* has been identified with Napoleon, Hitler and Mussolini. In 1934 various French anti-republican groups persuaded the Comédie-Française to stage the play. The performance led to demonstrations in the streets. Coriolanus is a great soldier but a poor statesman. His refusal to hide his contempt for the general public, along with his immense pride, leads ultimately to his downfall. A victim of a violent temper, he is incapable of acting mildly. He is accused of being a traitor and then banished. Two great scenes – his rejection of an elderly father figure and his acquiescence (after the longest pause in Shakespeare) to his mother's plea not to attack Rome – go for nothing. Jonathan Cake, too light-weight, is miscast. The high spot is his murder, which takes place right in the middle of the audience.

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