

ARTS

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He's behind you: a young couple are stalked by a serial killer in "Zodiac". The factual complexities of the plot end up thwarting a talented director

Genius stifled by a true story



Zodiac

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I have no problem with making movies about serial killers – in fact, I tend to like movies about serial killers – but things get difficult when they are about real-life murders. It is not a question of sensitivity to the victims or families (in this case, the murders were 40 years ago and have already inspired five feature films including *Dirty Harry*); rather, the difficulty is how faithful to be to the facts. David Fincher's new thriller *Zodiac* is at its best when at its most artful and imaginative – it is contained and ultimately thwarted by its factual plotline.

It tells the long story of one of America's most infamous criminals, a serial killer who shot and stabbed somewhere between five and 17 victims in the San Francisco Bay Area in 1969, and continued to taunt the police and community with coded messages (calling himself "the Zodiac") up until 1975.

We view events principally from the newsroom of the *San Francisco Chron-*

icle where top crime reporter Paul Avery (Robert Downey Jr) is covering the case, and cartoonist Robert Gray-Smith (Jake Gyllenhaal) gradually also becomes obsessed with it. This is the *All the President's Men*-style problem-solving backdrop of the piece, with the San Francisco cop (Mark Ruffalo) additionally investigating the crime from his office in town. But the film goes on to cover the whole timeline of the controversy, from the original murders, through the 1970s attempts to find the killer, right up to the 1990s by which time it has become a "JFK" – an old unsolved case still consuming the lives of its original investigators. The whole thing takes two and a half hours.

Such is the talent behind this film that it leaps up into some wonderful moments and strands, but because of its over-ambitious timeframe and rigorous adherence to the complexities of the case, these sparks of genius are somehow never allowed to come together or ignite. Let me describe, in chronological order, a few such sparks of genius. First, the opening scene of the film – a memorable shot looking out the side window of a car. The car window frame remains motionless at the perimeters of the shot as we drive along a suburban street on the evening of July 4.

In the background are fireworks and skies of San Francisco, lighting up the mist as the car rolls past house party after house party, until we arrive at the house where we are visiting, and into the frame pops the pimply face of a young man who is being picked up by his date: these will be the murderer's first

two victims. The death, when it comes, is all the more horrible having come from such a quaint and colourful beginning.

Second, the murder scenes in general. They are very few, clustered at the beginning of the film in a way that makes for an odd overall rhythm, and I am not convinced that they were really necessary, but they are gruesomely brilliant. Each begins with the banality of common conversation – intimate, casual, but of course ominous – and then to rousing, sick guitar music the

Whenever we are left with Jake Gyllenhaal's doxy eyes and droopy face, the pace sags

killer goes about his dreadful work. Although misapprehended, and oddly maniacal, they are evidence of a terrific film-making energy.

Third, Robert Downey Jr's performance as journalist Paul Avery. He has come to be one of those actors who cannot help but steal each scene, and this is him at his best. I am sure the real Paul Avery was nothing like Downey's larger-than-life drunkard comic and yet with an almost camp largeness of gesture, Downey mimics and curses his way over the screen. Whenever there is a section without him, and we are left only with Jake Gyllenhaal's doxy eyes and droopy face, the pace sags.

Finally, there is a scene towards the end of the film when Robert is following a lead on his own and suddenly we worry that he has stumbled across the killer himself. It is lifted straight out of *The Silence of the Lambs*, but as he follows him down to the basement (why, why do they always agree to go down to the basement?) the suspense is captivating.

With a slight smile – pop – the lights go off. It is a perfectly self-contained, perfectly executed little essay in horror – pretty much irrelevant to the plot, but the only really scary moment in the movie.

What unites these moments and characters is their artistry and irrelevance to the factual plot – they are gasps of fresh air, escaping between the cracks in the story. You get the impression that Fincher only comes to life when he has room to imagine, and that such a detailed, evidence-based script is not the vehicle for him. Between the violent opening and Robert's later quest to solve the case in the final third there is way too much turgid stuff about police procedures and mundane clues.

An additional half hour could have been cut. If only the murders had happened throughout the film, and the two reporters were investigating during a shorter time-frame; if only they had been more threatened themselves and we had more of those basement scenes; if only the puzzle-solving element consisted of more dramatic insights and fewer mundane details; if only, in short, they had made up their own story.

A perfect antidote to Handel's meandering



Stiffelio
ROYAL OPERA HOUSE, UNTL

After the recent glut of monster Handel operas, each at least four and a half hours apiece, it was nice to come to something a little more concise.

Stiffelio, one of Giuseppe Verdi's least performed operas, is terse, dramatic and fast, in fact, pretty much the perfect antidote to the languorous and meandering cleverness of Handel, wonderful though most of it has been. It was like having a pocket of salt and vinegar Walker's after a triple-decker ploughman's.

Elijah Moshinsky's detailed 1995 Royal Opera production was making a much deserved come back and accompanying it was Jose Cura, the Argentinean singer whose debut in the original made his name.

The set demonstrated that there are at least a few directors left who don't feel they are above realism, fastidiousness, detail, unvarnished beauty; especially in Act Three, when we were presented with a fully kitted-out 19th-century parlour. (If only Moshinsky could usher in a new super-realist phase in staging.) What a relief not to be confronted with the messy conceptual enter-prises or patronising updates that one has to put up with these days.

Without anything being foisted upon us, one was able to swallow the facts were presented plainly, accurately, and the drama, the music and the words all gained intensity as a result.

I'm sure a truly dreadful production could have scuppered the impact of this work, but it would have been difficult. For underneath everything is a brilliantly indestructible libretto – a rarity in 19th-century opera. And its brilliance relies on something even rarer: its way too much turgid stuff about police procedures and mundane clues.

This was felt even more acutely in 1858 when Verdi was attempting to get it performed in Trieste. The censors were forced to bring out their shears. And I can understand why.

At the centre of the drama is the relationship between a cuckolded Protestant minister, Stiffelio, and his wife, Lina. Lina's father, Stankar, tries to cover up his daughter's infidelity, but the truth finally comes

out. It is a mortifying moment for Stiffelio and we feel it.

Another director might have shifted proceedings to Brick Lane to allow us to experience the transgression more sharply; thankfully, Moshinsky didn't.

We can all make the mental step needed to understand Stiffelio's position. We can all imagine the shame he feels and we can all find, among our acquaintances, an example of it: an honourable character who is suddenly, embarrassingly, dishonoured.

It was made even easier by Cura, whose uncomfortably brooding and introverted postures fitted the role perfectly, even if it seemed almost inadvent.

The voices of Cura and Sondra Radvanovsky, as Lina, didn't disappoint either. They produced big old-fashioned sounds, ones you might remember from the 20th century. It was a glorious change, like finding a piano after months with a clack-choron. They perhaps weren't quite as subtle as some of the smaller voices that now prevail, but neither were they as irritatingly self-conscious and manicured.

For some it was too much, too loud, too shrill, and sure, I might have preferred the singers to explore the pianissimo side of things a little more, but so much of the high octave soliloquising made sense in the context of the drama that the constant howling was forgivable.

The climax was an Ibsen-like domestic in Act Three. In a middle of it, Stiffelio hands Lina a divorce paper and demands she sign it. It is a brilliant moment, in which the whole fraught romantic affair is shoehorned into a prosaically bureaucratic exchange.

Lina agrees, reluctantly, but then demands that Stiffelio, her husband and pastor, hears her confession: "Minister, confessant!" It's a line that still has the power to shock, not only because it brings to a head the conflict that Stiffelio faces in being both a cuckolded husband incapable of forgiveness and a priest faced with his parishioner's pleas for forgiveness, but also because of the erotic possibilities that the line offers. Are we going to get the steamy ins and outs of the tryst? We don't, of course.

Instead the drama concludes with an ingenious scene set in church. The community is gathered; Stankar, Lina's father, pleads for mercy for having murdered Lina's lover, Raffaele; Lina sits disconsolate concealed by a veil. Stiffelio, crumpled and reeled, comes to the bible at the pulpit and opens it at random. He reads out the page on which his hand falls: "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone."

So God has, finally, forgiven Lina. But has Stiffelio? Verdi does not say, and neither does Moshinsky. While Lina runs to clutch the legs of Stiffelio in thanks, her husband pastor stands stiff, impassive and unmoved.

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Fall of a mummy's boy

THEATRE REVIEW
Coriolanus

BARBICAN, LONDON

The Japanese love the aggressive, military side of Shakespeare. I have memories of being terrified in the cinema by the violence of Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood*, based on *Macbeth*, and my college tutor showed us feature-length, Bard-based cartoons from Japan that made the "Swan of Avon" seem a very nippy bird indeed. It was no surprise, therefore, that the Ninagawa Company's *Coriolanus* came on strong from the start, with a crowd of revolting plebeians shouting and frantically running up and down a flight of massive stone steps. This production was high-volume. Does Tullus Aufidius, leader of the Volscians, usually shout as much as this?

Yukio Ninagawa is both an innovator and a traditionalist. The production is vibrant and unusual, largely thanks to the lighting, the acting and some fabulous fighting, but it also continues those already present in the text, but I am guessing. The greatest problem for us, with such an obviously indigenous company, is being unable to recognise the

echoes of national tradition. *Ninagawa* is primarily addressing the sensibilities of a culture about which we still know very little. For example, the play is famous for the overpowering presence of Coriolanus's mother Volumnia, played chillingly by Kayoko Shiraiishi as if she was made entirely of steel with very sharp edges. However, several of my Japanese neighbours at the Barbican were at times laughing at what may have been a rich caricature of an over-protective and jealously defensive Japanese mother. Similarly, the Roman crowd was full of "types" that seemed to have more meaning for the enthralled Japanese audience than for me. I was reminded of watching Ingmar Bergman, when one frequently says: "If I was depressed and Swedish, I would enjoy this more."

There are problems with seeing *Coriolanus* in the Japanese language. My eyes were darting from the action to the electronic translation at the side of the stage until they began to ache. It was such a visual production that I decided to follow the action and miss some of the narrative. However, I was not too bothered. *Coriolanus* is a relatively straightforward plot. The central character is a war hero who gets pushed around once he is back home, mostly by the plebeians. He gets strappy and petulant when they insist that he shows his war wounds, and they banish him. He promises revenge, and then is talked out of

sacking Rome by his fearsome, controlling mother. It all ends unhappily for Caus Martius Coriolanus, and a great part of this piece's success is the stunning performance by Toshiaki Karasawa, who has the right mix of tough-guy macho and simmering sulking, and who looks like he would do well on the gymnastic hoops and would not care to come second. All the acting was terrific. I particularly admired Kotaro Yoshida as Menenius, who brought dignity to one of the few quiet performances in the production. That Coriolanus rejects his wise counsel while capitulating to the authority of Volumnia confirms him as the finest example of a mummy's boy in stage history.

Coriolanus will have gone from my mind in little time you read this; it only ran for five performances. However, *Ninagawa* will surely be back. *Coriolanus* was a remarkable visual treat, with a 40-strong company orchestrated like a troupe of acrobats, running and fighting and jumping and rolling. The highly stylised and melodramatic Japanese acting is both alarming and intriguing.

When this splendid company visits London again, particularly if he brings actors of the calibre of Karasawa, Shiraiishi and Yoshida with me, I recommend you buy a ticket, even though you might not quite understand it.

Peter Shaw

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