Death Defying Acts

Behind The Illusion

BY BRIAN MCFARLANE

With a dozen or so features (and as many shorts) under her belt, Gillian Armstrong remains an unpredictable filmmaker.

She has dealt with big stars (Mel Gibson and Diane Keaton in Mrs Soffel [1984], for example) and seemingly sure-fire material, such as Susan Sarandon and Little Women in her adaptation of the same name (1994). She was ready to tackle Peter Carey’s eccentric novel in Oscar and Lucinda (1997), a far less certain box office assignment, and she has interrupted her features career with documentaries such as Bingo, Bridesmaids & Braces (1988) and Unfolding Florence: The Many Lives of Florence Broadhurst (2006). If there is a recognizable thread running through Gillian Armstrong’s oeuvre since her lovely and tender feature film debut, My Brilliant Career (1979), it is a concern for women’s lives under pressures of various kinds.

In a sense, her latest film, Death Defying Acts (2008), is a variant on this preoccupation, which still makes its presence felt – even if not so centrally as has sometimes been the case. It is a film with two chief plot strands, and its weakness may well be that it doesn’t draw these closely enough together.

The first strand is to do with the legendary magician and illusionist Harry Houdini. A young girl’s
You would think Houdini might be a gift to film – of all art forms, film is the most amenable to representing illusionism. Oddly, though, there have been very few attempts to film Houdini’s exploits, and no feature film centred on him since the Tony Curtis biopic Houdini (George Marshall, 1953), Armstrong’s film opens, as I have said, with the image of water. This proves to be water in a tank in which Houdini (Guy Pearce) is immersed, chained. On stage, his manager, the shrewdly opportunist Sugarman (Timothy Spall), is becoming anxious about him just as Houdini emerges, having unshackled himself underwater. After this, however, there is very little sense of what has made Houdini such a world-famous name. Death Defying Acts makes use of silent film newsreels with titles proclaiming how Houdini has exposed fakes whose psychic powers he has solicited in the matter of his late mother’s last words.

It may well be countered that presenting Houdini as the great showman is not Armstrong’s intention, but, even so, one feels a need for more sense of what his réclame rests on. Further, Guy Pearce, despite his impressively buffed-up torso, isn’t quite charismatic enough to offer a short cut to our grasp of Houdini’s prowess. In comparison with The Illusionist (Neil Burger, 2006), Death Defying Acts never succeeds in making its showman protagonist and his works compelling.

On the other hand, the romance between working-class Mary McGarvie (Catherine Zeta-Jones) and the visiting Houdini doesn’t fill the gap either. She is a single mum living with her young daughter, Benji (Saoirse Ronan), who idolizes Houdini: ‘he was a god, that’s what it said in my comics.’ They work a music-hall act in which Mary does a sort of belly dance before a backdrop of the Pyramids, joined by Benji as her blackamoor assistant. They perform a few perfunctory ‘Egyptian’ hand movements before stumping their working-class audience with a bit of simple trickery. ‘We gave them what they wanted,’ says Benji in voice-over justification of the chicanery they have practiced. It is Mary’s supposed psychic powers that bring her to Houdini’s attention. She poses as a maid at Houdini’s hotel, checking out information she may be able to use in pursuit of the £10,000 Houdini is offering to whoever can discern his late mother’s last words.

Given that Houdini has exposed numerous preceding fakes, it is surprising that he does not cotton on to the fact that Mary is an obvious con artist. Or is he so smitten by her beauty (and Zeta-Jones has never looked more fetching) that he wills himself to trust her? ‘I think you’re the one I’m waiting for,’ Houdini tells her. Sugarman, who knows that show business is about nickels and dimes, not about science, is properly sceptical of Mrs McGarvie. ‘It means you read The New York Times,’ Sugarman comments to her regarding the subject of her special ‘knowledge’ of Houdini. Mary’s cynical reply: ‘It was The Tribune, actually.’

Houdini invites Mary to a posh lunch where, in a moment of wit, she so misreads the menu that she only orders bread, and he follows suit. ‘I want to treat you as the lady you so clearly are. You’re special. You have a gift,’ he reassures her. He makes much of his own humble origins: he feels he has come from nowhere and has lost something since ‘the real days’. This is not of itself interesting; the tension arising from Mary’s own difficulties and deceptions in relation to Houdini’s growing interest in her, both romantically and for the promise of her ‘gift’, should be more tantalizing than it actually feels.

The screenplay by Tony Grisoni and Brian Ward sometimes seems to be suggesting as a thematic tighter the idea of two sets of parent–child connections. Houdini is possessed by the idea that he was not present at his mother’s death to hear her last words, and it is his need to know this that has led him into the reaches of spiritualist quackery. Houdini tells Mary that he wishes she could have met his mother: ‘You would have got on like a house on fire.’ Is he, in his dealings with Mary, in some way trying to repair his sense of loss? In the Mary–Benji pair, Mary shows plenty of resilience and ingenuity, but...
Benji appears always to be watching out for her, and the fact that Benji alone has access to the film’s voice-over reinforces this. Benji is the one who steals the watch that is essential to their music-hall act, but it may also be the case that she is the one with the real “gift.” In the opening voice-over, she reflects, ‘As I grew up, the gift vanished, just like my mum said it would, and I saw the world as it really was with all its fleet ways and trickery.’

Given the privileged placing of Benji’s statement at the start of the film, and that no one else gets to address us so directly, it confers on her a status of insight not available to anyone else. She has the film’s closing words too; the film ends with Benji, not with either Houdini or Mary. One also begins to wonder if Benji is not indeed the film’s protagonist. Perhaps, too, there is an irresistible intertextual reference at work here. Benji is played with observant alertness by Saoirse Ronan, who was so recently seen as another watchful protagonist: as Briony, whose misinterpretation of what she saw shaped the narrative in Atonement (Joe Wright, 2007). In Armstrong’s film, Ronan, dressed throughout in boys’ clothes, is a more engaging figure than either of the putative stars: she is the one who suggests an inner life, and does so persuasively enough for us to ponder whether she might not have the ‘gift’.

Fictions that draw crucially on real-life figures have become almost a literary subgenre. E.L. Doctorow’s Ragtime, filmed in 1981 by Milos Forman, mixes fictional characters with real-life ones such as Evelyn Thaw and Booker T. Washington; two new novels, Luke Davies’ God of Speed (2008) and Margaret Cezair-Thompson’s The Pirate’s Daughter (2007), draw on the lives and reputations of Howard Hughes and Errol Flynn respectively in the interests of creating new fictions. Somehow, Armstrong misses the opportunity to make this mixture of fact and fiction a fascinating new experience. The point of the enterprise presumably lies in imagining how a public figure, notorious or otherwise, might have conducted himself or herself in such other circumstances as the novelist or filmmaker has devised. There is real elegance in Pearce’s Houdini, but this is not enough to solicit our interest in his dealings with Mary, despite the mysterious beauty with which Zeta-Jones imbues her. Allegedly, the screenplay, which had a long gestation, didn’t originally include Houdini at all, and perhaps this accounts for the oddly perfunctory way he is inserted into the narrative.

How does the film line up in relation to some of Armstrong’s other work? In Gemma Jackson’s handsome production design, it recalls My Brilliant Career and Little Women for its evocation of period and place. Edinburgh in 1926 is sumptuously brought to life, using both actual Edinburgh locations as well as other locations (including London’s Theatre Royal, Drury Lane and the Savoy ballroom) and studio-shot sequences (at Ealing Studios), all rapturously lit by cinematographer Haris Zambarloukos. The whole is infused with a glowing warmth and affectionate detail that go halfway to winning the viewer, but where those two earlier films scored equally strongly in those matters they also won stronger sympathetic involvement with their central female figures. Zeta-Jones does all she can with Mary McGarvie, but the screenplay is too bitty to allow more than enticing glimpses of the woman to emerge. She never has the scope available to Judy Davis’s Sybby (My Brilliant Career) or Susan Sarandon’s Marmee (Little Women). There are nice moments as Mary deals with some mousy neighbours and relishes the luxury of the hotel rooms in which Houdini has set her up, but they seem no more than fragments.

Another earlier Armstrong film that comes to mind in connection with this is Starstruck (1982), an undervalued exercise in the lure of show business. This Sydney-set film evoked place with the sort of affection noted above in her other films. It also created a determined female protagonist (played by Jo Kennedy) with whom one felt Armstrong was more in tune than is the case with Mary McGarvie. A more important association may be with High Tide (1987), a more single-minded exploration of the theme of mothers and daughters. Death Defying Acts may have been a stronger film if it had chosen to focus more firmly on this aspect of its narrative, relegating Houdini to the more-or-less catalytic role that seems to be adumbrated in the opening and closing voice-overs.

I don’t want to imply that there is nothing to savour in Death Defying Acts. It passes the time easily enough; it looks and sounds good (Cezary Skubiszewski’s score is often most romantically apt); and it pulls off some genuinely charming moments and effects. The music-hall episode and the glorious vistas of Edinburgh offer contrasting examples of the sorts of pleasures I mean. What Death Defying Acts lacks, in my view, is a clear sense of purpose. It is as if the film has been distracted by the idea of a charismatic intruder in everyday lives, without doing much more than to assert his impact. Its dealings with illusion and dreams and magic and their relation to those everyday lives never quite succeeds in creating the tension or depth of feeling one expects. Its pleasures remain pretty much those of the surface. In some ways it is still recognizably Armstrong, but it is lesser Armstrong.

P.S. Why is there no hyphen between Death and Defying? Have I missed some subtle ambivalence here?

Brian McFarlane is an Honorary Associate Professor (Monash University) and Visiting Professor (University of Hull). His Encyclopedia of British Film (third edition) and his book on Great Expectations and its adaptations will be published in 2008.