PORTRAITS IN CELLULOID

Artists in various fields have long provided a common subject of the biopic. Brian McFarlane examines some recent examples of this genre.

Back in 1945, in the famous toshfest A Song to Remember, novelist Madame George Sand (Merle Oberon) had whisked her protégé–boyfriend, composer Chopin (Cornel Wilde), away from Paris, promising: 'You could make miracles of music in Majorca.' Well, he doesn't, and she is forced to berate him one wet morning with: 'Stop this polonaise jangle you've been working on for weeks'; and order him to breakfast. At the end, she is having her portrait painted when Chopin's old teacher dodders in to say the dying Chopin wants to see her. Not missing a beat, the imperious profile superbly in evidence, Madame Merle says: 'Frédéric was wrong to ask for me. Pray continue, Monsieur Delacroix.'

With that final felicitous touch of verisimilitude—novelist and composer now joined by painter—what a swathe the film cuts through the cultural life of nineteenth-century Europe! I won't say it wasn't fun when I first saw it; it was even still quite fun to watch on video in the mid-1980s; but it must be said that recent cinematic attempts to offer us portraits of the artist as young men and women have gone about their work with loftier intentions. Not for them the lush idiocies of old-time Hollywood biopics. In the 1940s alone, and just to single out composers, Schumann, Brahms, Schubert, Tchaikovsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, Jerome Kern, Cole Porter, George Gershwin, Rogers
and Hart and others were done over, generally kitted out with anodyne romances, shown briefly in moments of creative inspiration, confronted with a few obstacles, and then set on the path to triumph and renown. There would be a routine montage of place and performance, with leaves falling from calendars and trees, speeding trains, iconic architectural features to indicate a European progress, and most memorably in *A Song to Remember* ending with the plop of Chopin's blood on the keyboard.

In recent months, filmgoers have been made privy to the privacies and privations of painter Vermeer (*Girl with a Pearl Earring*), poet Sylvia Plath (*Sylvia*), composer Porter, again (*De-Lovely*), architect Louis Khan (*My Architect*), actor Edward Kynaston (*Stage Beauty*) and playwright James Barrie (*Finding Neverland*). If none of these offers the banalities of *A Song to Remember*, they are not without their own moments of cliche and sentimentality. Writers are perhaps the most difficult of all to render in cinematically interesting form as they go about their art. Joseph Strick's brave 1977 version of James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* avoided the stereotypical shots of the author looking glum or obsessed over his quill or typewriter or computer (think of Jason Robards smoking himself silly as Dashiell Hammett as he typed away in *Julia*, 1977) by focusing, as Joyce does, on the formative influences that will shape the potential artist. He allows protagonist Stephen Dedalus to talk at length about how he must use and/or put behind him the experiences of his first twenty years, and the film stops at his neophyte steps as author.

More often sources of the artist's genesis and development are rather cursorily dealt with. How did a nice American girl like Sylvia Plath end up writing tormented verse in rainy England prior to killing herself? What has brought the marriage of J.M. Barrie to the pass seen at the start of *Neverland*? How important was Porter's ambivalent sexuality to his growth as man and artist? How does Edward Kynaston's sexuality inform his pre-eminence as a portrayer of women on the Restoration stage? All right, none of these films is offered as a full-scale life of the artist, and given the scope of a two- to three-hour film as compared with, say, a 400-page biography, it would be unreasonable to expect a like concern for the minutiae that we expect of a written work. Nevertheless, sometimes it would add depth to the biopic to be given more sense of where the creative inspiration and activity have come from.

Paradoxically, though, these films have sometimes seemed more interested in the private lives of the artists, not so much in formative influences as in matters romantic. It might well be a matter of intense interest to explore the rest of the artist's life, apart from just the art, if we are to understand the kind of art she or he has produced. In the past, however, there was frequently little attempt to offer a convincing sense of other pressures at work in making the artist's life a partic-
ularly challenging one. It may well be true, as MGM would have us believe in *Till the Clouds Roll By* (1946), that Jerome Kern lived a life of blameless hard work (not, actually, all *that* hard) and enjoyed an idyllic romance and marriage, but it certainly doesn’t make for any kind of productive tension between the private and the professional life as represented in the film.

Irwin Winkler’s *De-Lovely* (2004, USA/Lux./UK) has been widely lauded as a major advance on the sort of composer’s biopic I’ve just mentioned, and especially in relation to *Night and Day*, Warner Bros’ 1945 version of the life of Cole Porter. The new film is none too kind in its reference to the latter, which starred Cary Grant, who might have made a definitive Porter in a more honest film. Kevin Kline does a carefully restrained Porter in *De-Lovely*, too watchful, too self-aware for real openness; and this performance admirably serves the treatment of Porter’s sexual ambivalence in the new film. It is in this respect that it chiefly marks an advance on Michael Curtis’s 1945 sentimentalisation: Porter’s preference for handsome young men is now made plain, but there is also something undeniably touching in the obvious devotion—the *intimacy*, as he says—between Porter and his wife, the divorcee Linda Lee.

Film-making convention still has its influence, however, as it did in 1945. Whereas the real Linda Lee Porter was known to be considerably older than her husband, in 1945 Alexis Smith’s gracious Linda was then clearly younger than Porter (Smith was in fact seventeen years younger than Grant), and Ashley Judd, who plays the new Linda with warmth and grace, is again depicted as much younger (she is actually twenty-two years younger than Kline). The point of labouring this is to suggest that, fifty years on, a mainstream movie about an artist, while it may now be able to deal more honestly with his homosexual preferences, still can’t come at the notion of a leading lady’s being older than her male opposite—not even in the interests of real-life veracity or psychological interest. (What might Freud have made of this attachment to an older woman?)

In the new film a sort of heavenly impresario, Gabe (Jonathan Pryce), guides the elderly Porter, as they sit in a drab rehearsal hall, through a procession of scenes from his life as composer, lover, husband and friend. Figures from his past and his shows come and go, and the film maintains a fluid mobility between life and performances, between different periods of the life, and between other places and this rehearsal hall. It’s a more sophisticated format than the old biopics used, but the film is really still too long and shapeless. A lot of it is attractive to look at and the songs would in any case save it if it weren’t, but it’s not really all that daring and it still notably privileges the marriage over the lovers.
Composers have the advantage in biopics in that their work can be performed, but they are not all that much better off when it comes to the business of showing the creative processes in action. For instance, is Kline sitting at the piano, jotting down notes as he composes 'So in Love', less banal than Grant responding to the pitter-patter of raindrops as he concocts 'Night and Day'? Painters in action have a more assured avenue to visual appeal: in Pollock (2002) we can watch Ed Harris in the title role slosh paint over a large area of canvas, and catch some sense of the creative spark and visceral energies involved in the execution of a work such as Blue Poles. More subtly Peter Webber's Girl with a Pearl Earring (2004) makes us aware of Vermeer's oeuvre, not just by letting us see the emergence of the eponymous girl but also by allowing cinematographer Eduardo Serra's lighting and Ben Van Os's production design miraculously to evoke the Dutch painter's world as it is known to us through his works.

Girl with a Pearl Earring copes well with two of the problems that films about artists must solve: the need to convince us that this person is or could be an artist and the decision of what to do about the art itself. Here Colin Firth is a glum but persuasively driven Vermeer, making us believe that his art matters more to him than anything else—more than his (chronically pregnant) wife, his children, or even the growing sense of erotic tension between him and Griet, the family's maid and the model for the 'girl' in the painting. This painting hangs over the whole film, both in Scarlett Johansson's watchful, minimalist performance as Griet and of course in the emerging portrait itself. The film maintains a sense of how the art of the artist's life is related to but also in conflict with the details of his everyday life. Unlike its source in Tracy Chevalier's novel, already spare enough, Webber and his screenwriter Olivia Hetreed have honed the narrative to concentrate almost wholly on Griet's time in Vermeer's house, thereby stressing the domestic claustrophobia of the drama. It is a physically cramped space reeking of strong emotional conflicts. Vermeer is under pressure from his wife and her dominating mother to produce the kind of work his patron wants and which will bring in money, yet he is the kind of artist who can only do what his creative impulses and perceptions insist on.

Actors, indeed performers of any kind, offer less intransigent obstacles to the film-maker when it comes to showing them at work. Whether it is Moira Shearer dancing her way through the ballet of The Red Shoes (1948)—and off a balcony when the conflict with private life becomes too oppressive—or Larry Parks miming to Al Jolson's voice in The Jolson Story (1946), there is something to see; there is a performance from which the audience arrives at an assessment of the
artistic talent on display. Richard Eyre’s fascinating *Stage Beauty* (2004) is adapted by Jeffrey Hatcher from his own play, *Compleat Female Stage Beauty*, in turn based on a crucial period in the life of the Restoration actor Edward ‘Ned’ Kynaston, famous for playing women’s roles in a theatre from which women were excluded. This film provides explicit comments on the nature of art and what it means for the artist and the way it can stain his entire life.

With the enactment of the law allowing women to perform on the stage, Ned’s life takes both professional and personal nosedives and, in chronicling these vicissitudes, the film exhibits a persistently intelligent pressure of ideas. ‘Why do you act?’ he is asked. ‘When you act you can be seen,’ he replies early in the film before his world has come crashing round his ears. At the end, when his former dresser Maria (Claire Danes) has made her debut as Desdemona to his Othello, and the new realism of the performance has left the audience unsettled, she asks him ‘Who are you now?’. All he can reply is ‘I don’t know.’ It is an aptly uncertain note for the film to end on. (As a matter of historical accuracy, Kynaston never played Othello, but there are more important issues at stake here than this kind of scholarly detail.)

Between these two exchanges, Hatcher’s screenplay keeps prodding away at the concept of the stage artist. Ned’s answer to the first question is a long way from the romantic ‘I-act-because-I-must’ idea; equally, though, it eschews the anomic of Peter Sellers’ bleak self-knowledge when he says ‘I don’t really have any personality of my own’ in *The Life and Death of Peter Sellers*. It is Maria who comes nearest to expressing the artist’s yearning when she says to Ned (Billy Crudup): ‘I just wanted to act. I just wanted to do what you do,’ and in the film’s opening sequence we see her standing in the wings mouthing Desdemona’s words. Her passion to act is urgent enough to send her to perform in a disreputable, unlicensed pub theatre, and she will later tell Samuel Pepys (Hugh Bonneville) that, unlike the writer who can write for himself, ‘I cannot do it for myself alone.’ As Ned has said earlier, an actor needs to be *seen*; and a little obliquely, ‘A part doesn’t belong to an actor. An actor belongs to the part.’ Perhaps because of its origins in a play, in the screenwriter’s own play, the film’s dialogue is made to bear a considerable burden in directing our attention to what it may mean to be this sort of artist.

But there is more to Ned’s story than his displacement by women actors in women’s roles. His personal life is intricately tangled with his life as an artist. As he makes his way home through designer Jim Clay’s imaginatively wrought London streets, he is propositioned by a gross nobleman (Richard Griffiths) in search of a whore. At his lodgings though, he is awaited in bed by Villiers, Duke of Buckingham (Ben Chaplin), who wants him to put on a woman’s wig before
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going down to business: 'I like to see a golden flow when I die in you' ('die' in the seventeenth-century sense of 'orgasm'). Just as he is in his professional life, Ned will be a victim of gender confusions and ambivalence in his private affairs. Villiers later tells Ned he is marrying and, when Ned taunts him, says: 'I always thought of you as a woman.' Villiers may be justifying himself, but his words may also be the sad truth about Ned: 'I don't know who you are now. I doubt you do.' Acting is thus presented as a way of both drawing on self in the interests of art, and of obscuring that self beneath an overlay of art.

Like the Sellers film, Stage Beauty does attempt to take us into the mind of one kind of artist: the kind who expresses himself by pretending to be someone else. If his art has previously been founded on his exquisite representation of women, the rest of his life will have to take a new impulse, an impulse towards greater 'realism' in the theatre, a starting point for which will be the assigning of roles to actors on more obvious gender lines. The film no doubt elides a gradual move away from stylisation to naturalism but it is to its credit that it takes an interest in the art that gives meaning to the lives of its central characters. In passing one might note that, while the sexes are conventionally sorted in Stage Beauty, nationality is another matter: like umpteen British films of the last few years, it relies on the importation of US stars Danes and Crudup to play the leading roles. Another sort of disguise is necessary for the film to get Americans into cinemas to watch a very English tale about English actors.

Architects have been less common film protagonists than composers or actors. There was Joel McCrea struggling to maintain his integrity as architect and lover in William Wyler’s Dead End (1937); Gary Cooper mixing phallic buildings with sexual passion in the Warners version of Ayn Rand’s best-seller, The Fountainhead (1948); Eiji Okada as the Japanese architect who finds love with Jeanne Moreau in Hiroshima Mon Amour (1958); Richard Moir as an architect who runs up against militant opposition to the development he has designed in the Australian Heatwave (1981); and Brian Denehy, who revealed The Belly of an Architect (1987, UK/Italy) for Peter Greenaway. Other examples could be invoked, but in nearly all instances the profession has been subsidiary to the plot, and the plot has often been dominated by sexual passion, as if this were the usual corollary to the life of the architect as artist and the responsibility for huge building projects required a more-urgent-than-usual libido.

Nathaniel Khan’s film My Architect, at once a search for a father and an exploration of his architectural triumphs, takes the breath away with some of its shots of what Louis Khan achieved. The son sets out to interview colleagues of the
father he scarcely knew, finds siblings he has never met, and discovers buildings
that, as much as great music or painting, exhibit the human spirit in soaring
mode. What most distinguishes the film is the way it memorialises Khan's art.
Architecture is, in this respect, a film-maker's dream. The products of the artist's
vision are there for anyone to see, and for a film-maker to represent in dazzling
images. For me, among the great film images of 2004 are those of the gorgeously
shot Salk Institute for Biological Studies at La Jolla, California, where the camera
imbues grey concrete blocks on either side of a concourse with something like a
spiritual dimension; or of the Kimbell Art Museum, Texas, when there is a sudden
burst on the soundtrack of Beethoven's 'Ode to Joy'—another art form being used
to intensify the sense of wonder enjoined by the architect's creation.

Khan may be a prime example of the artist who, in creating sublime art,
inevitably fails in the day-to-day business of family living. If this was true for
Khan, it was also true for Vermeer and Barrie, not to speak of Gaugin who, as the
old Hollywood version (1942) of Somerset Maugham's The Moon and Sixpence
tells us, forsook wife and children for the lure of the golden bodies of the South
Pacific, merely making great art in the process.

Finding Neverland, in its dealings with author and the fiction-reality interface
of his life, invites comparison with Gavin Millar's Dreamchild (1985), that beau-
tiful and poignant reflection on the life of Lewis Carroll/Charles Dodgson, his
most famous work, Alice in Wonderland, and the real-life Alice Liddell for whom
he wrote the stories. As Carroll, Ian Holm (who, incidentally, also played J.M.
Barrie in the BBC-TV drama The Lost Boys, 1979) offers a more complex insight
into the author's mind and his relationship with his young friend than Johnny
Depp's much praised rendering of Barrie in Finding Neverland. There is charm
and sweetness in Depp's interpretation of the playwright at a crucial time of his
life, but not much complexity. While I'd agree that in Pirates of the Caribbean he
showed a hitherto unsuspected flair for a free-wheeling campy humour, Depp
has always seemed to me a graduate of the Mt Rushmore school of acting, as if
too much thought would spoil the physical perfection.

In Finding Neverland, Barrie has just had a theatrical failure and his marriage
to social-climbing Mary (touchingly played by Australian Radha Mitchell) is
chilly. It grows still chillier when he meets Sylvia Llewellyn-Davies (Kate Winslet),
a widow with young children who provide the inspiration for the Darling family
in Peter Pan. The film takes liberties with the facts of Barrie's life and with the
family that provided the prototype for the Darlings—for example, Sylvia was not
a widow when Barrie met her and she lived for several years after the opening
night of *Peter Pan*. But *Finding Neverland* also manages an impressive sense of the connection between the art and the rest of the artist’s life, and in the film’s terms this is more important than strict adherence to the details of the lives. On the day after his failed first night he goes to the park but Mary declines to accompany him: ‘You'll be working,’ she explains, and so, of course, he proves to be when he meets the Llewellyn-Davies family. The children are playing an imaginative game and he talks to the little boy about working on his ‘imagination’, the camera demonstrating what he means when the dog he is dancing with turns into a bear. There are lots of moments like this, notably that in which the hand of Sylvia’s disapproving mother Mrs du Maurier (played with scene-stealing imperiousness by Julie Christie) turns into a hook as she reprimands the Peter-to-be. This isn’t especially subtle, but it encapsulates the connection between the real and the fictionalised—in a word, the moment of inspiration. One of the film’s recurring pleasures and strengths is this objectification of the imaginative leap.

The film is generous in the end to the two women who, not understanding his art, fear Barrie’s involvement with the children. Mary is allowed finally to say to him that she had hoped he would ‘take me with you’ to the world he has created; and Mrs du Maurier, in a *coup de cinéma*, leads the clapping that signals the belief in fairies central to that intermingling of the real world and the world of the imagination that is at the heart of *Peter Pan*—and of the life of the artist Barrie. These two women, each with grounds for suspecting Barrie, acknowledge the special nature of an artist’s vision, and they also stand for the world in which artists must move but which may not necessarily be sympathetic to the peculiarities of their gifts and needs. In Barrie’s case, the delicacy of his relationship with the children, whose easy access to the world of the imagination matches his own, leads his friend Conan Doyle (Ian Hart) to warn him that there is gossip about ‘how you spend your time with those boys and why’. Doyle goes on to generalise: ‘When you get a bit of notoriety, people … look for ways to take you down.’

This issue of ‘notoriety’ or ‘celebrity’ is crucial to the study of artists, and the artists represented in the foregoing films react to it with varying degrees of aplomb. As Ned Kynaston finds, celebrity is a fickle mistress, likely to withdraw her favours when a new allurement appears. Celebrity belongs to the artist’s professional life; it may take an exceptional human being to balance its claims against those of the other people who are important in his or her personal life. How—and how far—this balance is maintained may well be the most rewarding aspect of these cinematic portraits of the artist.