

DVD REVIEW: Looking for Richard

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Citation:

RODGERS, Diane (2016). DVD REVIEW: Looking for Richard. Cinema Retro.
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Looking for Richard (1996) Al Pacino
DVD, released 17 October 2016, RRP £9.99, cert 15, running time 112 mins approx.
(Review by Diane A. Rodgers, Oct 2016)

This film comes across as something of a vanity project for Pacino, part documentary, part dramatisation of Shakespeare's *Richard III*, in an attempt to explore, understand and represent the play to the common man. The film and its aims are ambitious perhaps and in great danger of hilarious and actorly self parody in places ("It has always been a dream of mine to communicate how I feel about Shakespeare to other people"). Although overall Pacino's film is a little confused about what its exact aims are, it does capture some entertaining aspects of the creative acting and directing process.

Pacino's sincere passion for *Richard III*, his earnest attempts to analyse it and make it relevant are admirable; the play is complex and interwoven, full of scheming politics, intrigue and backstabbing. He tackles head on a number of issues including the difficulties American actors and audiences face with the language of Shakespeare, their overly reverential attitude toward the text (which Derek Jacobi points out is the main stumbling block for American actors) and the fact that the average man-on-the-street honestly just finds Shakespeare a bit boring, amusingly illustrated in a number of vox-pops from the streets of New York.

The film features an impressive cast, including performances from and interviews with Kevin Spacey, Alec Baldwin, John Gielgud, Derek Jacobi, Kenneth Branagh, Vanessa Redgrave, James Earl Jones, Winona Ryder, Kevin Kline, and a host of other recognisable faces; therefore, the fly-on-the-wall documentary are often the most gripping. There are some genuinely heated moments of round-table rehearsals, revealing in terms of talent, dedication and understanding of actors of their own art. Notable, amongst others, are Penelope Allen (Herself / Queen Elizabeth), expressing sheer passionate outrage in a clear understanding of her character's complexities and Alec Baldwin (Himself / Duke of Clarence) who seems drop effortlessly and convincingly into inhabiting this character in a most understated manner one moment, and the next making jokes between takes about being paid in donuts. Pacino has clearly made a directorial decision to rely on close-ups and screen actors in efforts to avoid stagey British theatrical traditions, allowing actors to quietly and intimately inhabit their characters, creating a more uniquely American approach to Shakespeare.

Nonetheless, Pacino's sheer intensity and commitment to the process of this do lead to some truly ridiculous actorly moments here, worthy of a Christopher Guest-style parody. For example, Pacino's plan for casting is simply to get a bunch of (famous) actors in a room with copies of the play, let people randomly start reading out whatever parts they feel drawn to, with his intent that "the role and the actor will merge... and hopefully the casting will get done" by itself, one way or another. Cut immediately to: room full of extremely confused actors arguing about who's reading what part. In another behind-the-scenes moment, Pacino's co-director attempts to explain iambic pentameter to him; pontificating that it is "like an anteater, very high in the back and short front legs...", leaving a bewildered Pacino shrugging to camera. In fact, Pacino seems unafraid to portray himself as perhaps not the most astute or perceptive amongst his peers, admittedly finding the play "very confusing" and full of "fancy words", expressing wide-eyed awe at Kevin Spacey's clear understanding of the play: "You're a pretty smart guy".

The constant cutting of the film between behind the scenes rehearsal and documentary exposition with more filmic dramatised scenes of the play does not help with clarity for the viewer, however. The point isn't always clear, and some of Shakespeare's text, in scenes taken out of context at least, is not always easy to follow, plus it becomes increasingly unclear what type of film Pacino is trying to make here. At times, it seems a lighthearted parody film about attitudes toward Shakespeare; Kevin Kline tells a story of his earliest memories of *Richard III*, having attended the play with his girlfriend: "we made out in the back row and left in the intermission." At other times this is a documentary about American actors struggling to understand Shakespearean motives; John Gielgud, upon being asked why Americans find this difficult, replies, without irony: "Perhaps they don't go to picture galleries and read books as much as we do." It becomes even less clear with what purpose the film-within-the-film (of the cast in re-enacting *Richard III* in full period costume and setting) is being made, particularly as it is filmed using the same close-up documentary-style roving camerawork as for behind-the-scenes sections; there is no clear visual distinction for the audience as to whether this is rehearsal, play or final film.

With regards to the disc itself, the screener DVD copy available at time of review had no menu screen, artwork or extras, so it is difficult to comment on the finished article, although a recently added commentary would be a fascinating and welcome addition. The transfer itself could have been better also; the overall volume level seemed very quiet in comparison to most discs, and the contrast in terms of both colour and shadows was a little washed out and grainy.

This film is a bold attempt to grapple with a number of issues, whilst trying to do justice to the play itself, perhaps trying to do too many different things. It is a shame that the film increasingly focuses on dramatised film-within-a-film scenes when it is the behind-the-scenes documentary struggle that really provides the most fascinating aspects here. In fact, in true Shakespearean fashion, the wisest and most heartbreaking words of the entire film come from the mouth of a homeless, toothless, beggar interviewed ad-hoc in the streets of New York: "...if we think words are things, and we have no feelings in our words...it doesn't mean anything. But if we *felt* what we said, we'd say less and mean more. [wanders away from camera to a passerby] Spare some change?"