
From the Editor

MPPA Goes to Hollywood

In the 11-year history of MPPA, we have never hesitated to venture into unorthodox venues for its contents, even if at first blush they appeared far removed from the subject matter of performing arts medicine. Elsewhere in this issue is one such innovation: a review by Kyle Pruett of the movie "Shine," reprinted from the *New York Times*. Dr. Pruett, a child psychiatrist as well as a concertizing tenor, has been an eloquent and highly qualified spokesperson for the pitfalls experienced by children of prodigious talent in the performing arts. In addition, he has been a member of MPPA's Editorial Board since its founding, as well as a contributing author. This editorial was prompted because reading Dr. Pruett's interesting review stimulated some free associations on my part about the portrayal of the performing arts in movies in general as well as in the theater, and I began to wonder what lessons might be learned from a look at some of these efforts. Did these scripts tend to portray the arts and artists central to the story lines in such a way as to trivialize them or excessively dramatize them, or did they instead provide new insights that would increase the appreciation of the arts for hitherto untouched audiences? The answer is, undoubtedly, "both," but, nevertheless, I would briefly like to examine the positive side of this question and, what I believe, is an untapped if somewhat unpredictable and indirect potential source of support for the performing arts. In these days of crisis for the survival of both the arts and the artists, this subject is indeed as germane to the concerns of performing arts medicine as it is to the concerns of all involved in other aspects of arts preservation.

Once I gave free rein to my thoughts on this fascinating subject, I realize that there are an infinite number of examples, good, bad, and indifferent, of the thematic use of the performing arts and artists in movies and plays. In order to provide evidence for my thesis, that by

and large these performance formats have done a stellar job of bringing a largely unsophisticated population into a new position for appreciation of other performing art forms to which they might otherwise never have been exposed, this piece is by necessity very selective and incomplete. Even more important, I do not even touch on the communication format that has unquestionably done the most to popularize the performing arts in an almost uniformly positive fashion, and that is, of course, public television, which is in a class by itself in regard to recognizing its important potential of creating a huge new public of appreciators and core of support for the performing arts.

Let's talk briefly about "Shine," prior to looking at further examples. Shortly after Dr. Pruett's review appeared in the *New York Times*, the chief classical music critic of the *Chicago Tribune*, John von Rhein, also wrote about this movie, only in a musical context. Under the headline "Hard Rach" in his article (*Chicago Sunday Tribune*, Dec. 8, 1996, Sect. 7, p. 9.), Mr. von Rhein laid out the pianistic challenges of performing the Rachmaninoff 3rd Piano Concerto, the musical centerpiece for the story line of "Shine." The story of the film deals with the struggles of the real-life Australian pianistic prodigy, David Helfgott, who, like many prodigies, found himself thoughtlessly pushed, primarily by his father, and whose stress so peaked in his attempts to perform the Rach 3 that he suffered a catastrophic mental breakdown from which he ultimately recovered to perform that composition. (Additional psychological factors undoubtedly led to this tragedy, but they must have been complex, too much so to deal with in the movie.) In his discussion of Rach 3, von Rhein says, in part, it "represents the ultimate extension of technique one associates with the Russian piano school, . . . The composer once dryly observed he

wrote it 'for elephants'. . . Its sheer length and extreme technical and musical demands effectively place it beyond the reach of all but the most prodigious pachyderms of the piano."! Even granted the overdramatization and simplification of the script, what an eye-opener and deromanticizer of piano performance this can be for the naive and uninitiated moviegoer, while for the musically more sophisticated, it is an opportunity to further appreciate the musical challenges of the Rachmaninoff 3rd, all garnered in the name of entertainment.

A blockbuster movie that had a tremendous impact on a diverse population of moviegoers was the now-classic "Amadeus." While it was undeniably controversial in much of its story line, it presented an at-least-plausible and interesting concept of Mozart's personality, as well as a version of his not-that-well-documented (indeed if anything in Mozart's short life can be said to be well documented!) relationship with Salieri and the latter's possible role in completing the unfinished "Requiem" after Mozart's tragic death. Whether one agreed with all of the historical and other material forming the basis for the film seems inconsequential in the face of spending several hours transfigured by both the visual and the musical beauty so well performed and well woven into the story line. But did you know that, following the success of the movie "Amadeus," the Mozart "Requiem" was unobtainable in most record stores and was the best-seller of its time? This sellout was not a consequence of all of us relatively few classical music lovers rushing out to buy a new recording of this unique and powerful music; like it or not, this was due to the impact the first exposure to the "Requiem" had on average moviegoers, probably some of the same public who were fighting over the short supply of this past holiday season's fad in toys, "Tickle-Me Elmo." This analogy may

be offensive to some but will, I think, stand up, albeit with an important difference: hopefully at least some of those who bought the record realize they have the possibility for an experience of lasting and growing meaning by listening to Mozart, while Elmo's interest and durability are unlikely to outlast the holidays! If only a fraction of those who for the first time heard Mozart in "Amadeus" are excited enough to take a further step, perhaps not retuning the car radio to a rock station when classical music is played, or buying another classical recording or attending a concert, or even suggesting music lessons to their kids, what an invaluable dividend for a fine movie this would be! This is a gross oversimplification of what is required to motivate a new and typically resistant public, but it is available and has, I believe, great potential if suitably and imaginatively used.

Other movies with musical themes that have potential for educational purposes include "Mme. Sousatzka" and "The Competition," both of which are tastefully done, i.e., they neither overdramatized nor trivialized, and gave yet another view of the potential devastation of talented and potentially productive lives wrought by the traditional educational path taken by many musically gifted youngsters. Both these films give realistic, if slightly bent for the purposes of entertainment, views of the effects of selfish and unthinking psychological pressure by some master teachers as well as by the potential for destructive effects of competitions pursued in the guise of education and success.

A view of another aspect of education is given in the play "Master Class," which not only portrays a legendary and fairly accurate picture of Maria Callas' exceptionally difficult diva personality, but also offers a more imaginative view of what might have been her sadistic approach to vocal pedagogy and her interaction with students anxious to follow in her musical, if not personal, footsteps. Given the cost of theater tickets, this play cannot have the kind of mass educative impact of a movie, although given its success on Broadway and now on tour, a Hollywood version might well be in the offing.

The popularized presentation of the

performing arts in movies has not been limited to music; dance, particularly ballet, has also been used thematically in many movies, some more successfully or accurately than others. Among these movies I cite two examples, both of which featured Mikhail Baryshnikov, an extraordinary dancer whose acting talents are less impressive: in this context the one that was good was "Turning Point" and the one that was poor was "White Knights." The first, in spite of taking the usual dramatic liberties, does in fact present some aspects of a realistic view of life in the ballet, with its many sources of stress, especially on younger dancers. If one thinks these were overdrawn in "Turning Point," one has only to read Gelsey Kirkland's autobiography, *Dancing on My Grave*, to realize that what may seem to have been exaggerated for the sake of drama in the movie can, under the worst of circumstances, be unfortunately true to life. The second movie cited above is, I think, an example of disservice to dance by the very superficial working of the elegant dancing of Mikhail Baryshnikov and Gregory Hines into a third-rate script on life behind iron-curtained Russia, complete with the KGB, spying, counterspying, and all the rest, none of which had anything to do with dancing, which could easily have been replaced by chess playing for thematic material.

There are those who do not applaud the popularization by the movies of otherwise serious art forms and do not see the educational or musical virtues of a film such as "Shine." In the Sunday *New York Times* of December 22, 1996, the critic Bernard Holland writes a rather scathing review of this movie from just this point of view, and at the same time he deplores the overpopularization of certain pieces of musical repertoire, e.g., the Rachmaninoff 3rd Piano Concerto, equating the tendency to overprogram such music to the compromised distinctiveness of food served up to the masses by such establishments as McDonald's. "Psychiatrists, welcome to 'Shine': enjoy the bona fide melodrama. Rejoicers in the human spirit: let 'Shine' give you heart. But music lovers: how can you

get excited about a cozy piece of schlock like this? If you want to accuse David Helfgott's father of child abuse, fine. I accuse him of bad taste." Mr. Holland, who himself has been accused of being both a cultural snob and a hopelessly provincial New Yorker from some of his reviews, is challenging both the movie and the music as too plebeian for his apparent tastes. He overlooks the opportunities to bring in a public that with suitable exposure might even eventually endorse the kind of music programming that Mr. Holland would espouse. Furthermore, he does not apparently recognize the real-life current crisis in the arts that not only demands a wider base of financial support but would greatly benefit from a kind of popular groundswell that would increase audiences in number and in their appreciation of a variety of art forms. This type of popular support is critical to apply pressure on school boards to reinstate arts in the schools where they have been deleted as nonessential in the name of economy, and a public that will ensure that representatives do not get elected to Congress unless they recognize the electorate's view of the arts as essential to the quality of American life and that its support is a legitimate function of the federal governmental through an agency such as the NEA.

This essay developed using Kyle Pruett's review as a springboard. However, in limiting the discussion as I have, the most effective means of mass communication of the performing arts was only briefly mentioned, and this is PBS, which has tastefully and consistently been able to present full-length operas, "Live from Lincoln Center," most of the major dance companies, and "live" theater to an audience the size and nature of which defy the imagination. The attempts by Hollywood to make palatable presentations of the arts pale by comparison with PBS's success. However, to some extent, these media probably have different audiences, and they represent different means to some of the same ends, and value judgments are thus inappropriate. More power to them all!

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