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Fantasy Versus Redemption: Religious Possibility in *Little Voice*

Abstract

The author examines the religious significance of a recent and moderately successful British film which, while heavily reviewed in the international press and on the world wide web, has not generally been perceived by critics and audiences to comprise an overtly religious vision. Although in its first hour the film conforms to the somewhat ephemeral and fantasy-oriented structure of traditional Hollywood-style escapism, *Little Voice* is open to a fertile religious reading. The film abandons traditional Hollywood devices and bears witness to the Christian theme of redemption.

When *Little Voice* (Mark Herman, 1998) went on national release in the United Kingdom in 1999, it was inevitable that it would be compared to at least one other contemporary film which had grappled with an ostensibly similar subject matter, Peter Cattaneo's *The Full Monty* (1997). Although both films are set in the context of British unemployment and the concomitant social effects of hopelessness and desperation, *The Full Monty* merely conforms to a Hollywood model of escapism and fantasy, where a short-term success or advantage - namely, a strip routine performed on stage at a Working Men's Club - supposedly liberates the characters from pain and suffering, and enables them to find solidarity, a sense of purpose and pride, even of mission. *Little Voice* is a markedly different film. It provides an account of redemption that corresponds to various tenets of Christianity rather than to fantasies of Hollywood. This difference makes *Little Voice* a much more significant and religiously fecund film.

Like Cattaneo's picture, *Little Voice* has been nominated for awards in a number of international competitions, including the Golden Globes, BAFTAs, and the Academy Awards. It is likewise set in the North of England, within a general ambience of economic deprivation and gloom. A shade of darkness and death pervades this film - both literally insofar as the ghost of the protagonist's late father looms over her at all times, and in a social context, insofar as the setting is a drab,

northern seaside town (shot in Scarborough), which has long passed its heyday and has the look of being perennially 'out of season'.

Michael Caine plays the part of a theatrical booking agent, Ray Say. However, until he discovers 'LV', or 'Little Voice' (Jane Horrocks), the only 'talent' we know he has discovered consists of an introverted stripper, a vulgar assembly of rotund men calling themselves 'Take Fat' and a geriatric, visually impaired knife thrower. In the film, Say learns that LV is a singer who is able to deliver uncannily spot-on impersonations of the likes of Judy Garland, Marilyn Monroe, Shirley Bassey and Gracie Fields. On a superficial rendering of the film, her expression of their talent is analogous to the climax in *The Full Monty*. Yet there is a fundamental difference in the way these two films wrestle with these two expressions of "talent". The difference reveals why a distinctively religious reading of Little Voice is appropriate.

The character of *LV*, played both in the film and in the original stage version by Jane Horrocks, is a semi-autistic young woman. She never leaves her home and we constantly see her retreating to her bedroom and to the record collection of her late father as a way of escaping the intrusions and put-downs of her brash and overbearing mother, Mari Hoff (Brenda Blethyn), described by one reviewer as "boozy, foul-mouthed" and "cock-hungry". (Andy Medhurst in *Sight and Sound* 9,1 January 1999, p.38) Mari introduces LV to Ray Say as "a misery; a miserable,

bloody misery" and likens her to a bird trapped in the rafters, in the dark all day. The film's recurrent motif is indeed that of a caged bird unable in the initial instance to spread its wings.

Religious imagery is also potent throughout the picture. Ray Say appears in one of the film's early scenes as a Lucifer-figure, trying to seduce LV with promises of riches, pearls and international fame if she agrees to exploit her private and unpretentious 'talent' on the stage. Handing her his gold card, he explains to her, "I wouldn't give one of these to just anyone, you know." His role as Tempter is testified by Mari's acknowledgement to her friend, Sadie (Annette Badland), that "Try as I do, I cannot say no to that man".

Ray is also construed as a misguided Creator-figure. Indeed, Mari refers to him as "agent to the stars, king of cabaret, manager of miracles", and he endeavours to instill in LV the understanding that she is his discovery, if not his creation - "I found you. Always remember that."

There are also Messianic connotations vis-a-vis LV's own character in this film. In the Fourth Gospel, Christ is identified as "the Light of the World" (John 11:5) and as "the true light that enlightens every man" (John 1:9). He "shines in the darkness", and whom the darkness has not been able to overcome (John 1:5). In an analogous fashion, in *Little Voice*, Ray Say is so overwhelmed by LV's exceptional

'gift', he attests, "Let there be light." When she is finally enticed on to the stage, she is introduced by the theatre's proprietor, Mr. Boo (Jim Broadbent), as "a talent, an undiscovered treasure, an act of wonder..., a northern light." Mari and Ray even take on the function of two of the 'magi', or 'wise men', who, according to Matthew 2, come to Bethlehem to attend the infant Jesus, and bestow on him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Say actually offers LV nothing more tangible than his gold card, but he instills in Mari the notion that, thanks to her child, she is "sitting on a goldmine." Further, there is a prophetic dimension to the next scene, when Ray and Mari enter LV's bedroom that night with the claim of "coming bearing good news".

A memorable scene is of Mari, Ray and Mr. Boo standing transfixed outside LV's bedroom window. They listen to her rendition of Judy Garland singing 'Over the Rainbow', and in particular the words, "Some day I'll wish upon a star, and wake up where the clouds are far behind me... That's where you'll find me." Boo is initially convinced it must be Judy Garland he is listening to, the impersonation being so convincing. This episode, which is followed by Boo bearing witness to the fact that "You have a remarkable daughter, Mrs. Hoff", is encapsulated at that almost mystical moment by the reference in Matthew 2: 9-10:

and lo, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.

No matter how spurious or wide of the mark these biblical references may be, there is little doubt that LV is construed in *Little Voice* as some kind of soteriological, or at least magical, figure. She can, in Ray's words, "make dreams that you dare to dream... come true." Indubitably, Ray sees in LV the agency and the vehicle of his own deliverance and redemption from a hitherto failed career. He implores at one point, "She's our chance, Mari. We've been shoveling shit long enough, you and me. Now's our chance to step out of it."

It is, however, where the narrative takes us from this point that *Little Voice* can be seen to function as a decidedly non-escapist picture, even though certain Cinderella-like fairy-tale and fantasy-oriented ingredients underpin this drama. While LV's sublime performance on stage at Boo's nightclub constitutes the film's crescendo, it in no way encompasses the film's climax. The rest of the film, in contradistinction to the strip-performance in *The Full Monty* (which concludes that picture) takes us into darker and more complex territory. It endeavours to grapple with the ramifications of this ostensibly triumphant episode.

Despite drawing on the symbolism of a shy and timid bird leaving its cage when she first appears on stage, the film does not elicit the facile or all-too-convenient proposition that LV's public performance is ultimately to her benefit. What is not in dispute in the film's concluding scenes is that LV has been shamelessly exploited by Ray and her mother. This consideration needs to be

wholly acknowledged and understood, by exploiter and exploited alike, if the redemption of any of the characters is in any elementary sense possible. Any signs or glimmers of redemption in *Little Voice* only ultimately stem from the experience of living in the 'real' world, as opposed to the characteristically fake and illusory Hollywood world - the 'reel' world of an escapist movie.

The Analogy of *The Purple Rose Of Cairo*

This dichotomy between real and reel worlds is clearly exemplified in Woody Allen's *The Purple Rose Of Cairo* (1985). Here, in a subtle and sophisticated manner, Allen explores the dangers and the disingenuity of traditional Hollywood fantasies. Mia Farrow plays Cecilia, a desolate and forlorn waitress in 1930s New Jersey. Desperate for escape from her unemployed, indolent, violent and philandering husband, Cecilia frequents her local movie house where the escapist fantasies with which she is besotted might be said to function as a substitute for her failed life. After watching the same picture, *The Purple Rose Of Cairo*, on at least five consecutive screenings, a character from the film, Tom Baxter (Jeff Daniels), literally walks out of the screen and strikes up a friendship with Cecilia. In light of her almost pathological fixation on Hollywood fantasies, it is hardly surprising that she should fall in love with him. However, when the real actor who plays Tom Baxter, Gil Shephard, turns up, Cecilia manages, at least temporarily, to forget her obsession with the illusory Tom Baxter. She chooses Gil over Tom. She

explains to the latter, "See, I'm a real person. No matter how... tempted I am, I have to choose the real world."

Such a realisation that the world of Hollywood cinema is ultimately no surrogate for the empirical world thus goes some way toward presenting a critique of the false and deluded hopes it has the capacity to impart. In actuality, however, in choosing Gil over Tom there is still a fundamental sense in which Cecilia is choosing the 'reel' world of Hollywood. Gil's profession is illusion. It consists in the making and selling of dreams. The illusory nature of the world he inhabits is borne out by his sudden decision to abandon her without explanation and to return to Hollywood. He leaves her alone and dejected once again.

The cinema's false hopes and dreams have in no small measure contributed to Cecilia's predicament. We observe Cecilia in the final scene again seeking escape and solace from the misery of her world. She is again immersing herself in a Hollywood musical at her local movie house. As Gary Commins noted in *Theology Today* (vol. 44, July 1987, p245), while she sits transfixed, listening to Fred Astaire singing 'I'm in Heaven', in a scene from *Top Hat* (1935), she sits, correspondingly, in her own personal "hell". The notion that Hollywood escapism has the capacity to convey redemptive significance is thus a fantasy as far as Cecilia's life is concerned, her inability to recognise this only exacerbating the illusion. There is, if

anything, a sense in which the false and deluded hopes such films have the potential to engender embody the very antithesis of redemption.

This antithesis is adroitly illustrated in *Little Voice*. We see the spectacle of an autistic and withdrawn young woman performing on stage, singing 'Chicago', and the hope expressed within the lyrics pertaining to "losing the blues". Yet, the setting is a drab, rundown Scarborough theatre which, in Ray Say's words, "no-one in their right mind wants to go to." Just as Cecilia encounters the facade of Hollywood, with its manufactured dreams and artificial promises, LV only 'comes alive' on stage in a transitory and ephemeral sense. It is, after all, the ghost of her dead father that sustains her, with the clear implication that she has not yet come to terms with his passing. Her immersion in his record collection and her talent for emulating the voices of its artists are substitutes for an authentic existence. When the vision of her father leaves her, she, like Cecilia in *The Purple Rose Of Cairo*, is bereft of spirit. It is symbolically significant that when she collapses on stage, following her electrifying performance, Mari presumes at first that her daughter has "bleated and died with all the shock".

The Full Monty concludes in a manner akin to the vision of Hollywood that Woody Allen is critiquing in *Purple Rose* - the fantasy that everything can magically and immediately be made right. In reality, the unemployed men who endeavour to emancipate themselves by stripping in the final scene would find

themselves penalised by the social security system that has hitherto sustained them.¹ The film's protagonist, Gary (Robert Carlyle), would be able to contribute only partially toward his child support obligations. There are no indications that his status as an out-of-work, somewhat misguided and naive father, will fundamentally change after this event. His ex-wife's barbed reproach is difficult to forget: "Face it Gary, he [their son] doesn't even enjoy staying at your place."² The underlying social problems have not changed, yet there is an almost utopian dimension to the film's denouement.

Ironically, *Little Voice*, with its overt fairy-tale motifs, takes all the staples of Hollywood fantasy, and yet turns them on their head. This reversal is played out after the stage performance and it is echoed in the song that accompanies the film's closing credits. The song is Irving Berlin's classic 'There's No Business Like Show Business', performed by Ethel Merman, containing as it does the sentiments, so utterly incongruous with the cynical tone of what we have just witnessed in the film, that "Everything about it is appealing".

Shame and Redemption

Only when LV develops a voice of her own, a voice with which she is able to defy and challenge her mother's and Ray's efforts to subdue and manipulate her, does the question of her redemption arise in this film. For the first time in her life,

we witness LV at the close of the picture standing up to and confronting Mari regarding the past. She castigates her for her shortcomings as a wife and mother -

You drove [DM] as fast as you could to an early grave. With your men, and your shouting, and your pals, and your nights and your nights and your nights... of neglect... When he had his records on, he sparkled. Not dazzling, like you, but with fine lights. He never spoke up to you, 'cos you would never listen. And I never spoke up to you, because I could never get a word in.

In large part, LV is the victim of her mother's shame. Mari clearly feels a sense of inadequacy over what she has failed to achieve with her life. This sense of self-loathing comes to the fore in her relationship with Ray. When she invites him back to her place for the first time, she enquires of herself, "What am I doing in front of you?", and is mortified at what she calls her "crappity home". She has a short-lived jubilation when Ray avows that she is "a once-in-a-lifetime thing", and that, "I've never felt this way before - about anything." However, her hopes are shattered when she discovers that he was actually referring to her daughter, the morning after catching a brief, but portentous, glimpse of LV's imitation of Judy Garland. Mari is mortified that she could have been so gullible. As she then asks of Ray, "What about me, eh? Where do I fit in? Me, the fuckin' second-class act."

Ray successfully convinces her at this point that she has an important role to play in his life. As he puts it, "I'm going nowhere without you, girl". However,

his growing frustration over LV's failure to cooperate with his plans culminates in his more brazen and candid disclosure to Mari in a later scene -

We go nowhere [together]. For a start, you're past it. Your body's gone... There's no way that you're coming with me and her to better things. No way, love... All you're doin' is getting in the way... You've had it, Mari. For God's sake, wise up, woman, eh?

At this point Ray is still himself displaying a naiveté. He still presumes that, short-term difficulties aside, LV, if sufficiently encouraged, will do as he asks. As he attests to Boo, "Up to the bloody sky we're goin'... Here's to the rise and rise of Little Voice." Yet, his words have obviously struck a chord with Mari, who poignantly and forlornly expresses the reality of the situation at the end to her daughter - "I can't start again, now, can I? Who'd want me, anyway?" If there is to be any redemption for Mari and Ray, it will not be along the lines that they had anticipated.

Redemption from Shame

The centrality given to the concept of shame in *Little Voice* links with Robert Jewett's argument in his recent publication, *Saint Paul Returns to the Movies: Triumph over Shame* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Michigan & Cambridge, 1999), that the burden of shame needs to be acknowledged and faced up to if it is to be exorcised and overcome. According to Jewett, this is what Paul enabled people to do. Jewett refers to Barbra Streisand's *The Prince Of Tides* (1991)

in this regard. The Wingo family grew up with a burden of shameful and destructive family secrets. These need to be confronted if the suicidal daughter, Savannah, is to be healed (or redeemed). Jewett explains that Streisand's film "throws light on 1 Corinthians 14 by indicating why 'the secrets of the heart' need to be exposed." In his words, "It reveals that the secrets of shame are profoundly crippling and that they need to be brought to light before people can come to health" (p25).

In a similar fashion, *Little Voice* deftly illustrates that, without this process of engagement, the characters are in no way going to be redeemed. Any hope or redemption we could speak of would have to be enforced on to rather than read out of the material. Without confronting the depths of their shame, any hope of recovery, as in *The Full Monty*, would be fanciful and contrived. Ray and Mari do not become more enlightened or sympathetic by the end of the picture - both are too proud and conceited to concede or even perceive that they have brought about their own downfall. In this regard, they violate the Hollywood custom of reconciliation and renewal.³ Rather, these misguided, pitiable, or even tragic figures are materially and emotionally bankrupt by the film's conclusion.

In marked contrast, finding her own voice and no longer fixated on her late father's record collection, LV does undergo a redemptive experience. It takes the form of her tentative courtship with Billy (Ewan McGregor), who is presented as LV's soulmate and - in a sense - her saviour. Indeed, Billy literally rescues her from

her home after it has caught fire, and her father's record collection has been destroyed. Although he saves her, however, any redemption there is comes from within LV's own character. She is now able to respond to Billy's overture that "There's people other than your dad... who might think something of you. People who are still alive." Speaking with a voice and personality of her own, she has the capacity to intimate to Billy that "things are fine, now." Considering she was all-but-mute at the beginning of the film, a prisoner in her own home and able to speak only through the voices of her late father's favourite singers, her arc, or trajectory is large and complete. Exactly what will happen beyond this point we may only surmise. Yet, the transformation in LV's character is of a kind that disallows an overtly escapist reading. It imbues *Little Voice* with a more authentically redemptive significance.

Conclusion

It would, of course, be facile to suggest that this interpretation of *Little Voice* is the only definitive reading of the film. A number of reviewers have, for instance, taken issue with the manner in which the film develops in the last half-hour. Roger Ebert of the *Chicago Sun-Times* claims that the romance between LV and Billy distracts "from the true climax of the movie", which for him was LV's "showstopper" performance at Mr. Boo's nightclub. Indeed, Ebert laments the fact that the film fails in not conforming to the structure and form of the classic

Hollywood movie.⁴ It is problematic, in his view, that Ray Say becomes less, rather than more, likeable as the film progresses, from "sympathetic and funny in the opening and middle scenes", to "mean at the end" - and for what Ebert considers to be "no good reason."

This is not a reading I share, however. Rather, *Little Voice* is akin to Woody Allen's *The Purple Rose Of Cairo*, insofar as both films wrestle with the problems inherent in seeking authenticity in a world predicated on escapism and fantasy. Allen's film delineates, in the character of Cecilia, a treatise on the seductive, though ultimately hollow, lure of Hollywood movies. So also *Little Voice* explores the dichotomy between the magic and triumph bound up with the 'reel' world of Hollywood film and the actuality of an alienated, dysfunctional and often squalid 'real' world, where it is spurious and, as the film suggests, potentially detrimental, to suppose that "the dreams that you dare to dream" can so easily and readily "come true", at least without any sort of price. Whatever its shortcomings or flaws⁵, *Little Voice* is an intelligent, intensely provocative and, at the same time, remarkably tender film. While grossing substantially less at the British box office than *The Full Monty* two years earlier⁶, it is by far the more challenging and insightful work.

¹ Having earned a few hundred pounds each for one night's work, the strippers would not be entitled to continue receiving state benefits. Their little gain, after the loss of all other benefits to which, if unemployed, they would be entitled, is not going to alleviate their plight. And yet the film is intent on manufacturing a triumphant ending.

² Had Ray and Mari been presented as overtly unsympathetic characters from the outset, their failures at the end would have been seen, from both LV's and the audience's point of view, as appropriate and justly deserved. We are, however, presented with characters who at first appear sympathetic and humorous. Only as the film develops do we come to witness their faults and flaws.

³ Ebert's review can be located at <http://www.suntimes.com/ebert/ebert-reviews/1998/12/120401.html>

⁴ It is ironic that Ebert should write, "I was reminded of old musicals that were handmade as showcases for big stars. The plot was just a clothesline for Astaire's big dance number or Mario Lanza's solo." In the case of *Little Voice*, Jane Horrocks' character is far removed from the world of the old Hollywood musical, and the film's plot is rather more than simply a 'clothesline' for her stage performance - indeed, that scene actually sets the wheels of the film's 'third act' in motion.

⁵ One criticism that could be leveled at the film is that, so pivotal and well-developed are the 'supporting' characters that they have the effect of knocking the film's conclusion off balance. While the film is ostensibly about LV, the performances of Brenda Blethyn as Mari and Michael Caine as Ray are so strong, and, as their lives inexorably disintegrate around them following LV's refusal to go on stage a second night, so intense by the end that they somewhat overshadow her. Caine's vigorous and almost unbearably painful rendition of Roy Orbison's 'Its Over', a metaphor not exactly underplayed in what must rank as one of the most electrifying performances ever committed to celluloid, is my most abiding memory of the film.

⁶ *Little Voice* took £8 million at the UK box office in 1999 (*Empire* magazine, issue 127, January 2000, p126), whereas *The Full Monty* took £52 million (according to *Screen International*).