

The Epic Sound of Melodrama:

Red Violin



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Reaches the Screen

By Marc Glassman

It's a sad fact that now, more than a century after the Lumière brothers gave birth to cinema, the release of a Canadian film made for more than \$10 million is immediately worthy of celebrity status. Very few films produced in this country have carried such a large price tag and, apart from Phillip Borsos's *Bethune: The Making of a Hero* (1990) none have attempted to shoot major scenes in foreign lands. So the release of a feature produced out of Toronto but shot in Northern Italy, the Austrian Alps, Oxford in England, Shanghai in China, and Montreal must be met with muted, but dare I say nationalist, huzzahs.

The Red Violin is that rarity, a Canadian epic filled to the brim with beautiful location shooting, internationally acclaimed film stars and a complex, episodic narrative. That the film was made for \$15 million, peanuts by the *Titanic* standards of Hollywood today, merely underscores the canniness and professional acumen of the team assembled by Rhombus Media producer Niv Fichman and director François Girard. A fine script by Don McKellar and Girard based on the director's concept of following a musical instrument through time and space proved to be an excellent aid in garnering talent, attracting the participation of such notables as Quentin Tarantino acting favourite Samuel L. Jackson, screen beauty Greta Scacchi and Chinese film icon Sylvia Chang. Fichman was able to induce co-producers Channel Four (Britain), Mikado (Italy) and New Line International (United States) to come on board, thanks to the extensive connections he has developed producing arts documentaries for the past two decades.

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Availing themselves of top crews in each country, Girard and his ace cinematographer Alain Dostie (*Thirty-two Short Films About Glenn Gould*, *Le Confessionnal*) have crafted a sumptuous look to the film. As the story travels through three centuries and five countries, telling the tale of a perfect but cursed violin, they render each sequence with élan and a rigorous eye toward period details. Their choice of a colour palette subtly shifts one's emotional responses, turning a romantic tale into something cooler as the film progresses: warm browns and reds for Italy, the dark hues of the monastery and music master Poussin's chambers in Austria, cooler greens and yellows for British virtuoso Frederick Pope's estate, blues and earth tones appropriate for China during its Cultural Revolution, and a severely reduced, matter-of-fact use of the chromatic scale for the auctioneering scenes in contemporary Montreal.

Having worked together as the producer and director on *Thirty-two Short Films About Glenn Gould* and "The Sound of Carceri," one of the six-part, multiple award-winning *Yo-Yo Ma: Inspired By Bach* series, Fichman and Girard are hardly a duo that would ignore the musical possibilities inherent in a film whose main star is a violin. Joshua Bell, the young and very talented American violinist whose

work with such leading orchestras as the Chicago Symphony, the New York Philharmonic and the London Symphony has attracted worldwide acclaim, was secured for the project two years before Girard began to shoot the film. "I would expose all the material to him," recalls Girard. "He read different drafts and discussed it with us and came up with his own ideas about how we could make the story work for the violin." Bell records with Sony Classical and it was Peter Gelb, the company's head, who introduced Girard to composer John Corigliano. An opera and symphony composer, Corigliano was initially reluctant to return to film music, having had a bad experience on Hugh Hudson's *Revolution*. "It was tense at first," Girard admits, "but it didn't take very long before we became friends. Soon it became the most extraordinary adventure."

Like Bell, Corigliano read drafts of McKellar's and Girard's scripts, allowing him into the process of creating the moods and tones of each portion of the story. When, for example, Girard told Corigliano that his "temp" music for a scene in a Chinese pawnshop was a piece by Sibelius, Girard recalls that the composer "thought the connection was absolutely right. He transcribed the melody and harmony, so he could key the shapes and structures of the piece. Then he wrote it in his own way.

It's completely different (from the Sibelius) but fits exactly the same way into the visual build-up of the scene."

The Red Violin can rightly be praised for most elements in its production. The sound, the look, the production values are all there in the finely crafted details of this well-made film. But, as Girard himself observes, "nothing is more important than the characters, the text, the meaning of each scene." If the film is truly worthy of praise, then the story itself must work. And it is clear that, for some, the tale and the treatment are off-putting. One hears that the film is too cold or old-fashioned for contemporary audiences. If my assessment of *The Red Violin* is, on the whole, positive, it is with the understanding that production values are not enough to make a movie successful. The tale, which Girard believes to be about "love and immortality," should communicate itself to an audience. Though Girard's own judgment of the story's thrust differs from mine, there is no doubt that filmgoers should relate to what is on the screen—a fine melodramatic tale with more than a touch of the supernatural.

Girard, himself, takes a detached, almost mystical, approach to the process involved in creating *The Red Violin*. "I tend to believe that the only real free choice we have is in

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choosing a subject," he says. "Once you decide to do a story about a violin through time, you have a sort of code, a DNA code, that will unfold as you progress. It's our job to dig into it and find out what's there and take care of it.... You're planting a seed and it becomes a tree. We're responsible for providing it with whatever it needs, but the story is already comprised in essential elements that unfold later, as the story progresses." Neil Bissoondath and André Alexis, both highly regarded contemporary Canadian novelists, often talk about their characters and plots in a manner similar to that of Girard. It's as if artists are vessels, channelling great stories into fruition. At any rate, it certainly makes their opinions

on their works no more valid than those of those former ink-stained wretches, now known as computer nerds, who form the critics union.

The story of *The Red Violin* is divided into five sections interwoven by two key scenes, a tarot reading in 17th-century Italy and an auction in modern-day Montreal. The tragic birthing of the violin, in Cremona, Italy, during the late 1600s is the subject of the first part of the tale. Niccolo Bussotti (Carlo Cecchi), a contemporary of Stradivarius during the golden age of violin making, is devastated when his pregnant wife (Irene Grazioli) dies in childbirth, leaving a stillborn baby. Bussotti commemorates his love for her by placing elements of her body—blood and hair—into his finest creation, a perfect "marriage of science and beauty"—a new violin. Anna Bussotti's spirit inhabits the instrument thereafter, and her spectral presence is evoked by a tarot reading interpreted for her by Cesca, her servant, days before her death. Simultaneously, the tale of the violin progresses as if Anna's child had not been stillborn, moving from childhood in Austria to reckless youth in England, to motherhood in China and maturity in Montreal.

In the second section, 100 years have passed and the violin is now in the possession of monks in an Austrian monastery. A child prodigy, Kaspar Weiss, plays the violin so beautifully that the Christian Brothers decide to place him in the hands of maestro Poussin (Jean-Luc Bideau), a down-on-his-heels fugitive from the French Revolution. Kaspar, played wonderfully by 10-year-old violinist Christoph Koncz, dies for his art and love of the violin. Another century passes and the gifted, but conceited British virtuoso Frederick Pope (Jason Flemyng) takes possession of the violin from the descendants of gypsies who stole the instrument from Kaspar's grave. Initially inspired by the violin, Pope, too, has to pay the price for his love of the instrument. His lover, Victoria (Greta Scacchi), identifies the violin as the true "shameless hussy" in this section's love triangle.

The violin then moves on to China, transported there by Pope's Asian manservant. It is purchased by a mother for her young daughter, Xiang Pei (Sylvia Chang), who grows up to be a prominent member of the Communist Party during the 1960s Cultural Revolution. Violins are denounced as decadent instruments from the West, and Xiang Pei has to pay a heavy price for saving her beloved red violin. Finally, in 1990s Montreal, the violin arrives, unknown, as part of a lot being sold for Western cash by the Communist regime. Its origins are revealed through the detective work of authenticator Charles Morritz (Samuel L. Jackson) who, too, falls under the siren song of the violin.

Girard and McKellar have crafted a story with a number of unusual conceits. Their red violin, for example, is the true star of the film. How many stories are really about objects rather than the people who come into contact with them? Take John Huston's *The Maltese Falcon*, for example. In that classic piece of Hollywood hokum, the falcon is not the star but a fake, whose cautionary appeal, the notion that it is "the stuff that dreams are made of," resonates throughout a film where the characters are pre-eminent. In many other films, such as *The Yellow Rolls-Royce* and *Genevieve*, cars are used as devices to move the plot along; they are not the true protagonists of the narratives. An exception to this structural sleight-of-hand is John Carpenter's *Christine*, in which the car is the true villain of the piece, a motorized kin to Freddy Krueger. And curiously, the violin does function in a role similar to *Christine*: all those who truly desire it end up suffering punishments for their love of the instrument.

This notion of the curse surrounding the violin is made palpable through one of the key organizing principles of the film, the use of the tarot deck. As Anna Bussotti contemplates her fate, her servant turns over the cards which introduce each episode of the film. The cards could hardly be less reassuring. Bussotti herself receives the Moon,

Sylvia Chang





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Director François Girard

ostensibly offering long life and travel, but only, it turns out, through her second corporeal entity, the violin. Poor, doomed Kaspar Weiss is dealt the Hanged Man, while Pope is given the Devil. Xiang Pei's card is Justice, surely ironic, or worse, during the blood-thirsty Cultural Revolution. And the ultimate card, dealt to Morritz, is an upside-down Death, signifying a possible rebirth; however, given what else has transpired in the story, it is hardly an auspicious image for him or the violin.

If one subtext of the film is doom-laden, another shows a sensitivity toward history and geography. Girard refers to this notion as "the geographic-distance factor. As we progress in the film, the distance between each place is increasing. From Cremona, in Northern Italy, to the Austrian Alps and Vienna is not so far; then from Vienna to England is a bigger distance; from there to China is bigger still; and then to Montreal is farther again." This movement in the film links the story to improvements in transportation over the centuries. While the violin travels to England and China by boat, it arrives and departs Montreal via airplane. Through the violin's travels, one can also observe that the fate controlling the instrument can affect people from various cultures and situations.

By contrast, Girard points out that "the progression in time [in *The Red Violin's* episodes] follows something similar to the geographic story in a reverse way. The gap between each story decreases, getting shorter and shorter, and that corresponds to the acceleration in history." While the pace of events does increase as the film progresses, it is interesting to note that the two revolutions chronicled in the tale, the French one which exiled Poussin and the Chinese one which forced Xiang Pei to renounce her instrument, are given short shrift. Even if life does proceed in a faster

manner today, revolutions, which are antagonistic to classical cultural practices, are still worthy of decrying.

Each story in *The Red Violin* tells the age-old tale of an overbearing man whose attempts to control the situations that surround him are doomed to failure. In Italy, Bussotti, the imperious violin maker can't save his beloved wife. Poussin, the financially strapped master of the violin, badly gauges the strength of Kaspar, his surrogate son, dooming the boy to a fateful audition. The volatile and highly sexual Pope loses his muse, and ultimately his life, when he temporarily transfers affections from his novelist lover to the beautiful violin and an attractive gypsy woman. The controlling character in the Chinese episode is Mao, whose repressive and dictatorial nature attenuates the emotional and aesthetic growth of his people during the ironically entitled Cultural Revolution. And in Montreal, it is Morritz, the instrument evaluator, incisively played by Jackson, whose detective work and dominant nature commands everyone's attention in the final section of the film. His fate, and that of his daughter, are left undetermined in the film's conclusion.

The Red Violin, as a cultural production, risks its financial survival on a point that can only be perceived as good old-fashioned Canadian linguistic politics. Here, in an age when subtitled films are the scourge of the industry, Girard and Fichman audaciously have characters in Cremona speaking Italian and those in Shanghai speaking Chinese. When Poussin insists on speaking French to his German-speaking student, Kaspar Weiss, the boy's difficulties in understanding his musical master are rendered in the subtlest of subtitles. Kaspar's acquiescence to Poussin's ambitions is shown when the boy reassures him in French that he wants to

play at the prestigious audition that causes his death. Oddly the one section where language is underplayed is in the contemporary Montreal setting where Charles Morritz even speaks to employees at Université de Montréal only in English with no Québécois chastising him for his lack of French in a truly bilingual city.

Girard was happy to take on the challenge of directing episodes in Italian and Chinese, languages that he does not speak. Wang Xiaoshuai, a well-known film director adapted the script into Chinese and was instrumental in helping Girard communicate with the actors and crew. So was actress Sylvia Chang, who became a friend of Girard's during the shoot. The only problem, admits Girard "is that it takes twice the time for everything. You speak, she repeats, you get the answer, she repeats and so on. When you're in prep and you spend the whole day talking, you sleep a little later." On the other hand, in Cremona, while rehearsing with Carlo Cecchi and Irene Grazioli, the director had a wonderfully Italian experience. "It was a Sunday morning in April, one of the very first warm mornings. We were on a terrace and I was drinking a cappuccino. They took the text and read it. I was so moved by the beauty of the language. It became operatic. I doubt that English or French could create that for me."

It is the musical quality of *The Red Violin* that is its most striking feature. And, by that, I'm not just referring to the exquisite sequences with Joshua Bell playing John Corigliano's score. The makers of this film clearly respond to those qualities in narrative and performance that resemble music. It's why Girard can relate to the sounds of languages he cannot speak; he doesn't need to, because he can hear and intuit what they are saying. That's why, whether consciously or not, the team of Girard, McKellar and Fichman have

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created a melodrama and not the romantic, tragic tale that they probably intended to make. In melodramas, characters are given a fixed dimension whereas in tragedies and even in most romances, they have a freedom in how they choose to conduct their lives. Here, the main players are dominated by a fate that seems beyond their control.

Following the dictates of a tarot-deck reading made in the 17th century, and held in thrall by a seductive violin, the protagonists can only play the melody, the narrative song, that grips them with a fantastical force. So Frederick Pope, Kaspar Weiss and Charles Morritz can do little else but abandon themselves to the violin. Weiss is shown sleeping with the violin and Pope strokes it like a lover after Victoria, his sweetheart, abandons him temporarily for a trip to Russia. Even Morritz forgets to call his wife for the whole time he is in Montreal. Is he, too, having an affair with the violin? And what does the violin represent? This, too, is a question that Girard might answer differently from me. To him, it is an instrument of love, a final testament to the adoration that instrument maker Niccolo Bussotti had for his wife. But there is a curse that haunts this love machine, one that kills anyone who truly adores it.

*There is a curse that
haunts the red violin,
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who truly adores it.*

This knowledge haunts the viewer as the deadly biography of the red violin is played out. The supernatural element of the tale, while underplayed by Girard, operates as an important subtext to the film. Thought through in terms of the effect that the violin has on the key characters in the story, one could reasonably argue that *The Red Violin* is an old-fashioned horror story tricked-up to be an art film.

The heady mixture of fear and desire that operates as the emotional underpinnings in *The Red Violin* is similar to the one many people encounter when entering the very competitive world of big-budget filmmaking. Girard, McKellar and Fichman have their eyes on the prize as their film continues its roundabout route through festivals, the international marketplace, commercial release and Genie nominations.

One can only hope that this most ambitious Canadian art film—this modern version of “the perfect marriage of science and beauty”—proves to be a happier and more profitable muse for those who made it than it is for Bussotti’s violin’s most fervent, ill-fated admirers. ■

Samuel L. Jackson

