http://www.soundonsight.org/miff-2012-caesar-must-die-betrays-the-power-of-its-premise/
6 captures
14 Aug 2012 - 24 Feb 2021
AUG 14 2012 SEP
About this capture

MIFF 2012: "Caesar Must Die" betrays the power of its premise

PUBLISHED ON AUGUST 12, 2012 BY TOPE IN MIFF, REVIEWS
TAGGED: CAESAR MUST DIE, CESARE DEVE MORIRE, MIFF, MIFF 2012, PAOLO TAVIANI, VITTORIA TAVIANI

Tweet Digg

Cesare deve morire (Caesar Must Die)

Directed by Paolo Taviani and Vittoria Taviani

Written by William Shakespeare (excerpts from "Julius Caesar"), Paolo Taviani and Vittoria Taviani

2012, Italy

Anyone who walks into a screening of *Caesar Must Die* with the belief that they will be seeing a documentary should know this now: *Caesar Must Die* is not a documentary. It can barely be called a docudrama. It rather belongs in the curious category of metafilm, nestled among those pictures that blur and obscure the line between fact and fiction, demolish the fourth wall and are so conscious of themselves that they may disappear into a spiral of self-referentiality. Metafilms can be some of the most innovative and invigorating pieces of cinema when successful, but when they are not they can materialise as hollow exercise or dense nuggets of intellectual tedium.

This film by the brothers Taviani, awarded the Golden Bear at this year's Berlinale by a jury presided over by Mike Leigh, slots in somewhere near the mid to lower end of the metafilm sliding scale. Conceptually, it is a fascinating exercise (already the word surfaces). For six months Paolo and Vittoria Taviani and their film crew stationed themselves in the high-security wing of the Roman prison Rebibbia to document theatre director Fabio Cavalli undertake the task of staging Shakespeare's a public performance of *Julius Caesar* with a cast made up entirely of inmates. Were this an ordinary documentary (or a documentary at all), this subject matter would have been more than ample: a man of presumed culture and refinement attempting to muster satisfactory if not great performances from a gang of assumedly hardened and artless men serving sentences for crimes ranging from drug trafficking to murder. One may imagine that the nature of The Bard's tale of tyranny, betrayal, honour and redemption might play into the actors' own histories to intriguing effect. There are definite hints and allusions to these parallels in the film's brief runtime, but this doesn't appear to be *Caesar Must Die's* main interest.

.

The film that this most resembles, in terms of conceit and concept, is Abbas Kiarostami's 1990 masterpiece *Close-Up*. Now, that is a vastly superior film by any account, but what the two do have in common is the dissolution of the fact-fiction interface. To produce *Close-Up*, Kiarostami filmed a re-enactment of an actual event with the persons involved in that incident playing themselves in what would appear – to anyone unfamiliar with the backstory – to be a normal fictional narrative film. One of the joys cinephiles gain from watching that breed of film is in debating what exactly it is as a piece of cinema, and whether, why and how one designation is more relevant that the other. What the Tavianis seem to be doing with *Caesar Must Die* is to stage not only the final public performance of *Julius Caesar* as well as the preceding months of rehearsal, but also the interactions that the inmates have out of character during those months of rehearsal. (With the exception of the final performance, the film is shot in a theatrically crisp and shadowy black & white). It becomes almost impossible to distinguish when a scene from the play is being recited and when the scene itself is being discussed, wrestled with and contemplated by the actors. Ultimately, this is of little consequence considering the film is in many ways simply an abridged version of Shakespeare's play from beginning to end, with key scenes played out at different times during the six month period and intercut with each other. It may even be that the scenes become more elaborate and are performed with greater conviction and urgency towards the end of the film as the inmates approach the day of reckoning.

.

As a concept the film is intriguing, but in practice it often feels inauthentic in a way that almost belittles and does injustice to the admirable undertaking these select few men have committed to. By depriving them of non-staged moments, the inmates themselves become narrative constructs in the story of their own lives, at least six months of it. Sure, this may be part of the novelty, but was this the initial intent in Paolo and Vittoria Taviani's minds when they embarked on the project, or was this approach simply a concession to an unavoidable tendency by the actors to perform at all times (a common overcompensation by people unaccustomed to a camera's gaze)? Yet, if one watches the film closely enough, there isn't a documentary anywhere as immaculately constructed, complete with reaction shots, perfectly timed focus racks and suspiciously precise blocking. The one instance in which there is a clear break in character between two of the actors is not only a lost opportunity, but the very moment when the film unintentionally bares its arse. Frankly, the entirety of this film must have been scripted, which is interesting considering the considerable drop in performance quality when the actors transition from Shakespeare to Taviani. Nonetheless, it is disarming how *not bad* many of the inmates are. Giovanni Arcuri as Caesar is perfect in almost every way as the tyrannical emperor, as is Salvatore Striano who plays Brutus. He is the tortured artist of the group. Perhaps the standout of the ensemble though, with his thoughtful face and air of gravity, is Cosimo Rega, the man who plays Cassius.

.

The real value of the film lies perhaps in its attempts to exhibit the transformative value of art. The final line of the film, once again during a moment no less staged than an opera at the Met, is spoken by Cosimo Rega, the one prisoner in the production we are told has been sentenced to life in prison for murder, the man who gets top billing on the cast list. His words are: 'ever since I came to know art, this cell has become a prison.' But if this film fails to demonstrate obvious examples of any such transformation, it's probably because the Rebibbia theatre is an established institution, in which case the men we see might be well into their butterfly stage. It is quite surprising to see how mild-mannered, dignified and quietly motivated all the inmates involved in the production are. Maybe the plethora of prison stereotypes purveyed by bad art has led to certain unfair expectations, but for those still hoping to see big bad Al Capone blooming into Laurence Olivier, *Caesar Must Die* is not your movie.

Tope Ogundare

Visit the official website for the Melbourne International Film Festival

Tweet Digg

Leave a Reply

Name
Mail (will not be published)
Website

Submit Comment

About Tope

WEBSITE | TWITTER | 19 POSTS

Nigerian-Australian Sydney-based med student, film enthusiast and fledgling writer. Also a soccer fan and filmmaker in-utero.

Other Posts by Tope

Dissecting the Miniseries: "Edge of Darkness" shines a light on the – then – future of television drama

V: The Original Series: a close encounter with ham and cheese

Search Sound On Sight: Search

Recent Posts

TIFF Cinematheque presents a Summer in France: The reputation of 'Eyes Without a Face' has not been greatly exaggerated

PUBLISHED ON AUGUST 13, 2012 BY JUSTIN LI

Eyes Without a Face Directed by Georges Franju Written by Boileau-Narcejac, Jean Redon, Claude Sautet and Pierre Gascar France, 1960 At an Edinburgh Film Festival screening of Eyes Without a Face, seven audience members, according to L'Express, fainted and "dropped ... [Read the Rest]

BFI Hitchcock Season – 'Saboteur'

PUBLISHED ON AUGUST 13, 2012 BY JOHN

Saboteur Directed by Alfred Hitchcock Starring Priscilla Lane, Robert Cummings, Norman Lloyd Hitchcock at war began in earnest with this 1942 thriller, a film rushed like many into production by the proudly patriotic studios, horrified at the sneak attack of ... [Read the Rest]

Breaking Bad, Ep. 5.05: "Dead Freight" a master class in ruthless audience manipulation

PUBLISHED ON AUGUST 13, 2012 BY SIMON HOWELL

Breaking Bad, Season 5, Episode 5: "Dead Freight" Written by George Mastras Directed by George Mastras Airs Sundays at 10pm ET on AMC Remember "Live Free or Die," the fifth-season premiere of Breaking Bad, and its nifty but slight little ... [Read the Rest]

'Bachelorette' is a poorly constructed and uninspired comedic mess

PUBLISHED ON AUGUST 13, 2012 BY TY LANDIS

Bachelorette Written by Leslye Headland Directed by Leslye Headland USA, 2012 Leave it to Bachelorette to be the first true dumpster fire attempting to live up to last year's Bridesmaids; a film so crass and tiresome as to feel overlong ... [Read the Rest]

MIFF 2012: A heady, spellbinding experience awaits just 'Beyond the Hills'

PUBLISHED ON AUGUST 13, 2012 BY TOPE

Beyond the Hills (Dupa dealuri) Directed by Cristian Mungiu Written by Cristian Mungiu (inspired by the non-fiction novels of Tatiana Niculescu Bran) 2012, Romania At 150 minutes, Cristian Mungiu's Beyond the Hills is not a second overlong. Extended as its ... [Read the Rest]

Are 'Go On' and 'Animal Practice' worth your time?

PUBLISHED ON AUGUST 13, 2012 BY DEEPAYAN SENGUPTA

As my colleague Kate Kulzick pointed out last week, NBC has chosen to use the boost in ratings they've gained from their exclusive US airing of the 2012 Summer Olympics to try and give some of their new shows a ... [Read the Rest]

Best of the Fantasia Film Festival 2012

PUBLISHED ON AUGUST 12, 2012 BY RICKY

Ricky D, Michael Ryan and Edgar Chaput are quite familiar with the Fantasia Film Festival, having attended the event for years (some of us since the very beginning); so we thought it would be wise to list our favorite films ... [Read the Rest]

The Olympics and American TV: 7 Factoids You May Not Know

PUBLISHED ON AUGUST 12, 2012 BY KATE KULZICK

With tonight's Closing Ceremonies of the London 2012 Olympics, another historic Summer Games comes to its end. There have been myriad history-making moments and memorable competitions, from Michael Phelps taking the record for most Olympic career medals (he has 22- ... [Read the Rest]

MIFF 2012: bask in warm, exploitative gaze of "Paradise: Love"

PUBLISHED ON AUGUST 12, 2012 BY TOPE

Paradies: Liebe (Paradise: Love) Directed by Ulrich Seidl Written by Ulrich Seidl and Veronika Franz 2012, Austria, Germany, France Anyone who has had an email account for long enough will attest to the tsunami of lude messages that clog ... [Read the Rest]

'Searching for Sugar Man' is an enjoyable portrait of an unsung artist; just don't go Googling beforehand

PUBLISHED ON AUGUST 12, 2012 BY JOSH SLATER-WILLIAMS

Searching for Sugar Man Directed by Malik Bendjelloul UK/Sweden, 2012 One problem the modern narrative documentary faces in the time of instantaneous online information is that the various twists and turns they present may well already be known to a ... [Read the Rest]

View More Recent Posts...

404 Not Found

nginx

Join the conversation

Recent Comments

"This film ripped off it's plot from Bereavement…." by **Anthony** on **Fantasia 2012: Jennifer Lynch has 'Chained' the Serial Killer Monster**

"It wasn't even that bad! Not amazing or even that…" by **Brian** on **'Bachelorette' is a poorly constructed and uninspired comedic mess**

"[…] … love. "For many, the highlight…" by **HD Highlights: August 16** | **ScreenScribe** on **Fringe Ep. 4.14, "The End of All Things"; Welcome answers belie stalled-romance nervousness**

"I'm a huge fan of Vertigo and there are so many …" by **Sound on Sight Radio #329: 'Vertigo,' 'Beasts of the Southern Wild,' and the Best of 2012 so far**

"I'm a huge fan of Vertigo and there are so many …" by **Mario in Philly** on **Sound on Sight Radio #329: 'Vertigo,' 'Beasts of the Southern Wild,' and the Best of 2012 so far**

"That's the problem, Deepayan; getting that hit. I…" by **Bill Mence** on **The Case Of The Disappearing Private Eye**

"[…] Full review at Sound on Sight Share this:Twi…" by **Searching for Sugar Man (Malik Bendjelloul, 2012) « Read Write Hand** on **'Searching for Sugar Man' is an enjoyable portrait of an unsung artist; just don't go Googling beforehand**

"Hey Peter, Not only do I agree with your commen…" by **Ricky** on **Sound on Sight Radio #329: 'Vertigo,' 'Beasts of the Southern Wild,' and the Best of 2012 so far**

"I'm a huge fan in general, but I think Ricky and J…" by **Peter** on **Sound on Sight Radio #329: 'Vertigo,' 'Beasts of the Southern Wild,' and the Best of 2012 so far**

"Excellent article. I think some moves are already …" by **Deepayan Sengupta** on **The Case Of The Disappearing Private Eye**

Copyrights and trademarks for the film and related entertainment properties mentioned herein are held by their respective owners and are used with permission or solely for the promotional purposes of said properties. All other text and images copyright ©2008-2012 Sound On Sight except where applicable. Site design and integration by Ned Zimmerman based on an initial concept by Tom Hartman.