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# "DEATH IN VENICE"

AT THE END OF THE PATH OF BEAUTY LIES EROS.

BY KATHLEEN TYNAN

Last spring, I heard that Dirk Bogarde would play the part of Gustav Aschenbach, or von Aschenbach, in a film of Thomas Mann's novella *Death in Venice* and that Luchino Visconti would direct. Here were exciting, if dangerous, ingredients: one of the finest screen actors in the subtle and underplayed mode and a director whose work has been on the grand, the operatic, and the exotic scale, but who had miscast Bogarde, many thought, in another film, *The Damned*. Together, what would they make of a masterpiece, *Death in Venice*, a short novel that, baldly described, is about the nature of beauty and death, and in particular about the relation of the artist to his work? Can a great artist successfully repress his instincts? Erich Heller wrote that *Death in Venice* embodies "so radical a critique of art that it amounts to its moral rejection." The subject of the argument is a middle-aged German writer who goes to Venice, falls in love with a beautiful Polish boy of fourteen, and dies there of the cholera. But in the film, the writer becomes a composer, and the argument about the nature of the artist is reduced to a minimum. A wise reduction, bearing in mind Visconti's greater skill in the handling of storytelling and image-making than in the use of dialogue. Of one thing we could be sure: The director would not trivialize the novella by making this a film about a homosexual pickup.

I had gone to Rome on my way to Venice, full of enthusiasm for the promise of watching Visconti at work, enthusiasm all too speedily dashed. "You've come to write about Visconti," said one stunningly waspish critic. "That's rather like saying you've come to write about Tennyson. Visconti," he continued briskly, "is the past." Somebody else ventured that Visconti was like a small king, who liked to rule over a court of inferiors: "How can he claim to be a Communist with all those servants?"

"Should I not see Suso Cecchi d'Amico?" I asked, since it was she who had written the scripts of most of Visconti's films. "Ah, Suso," came the reply. "To understand Suso you must know about her father, Emilio Cecchi. . . ."

Suso d'Amico, whom I met the next

morning, is a deep-voiced, intelligent, charming woman and a loyal admirer of Visconti. "You know, they talk of his decadent taste, but he's not a decorator. He arranges objects so that every composition has a meaning. This attention to detail and elaboration of objects, that is his vocabulary. He knows what he wants. Although he has the reputation for being difficult, he is very easy—I've worked for everybody, and I know. He is the most charming man I have ever met. And you must remember how important he was both as a leader of the Neo-Realist Movement in our cinema of the 'forties and in the Italian theatre, which, quite simply, he revolutionized."

"Was he a committed Marxist?" I asked, since many of his films have had political themes. "I'm sure he never read Marx, nor do I think he has an essayist's intelligence, but he is very cultivated. He's a traditionalist who likes to keep abreast, just as he constantly transforms his houses. In temperament, I believe, he is very close to the scene in his film *The Leopard* in which Prince Fabrizio, in his library, senses his approaching death. That is Luchino."

The next day, I lunched with Helmut Berger who had performed so wickedly well in *The Damned*. He asked me to Visconti's villa in the Via Salaria, where I walked past two large dogs, entered an impressive hall smelling of stale scent and camphor, and climbed to a heavily flowered balcony to meet Berger and Marisa Berenson, a dashingly beautiful girl who plays Aschenbach's wife in the film. How had Visconti helped Berger in *The Damned*? "Ah, he was very good about using my ideas," he said.

In Venice on the Giudecca in a long reddish house surrounded by a handsome garden, I found Dirk Bogarde. He wore a straw hat against the sun and looked ten years younger than his fifty years. Over some shrimps risotto, we talked.

"You know I was going to make up to look like the composer Gustav Mahler. We tried a lot of plastic around the nose, but I couldn't move from the eyes down. I've always found it impossible to work behind makeup, so we took it all off and tried a moustache. 'Ecco,' (Continued on page 208)



MARISA BERENSON

"dashingly beautiful" as Aschenbach's wife

MARIO TURSI