

Document Citation

Title	Odd men out
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Source	<i>Village Voice</i>
Date	1998 Jan 06
Type	review
Language	English English
Pagination	68
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Il gattopardo (The leopard), Visconti, Luchino, 1963

Odd Men Out

Adapted from Peter Carey's dense Booker Prize-winning novel, Gillian Armstrong's *Oscar and Lucinda* is both a story of impossible love and a parodic social history of mid-19th-century Australia—a country where Victorianism was an even more uneasy fit than it was in England or America. The novel is darker and more ironic than

Oscar and Lucinda
Directed by Gillian Armstrong
Written by Laura Jones, adapted from
the novel by Peter Carey
A Fox Searchlight release
Opens December 31

The Leopard
Directed by Luchino Visconti
At Cinema Village
Opens January 2

BY AMY TAUBIN

Hepburn in *Bringing Up Baby*, but the very differences that inspire their mutual attraction also make them act at cross-purposes.

Armstrong's most inspired choice was to cast Ralph Fiennes as Oscar and to allow the character to be as much the "oddbod" onscreen as he is on the page. Stammering and flailing about, Fiennes is like a combo of Jean-Louis Barrault as the lovesick mime in *Les En-*

only defense against the oceanic of his unconscious.

Risking his matinee idol status, Fiennes not only goes through the entire movie in a near hysterical he's also extremely feminine without being at all campy. And I daresay the gender-bending aspect of his performance, rather than the tickle twitches, that male members of the audience find so off-putting.

Nothing else in the film is as realized as Fiennes's Oscar. Blanchette is a skillful and appealing actress, but too soft for Lucinda (a young Jane Davis was needed). Armstrong brought out the best in the actors, but her direction gets bogged down in pictorial detail. Though a bit plodding, *Oscar and Lucinda* is still a more rewarding time drama than such crowd pleasers as Jane Campion's woolly-headed *Piano* (her worst film) or Tim Roth's insipid, prurient *Wings of the Dove*.

I MIGHT HAVE enjoyed *Oscar and Lucinda* more if I hadn't seen it with hours of Visconti's *The Leopard*, one of the greatest depictions of the 19th century in film history. Set in Sicily during the last days of the old feudal regime, *The Leopard* is an extraordinary meditation on mortality, history, struggle, and Renaissance perspective. Burt Lancaster owns the screen as a tragic Prince of Salinas who knows history has passed him by.

Not the shapeliest of films, *Leopard* contains two magnificent pieces: the battle of Palermo in which confused groups of soldiers shoot one another in a shockingly desultory manner, and the 45-minute grand finale that concludes the film. Knowing that he's dying, the prince wanders through the revelers as if reliving his entire life. Visconti maps subject matter onto film space through a choreography of actors. Never have entrances, exits, vanishing points, and a movie room filled with brimming champagne been so moving.