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Cannes Festival Reviews

Aria

(U.S.-BRITISH-COLOR)

variety 5/27/87
An RVP Prods. and Virgin Vision presentation. Produced by Don Boyd. Executive producers, Jim Mervis, RVP Prods., Tom Kuhn, Charles Mitchell; coproducer, Al Clark, Mike Wahs; associate producers, David Barvar, Michael Hamlyn; coordinating editors, Marie-Therese Boiche, Mike Cragg. Reviewed at Cannes Film Festival (In Competition), May 15, 1987. (No MPAA Rating.) Running time: **98 MINS.**

Sequence 1 — Director, Nicolas Roeg; camera, Harvey Harrison; artistic director, Diana Johnson; editor, Tony Lawson; opera, "Un Ballo in Maschera;" composer, Verdi; voice, Leontyne Price, Carlo Bergonzi, Robert Merrill, Shirley Verrett, Reri Grist; cast, Theresa Russell.

Sequence 2 — Director, Charles Sturridge; camera, Gale Tattersall; artistic director, Andrew McAlpine; editor, Matthew Longfellow; opera, "La Forza del Destino;" composer, Verdi; aria, "La Vergine degli Angeli;" voice, Leontyne Price, Giorgio Tozzi, Ezio Flagello; cast, Nicola Swain, Jack Kyle, Marianne McLoughlin.

Sequence 3 — Director, Jean-Luc Godard; camera, Carolyn Champetier; editor, Godard; opera, "Armide;" composer, Lully; aria, "Enfin il est en ma puissance;" voice, Rachel Yakar; cast, Marion Peterson, Valerie Allain.

Sequence 4 — Director, Julien Temple; camera, Oliver Stapleton; artistic director, Piers Plowden; editor, Neil Abrahamson; opera, "Rigoletto;" composer, Verdi; aria, "La Donna è Mobile;" voice, Alfredo Kraus, Anna Moffo, Annadi Stasio; cast, Buck Henry, Anita Morris, Beverly D'Angelo, Gary Kasper.

Sequence 5 — Director, Bruce Beresford; camera, Dante Spinotti; artistic director, Andrew McAlpine; editor, Marie-Therese Boiche; opera, "Die Tote Stadt;" composer, Korngold; aria, "Glück, das mir Verblieb;" voice, Carol Neblett, Rene Kollo; cast, Elizabeth Hurley, Peter Birch.

Sequence 6 — Director, Robert Altman; camera, Pierre Mignot; artistic director, Stephen Altman; editor, Robert Altman; opera, "Les Boreades;" composer, Jean-Philippe Rameau; voice, Jennifer Smith, Anne-Marie Rodde, Philip Langridge; cast, Julie Hagerty, Genevieve Page, Cris Campion, Sandrine Dumas.

Sequence 7 — Director, Franc Roddam; camera, Frederick Elmes; artistic director, Mathew Jacobs; editor, Rick Elgood; opera, "Tristan und Isolde;" composer, Wagner; aria, "Liebestod;" voice, Leontyne Price; cast, Bridget Fonda, James Mathers.

Sequence 8 — Director, Ken Russell; camera, Gabriel Beristain; artistic director, Paul Dufficey; editor, Michael Bradsell; opera, "Turandot;" composer, Puccini; aria, "Nessun Dorma;" voice, Jussi Bjoerling; cast, Linzi Drew.

Sequence 9 — Director, Derek Jarman; camera, Mike Southon; artistic director, Christopher Hobbs; editor, Peter Cartwright, Angus Cook; opera, "Louise;" composer, Gustave Charpentier; aria, "Despuis le Jour;" voice, Leontyne Price; cast, Tilda Swinton, Spencer Leigh, Amy Johnson.

Sequence 10 and linking scenario — Director, Bill Bryden; camera, Gabriel Beristain; editor, Marie-Therese Boiche; opera, "I Pagliacci;" aria, "Vesti La Giubba;" composer, Leoncavallo; voice, Enrico Caruso; cast, John Hurt, Sophie Ward.

Cannes — "Aria" is a film that could not have happened without the advent of music videos. A string of selections from 10 operas illustrated by 10 directors, it's the kind of sensory overload, albeit of a more sophisticated nature, that today's viewing audience has become accustomed to. Paradox of this picture is that opera purists will probably be turned off by the visual flash and film buffs might be turned off by the opera. Heavyweight talent involved and unique nature of the project should ensure respectable returns at specialty outlets.

Style of the "Aria" segments has little in common with the rapid-fire editing of music videos, but they are nonetheless renderings of visual images designed to accompany songs or music. Producer Don Boyd, who orchestrated the project, instructed the directors not to depict what was happening to the characters in the operas but to create something new out of the emotion and content expressed in the music. The arias were the starting point for the films.

Result is both exhilaratingly successful and distractingly fragmented. Individual segments are stunning but they come in such speedy succession that overall it is not a fully satisfying film ex-

perience. One watches with detached fascination as the duelling directors try to top each other.

Action rises and falls without really working up a head of steam or building to a climax. Along the way one or two segments fall totally flat and conclusion offers no real payoff. But it is still a ride with strikingly original sights and sounds along the way.

Selections also represent a variety of filmmaking styles from Bruce Beresford's rather pedestrian working of a love theme from Korngold's "Die Tote Stadt" to Ken Russell's characteristically excessive treatment of an idea distilled from Puccini's "Turandot."

Using the "Nessun Dorma" aria as his starting point, Russell suggests a state of limbo in which a woman is surrounded by the rings of Saturn and tattooed with jewels. This segment may be the most purely visual of the bunch with a twist ending providing a jolt.

Structurally, the most ambitious of the selections is Jean-Luc Godard's working of Lully's "Armide" which he transposes to a body building gym where two naked women try unsuccessfully to attract the attention of the men. Insinuating aria accompanies images of the cleaning women before the royalty of the gym.

On a more whimsical note, Nicolas Roeg offers an interpretation of Verdi's "Un Bello in maschera." Set in Vienna in 1931, piece preserves most of the elements of the original opera about a King Zog of Alhenia who is visiting his girlfriend but is concerned by assassination rumors. Melodrama is played almost tongue-in-cheek, a feeling further heightened by Theresa Russell, who plays the good king.

If opera was the soundtrack of a mainstream film it might look something like Julien Temple's version of Verdi's "Rigoletto" in which a producer chooses to cheat on his wife at the same place she's cheating on him. Buck Henry and

Beverly D'Angelo as the not so happy couple enhance the Hollywood parody of the piece.

The most striking clash of images is achieved by Franc Roddam who moves Wagner's "Tristan Und Isolde" to Las Vegas. As the lush strains of the music blare, the neon sea of the casinos has never looked more strange. But even in the crassest place on earth, a loving couple can achieve the most delicate and intimate exchange.

Robert Altman turns the table on Jean-Philippe Rameau's "Les Boreades" by focusing not on the stage but an 18th century Hogarthian audience full of whores and lunatics in commedia dell'arte make-up. It's a scene out of "Marat/Sade" as Julie Hagerty and Genevieve Page, among others, listen with mock seriousness to the exaggerated marital problems of Queen Alphise.

Other scenes with less zip are Charles Sturridge's elegiac theme from Verdi's "La Forza del Destino" and Derek Jarman's nostalgic "Louise" by Gustave Charpentier.

Individual segments are loosely woven together by pieces from Leoncavallo's "I Pagliacci." Paralleling some of the real life drama

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of Enrico Caruso who sings the aria, John Hurt plays a troubled opera star on his way to the theater. Once arrived, he encounters his elusive muse (Sophie Ward). Finally the aria concludes with Hurt performing before an empty house and then collapsing, demonstrating the agony and ecstasy of being a performer.

Like rock videos, the selections collected here feature plenty of sex with no fewer than five including love scenes and some nudity. Viewers unfamiliar with opera might get the idea that sex goes with the territory.

Each short film was produced independently of the others but what they share are uniformly lush production values. Costumes, staging and locations are worthy of any great opera production and sound quality is loud and clear and crisp.

But what these small films actually add to the music of the operas is questionable. They seem more like separate and unrelated works that now stand on their own. Luckily the film is rich enough to allow for viewers to find their own vantage point. —*Jagr.*