Document Citation

Title	**'Tis pity she's a whore**
Author(s)	
Source	*Sight and Sound*
Date	Autumn 1973
Type	article
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	2
Subjects	Rampling, Charlotte (1945), Sturmer, Great Britain Testi, Fabio Ford, John (1894-1973), Cape Elizabeth, Maine, United States Griffi, Giuseppe Patroni
Film Subjects	Addio, fratello crudele ('Tis pity she's a whore), Griffi, Giuseppe Patroni, 1971

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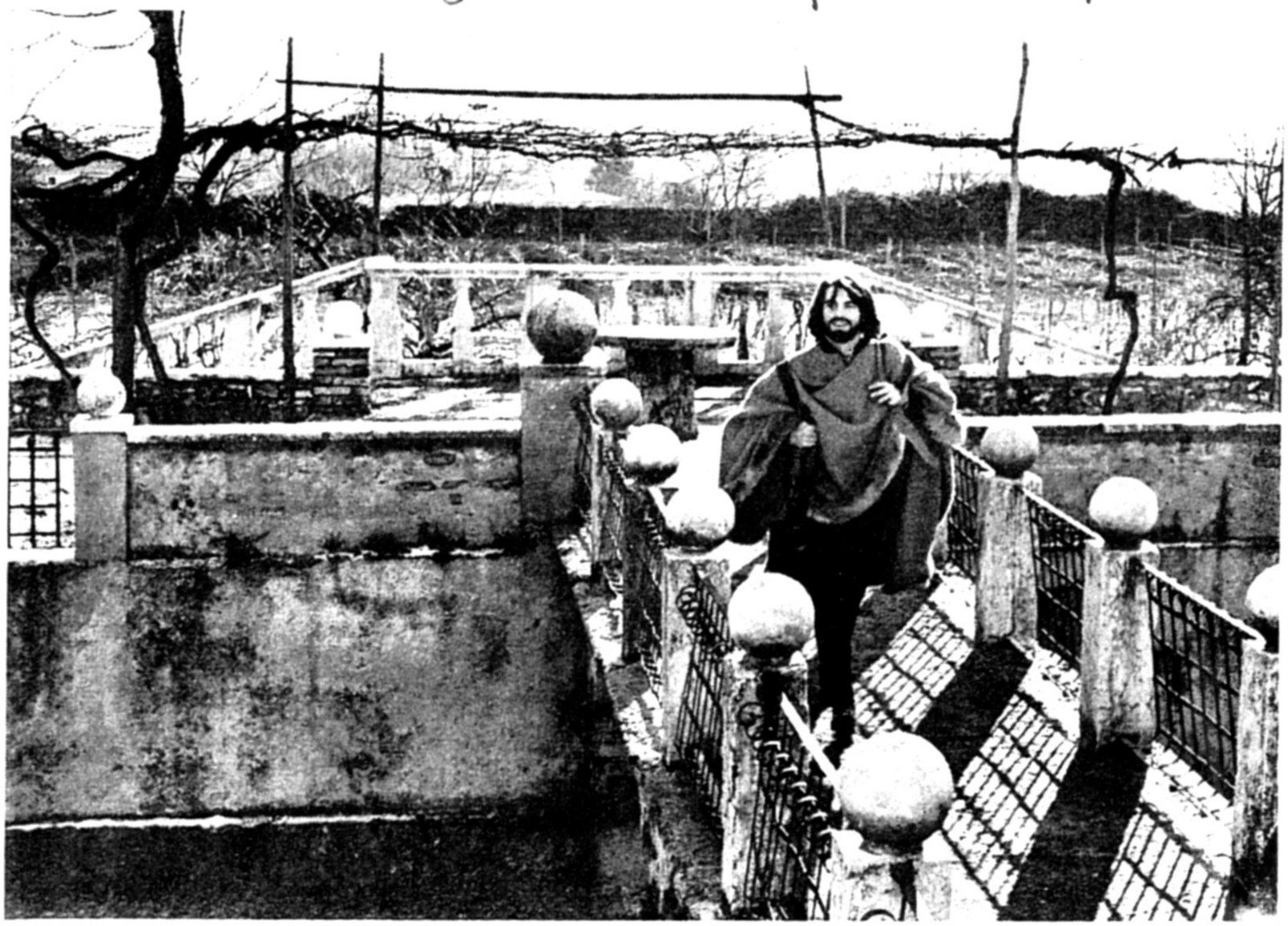

'Tis Pity She's a Whore

The first thing you recognise in '*Tis Pity She's a Whore* (Miracle) is a series of images of extraordinary beauty and splendour. To begin with they seem like isolated images: the forest of fluttering white banners amid the dunes where Annabella and Giovanni, the brother and sister become lovers, first brood on their future and later Giovanni has his dark night of the soul against a chill winter sunset; the stance of Soranzo, the deceived husband, grimly supervising the dismemberment of Giovanni clad in a complex wooden brace that makes him look like a refugee from a Vorticist painting. It is perhaps significant, though, that the first two I pick are both quite mysterious and unexplained (if not, presumably, inexplicable) in realistic terms. Are all the banners for anything—to scare birds; part of some land reclamation scheme? Is the brace surgical, some kind of treatment for the stab wound in the shoulder Giovanni gave Soranzo, or is it a self-mortifying instrument of torture he has applied to himself even as he goes about executing his revenge?

We do not know, and for that matter we do not care. They go towards the creation of a disquieting world of semi-abstractions in which such extraordinary characters can fitly live and breathe. Taken one by one the images are dazzling, but the film is no aesthete's colouring book of pretty pictures—every picture helps to tell the story. The whole film is a tight net of visual references, recurrent images in the poetic as well as the literal sense. There is the Chinese-box birdcage into which Giovanni pursues Annabella, trying to get some sense out of her when she is in a teasing mood, whipping through door after door in close-up accompanied by the rustle and flap of tiny frightened wings, while we are left totally disoriented until the end of the scene, when the camera is pulled back to reveal the two characters' spatial relationship and how the setting is put together. Or there is the weird pale-wood maze of constantly changing perspectives in which Soranzo sues for Annabella's favours while Giovanni lurks just out of his sight, but held constantly in visual comparison by Annabella and ourselves.

In other words, from the moment Giovanni and Annabella enter their incestuous relationship they are caught in a labyrinth—one which, to an extent, they can negotiate but which

finally dominates them and makes them the toy of external forces pulling every which way, like the raft on which the horses arrive towards the end, brought to where Soranzo wants it by a dozen or so ropes to all parts of the castle's harbour which somehow balance out and edge it to the quay. It is as though Patroni Griffi, having decided to jettison the smoky splendours of John Ford's muse, has replaced them with his own visual rhetoric to produce much the same result. Not that the verbal side of his film is by any means as dire as it has been represented—there is, after all, more than a touch of intellectual snobbery to objections just because the characters are made to talk colloquially rather than in the blank verse of Jacobean tragedy; and actually the only dodgy moments come when, just occasionally, a recognisable line of Ford pops up in the midst of fairly normal modern prose.

All the same, the words are no longer what Patroni Griffi's '*Tis Pity* is about. Most of the key scenes he manages with very few words of any kind, and his players, Charlotte Rampling, Oliver Tobias and Fabio Testi, are used more as hieroglyphs than as actors, even though Miss Rampling in particular looks considerably more like an actress of consequence than ever before. And even though it has been briskly shorn of a couple of intertwined subplots concerning two other candidates for Annabella's hand, the essential feeling of the play is kept intact. There are ideas, indeed, which work out so well as a way of reading the play that one would like to see them used in a stage production. In particular, the management of the notorious scene near the end in which Giovanni starts off the bloodletting by appearing at the family banquet with Annabella's heart skewered on his dagger.

This is led up to by what seems like an endless tracking shot of Giovanni staggering along a gallery passageway, so that we get habituated to the bloody sight, then a sharp swerve into the banqueting hall through an anteroom lined with tiny wooden pyramids like spikes (a breath-catching visual shock, this). Once inside, however, Giovanni seems to be running out of steam. There are a few yelps, but his entry really falls rather flat. And understandably—even in Renaissance Italy, if someone came dashing in with a human heart wrapped in muslin probably the last thing you would suppose it to be is a human heart wrapped in muslin. And so Giovanni is finally left insisting lamely, 'It is her heart, really it is,' and the impetus for the cumulative horror of the slaughter comes, of course, from someone else; from the deceived husband who, even in a frenzy of vengefulness, at least continues to belong to the real world of life rather than the bleak abstraction inhabited by Giovanni and Annabella.

JOHN RUSSELL TAYLOR