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## Death in Venice

**D**IRK BOGARDE calculated that he had reached his two hundred and forty-third 'look' and the end of his tether. Almost. Working for Luchino Visconti on Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* was an experience, alternately exalting and exasperating. Visconti—Duke of Modrone and descendant of Charlemagne—is the absolute monarch, tyrant and charmer, hawk and dove. The camera and consequently Visconti seemed pleased with the 'looks', thought Bogarde, relieved. 'Three months from now I shall know it has been marvellously worthwhile. But just at present it is too tender to contemplate. Like going to the dentist and having all your bridge-work done in one go.'

He considered Visconti—'V', the 'monster' or the 'master', depending on the prevailing wind—was not unlike Losey, in the way each composed their films in many-layered depth. Also there was the total application to the needs of the production, which placed punishing demands on those who have to supply the needs. 'Though Losey is more professional, more aware of working within the film industry set-up. Visconti is a brilliant amateur in the best, truest sense. Very aristocratic, very rich, very talented—the coincidence of all three has conditioned how he works.'

We were in Trieste on the tag-end of the marathon which had begun at the Hotel des Bains on the Lido, where Mann set his story; moved into Venice, a nervous nose ahead of the tourist season; and fetched up at Cinecittà in Rome. A decaying railway terminal at Trieste had been found to substitute for the station (circa 1911) at Venice which had inconsiderately modernised itself. The location scouts were off in the hills talent-spotting good-looking graveyards. That would be it. Tempers had stopped fraying. The End was in sight.

The day before shooting at the station was a holiday, which meant that everyone went around with a twitch of conscience for being so idle, although Visconti himself had decreed it. No one felt quite content until he arrived from Venice with his entourage, a new crew-cut and a brave, checkered umbrella that did duty for a sunshade. One can see why his crew drop everything to work with him when he calls; why his rages, which can immobilise a set and everyone on it, are instantly forgiven and forgotten. He gives his unit from the star down an exhilarating sense of pride. 'These days he is a lamb,' says Piero Tosi, the costume designer who has been with him since *Senso*, 'then he was a tiger.'

At dinner that night he was expansive and happy. All was well. Bogarde was a loved son. He led his film 'family' into the tough little Trieste restaurant where the food had to be superb and traditional and the staff buzzed around him, not deferentially, but like respectful accomplices in an elaborate conspiracy. He was an immaculate host. One must try the special bean soup, the local cheese, the private wine.

Characteristically, he had spent the afternoon at the castle of the Hapsburg Archduke Maximilian and his wife Carlotta at Miramare. Just looking and feeling and absorbing the atmosphere. Someone suggested, not entirely in jest, that he had probably lugged the unit out to Trieste just to have an excuse for visiting Miramare. He thinks the real Hapsburg story would make a splendid film: the others had been 'fairy tales'. Romantically wrong.

The prospect of *Nicholas and Alexandra* intrigued him: 'but you can only make it in Leningrad, nowhere else.' He finds the critics tiresome at times. 'They will always connect each of my films with all the others—the link—the family. Particularly the Americans do this. I don't see the point. A compliment? Maybe. But I could wish they would pay me a greater compliment. To judge each film as it comes.'

'What is past is past,' he says with the urgency of a man whose next film—a Proust adaptation—may be his last. 'I see only the faults in my old films. The other day I saw *La Terra Trema*. I thought the audience would walk out. How can they stand it? Though I wish very much I could have completed it in the three episodes I planned instead of just one. Oh yes. But the time is past. The time for *La Terra Trema* is past.'

*Death in Venice*, like all his film projects, has been maturing in his mind for many years. But the plans for actually making it crystallised during *The Damned*. Bogarde's first indication of it was when he told Visconti he would rather be the character named Aschenbach (played by Helmut Griem) instead of Friedrich Bruckmann—the 'Macbeth' of *The Damned*—which many critics now agree was a monumental piece of miscasting. Visconti was adamant that he should be Friedrich, adding, according to Bogarde, 'but you may play Aschenbach in my next film, *Death in Venice*.'

He later justified his choice of Bogarde to the baffled front office at Warner Brothers by explaining that, 'Bogarde is like a dead pheasant, which you hang from the neck and when the head falls the body is ripe. Bogarde is exactly ripe

for this role.' Bogarde related the story with some relish. Later on the set, when Visconti remarked that he was looking a trifle 'old', he retorted that you could hardly expect anything else from a dead pheasant.

The front office, apparently, was also concerned about the theme of Mann's novella. Anyone who had merely read a synopsis instead of the original might reasonably suppose that the film would be simply about an elderly man who chases a young boy and then dies. 'It is not about homosexuality,' Visconti insisted. All the same, it was thought, why not change the boy to a girl: instead of a lecherous old man pursuing a little boy, a lecherous old man pursuing a little girl. Reason, it appears, prevailed.

It is easy to see why the book should be such a coveted film property. It has the formidable pure classic line that challenges a director's skill and vision. If he fails to measure up, he can expect no mercy. Conscious perhaps of his own failure with Camus' *L'Etranger*, Visconti started the film as some kind of sacred mission. 'If it is no good, neither of us can work in the cinema again,' he assured Bogarde. Somewhat extravagantly, considering he is now planning the Proust film.

To emphasise what he feels is the essence of the story, he has introduced a dialogue between Schönberg and Gustav Mahler—upon whom Mann based the character of Aschenbach—taken from letters they exchanged which discuss the nature of perfect beauty. Mahler-Aschenbach believes beauty is created by the artist and is disproved when he discovers perfect natural beauty in the Polish boy Tadzio.

Visconti, however, has little respect for the cadence of dialogue—strangely for an artist whose reputation as a musician and producer of opera would suggest a hypersensitive feeling for the rhythm of sound. He seems to share an impatience with mere words with Hitchcock and Ford, whom James Stewart recalls ripping out entire pages of dialogue no matter how relevant just because the chat slowed up the visuals.

The script of *Death in Venice*, which he has written with Nicola Badalucco, is a pictorial poem. The lighting cameraman Pasquale De Santis has washed the film in those pale mists of Venice in which mirages take shape. There were problems at first. 'Mahler' had to become 'Thomas Mann', though Bogarde's fears that he might materialise as 'Mr. Chips' or 'Rudyard Kipling' were fortunately unfounded. The specially constructed Mahler nose make-up had a distressing habit of blowing up in the heat. Oddly, Visconti, who can hold up a morning's shooting arranging the precise fold of an extra's veil which may just get into shot but probably won't, was less perturbed than Bogarde, who for the past three months had been thinking in terms of Mahler, since the memorable night in Rome before

LEFT: "DEATH IN VENICE". TOP: BOGARDE AND VISCONTI AT THE TRIESTE STATION. SILVANA MANGANO AND BJORN ANDRESEN. BELOW: AT THE HOTEL DES BAINS.



production started when Visconti, with a showman's feel for the significant gesture, clued the actor into the composer. Actors wait on Visconti's clues, I find, like columnists panting for the latest crumb about Princess Anne. It is all they can expect. As Alain Delon, who worked for Visconti on *Rocco and his Brothers* and *The Leopard* and will play Proust in his next film, explained: 'If he picks you, it's because you have what he wants in the role. He knows what he's getting, even though you may not know. He only tells you when you're wrong.'

The search for the ideal Tazio (which had defeated other directors) ended with Bjorn Andresen, who is Swedish, fifteen years old and would rather spend his life playing an electric guitar. At the introductory press reception he mistook Bogarde for the film publicist and the film publicist for Aschenbach. He doesn't fancy acting. But he looks superb, takes direction beautifully and everyone agreed he was a nice, sensible lad to have around. His mother is played by Silvana Mangano, who is doing the film pretty much for love of the book and Visconti.

What is surprising about Visconti is the blend of extreme perfectionist who plans and prepares endlessly (which I had expected) and spontaneous creator (which I had not expected). 'He has,' said one observer, 'a genius for making use of God's gifts.' In one of the film's family groups in the salon of the Hotel des Bains was the once famous lieder singer Masha Predit. On the spur of the moment and for the most crucial scene in the film (the death scene on the beach), Visconti recruited her to croon a Mussorgsky lament, serenely seated in a basket-chair, as Aschenbach dies. It is a stunning inspiration and, according to those who witnessed it, incomparably beautiful. Another inspiration—Aschenbach walking idly along the beach picking up a dead crab—Visconti reluctantly discarded because it didn't fit. 'It was very nice, but unnecessary.'

At the same time he will insist meticulously on pre-First World War costumes that are not only authentic in design but actual clothes of the period. It goes without saying that he and Tosi know two old women in Rome who have collections of wardrobes worn and discarded by Edwardian aristocracy. Bogarde's raw silk summer suit, for instance, was made in 1911. The women's linen garments were unpressed, because then linen was soft, creased and flowing instead of stiff, ironed and tailored.

Aschenbach's trunk, which was not opened in a particular scene, nevertheless had to be packed with all the clothes he would wear at the Hotel des Bains. Four filming hours were spent waiting for an exact Edwardian black wood photograph frame to be found in the curio shops of Rome. The equally authentic filigree silver and gold frames submitted him would not, he considered, be proper for Aschenbach. At the station ticket

office in Trieste (alias Venice), one of the crowd artists produced two modern pfennigs for a 1911 ticket to Vienna. The audience won't even see the error, let alone notice it, but Visconti insisted on another take using the correct fare.

He peppers his scenes with his very particular touches. Among the internationally mixed family parties at the hotel, the Russians are always roaring with laughter. 'Because,' said Visconti brooking no argument, 'it was before the First World War.' They also wear clothes ten years out of date. 'The Russians,' he adds with, one suspects, a disdain worthy of the Hapsburgs, 'were always ten years behind the fashion.' Commenting on an hourglass he'd chosen for one scene, he observed that 'there was one just like it in my father's house.' The sense one gets of sharing his life with his films is very strong in this one. In 1911, after all, he was a clever, cultivated child seeing all and noting everything.

In the Trieste railway station, partially bombed in the Second World War but still sporting the elegant roof which had attracted Visconti, the extras were

losing their false moustaches in the heat and Bogarde was trying not to get involved in the argument about whether the Venetian railway tickets should be white cardboard or a green screed. One wouldn't fancy being the fool who had overlooked that item of research. Tosi was inspecting Edwardian wrists for Common Market watches, and the cream serge and black doeskin and cotton dusters swept the platform grandly. One by one the extras were called to the booking hall where Visconti brooded over their placing in his scheme of the scene. Visconti, they said in hushed whispers, was choreographing his ballet.

That *Death in Venice* even reached the stage of being filmed more or less as written is a battle won by Visconti over José Ferrer, Huston, Losey, Zeffirelli, Resnais and all the other directors who have wanted to make it and for various reasons couldn't. It now remains to be seen whether he has consolidated that victory where it matters. On the screen.

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