THE DRESSER, directed by Peter Yates

PLAYED TO DEATH

Peter Yates’ film of Ronald Harwood’s *The Dresser* begins with a dying fall, in the final scene of Othello. The play is being performed by a touring company in some drab English backwater sometime during the second World War. Sir, the troupe’s aging star and impresario, dispatches himself with plummy grandiloquence -- pure ham on rye. Then, atop Desdemona’s corpse, he mercilessly heckles and hectors his fellow actors *sotto voce*. No competitor will stop Sir from milking the Moor’s death for all it’s worth. His own demise, shortly to come, will be assisted by Norman, his dresser, major-domo, therapist *manqué*, and nursemaid.

Sir’s terminal illness is never named. But his overall circumstances bring to mind the reply by a friend of Charley Parker, when asked about the cause of the legendary jazzman’s death: “Bird? Man, he died of *everything*!!”. At the tail end of a once illustrious career, Sir is reduced to circumnavigating the provinces, accompanied by a company of thespians, down at the heels and on their luck: inter alia an aging queen; heterosexual dotards, and draft rejects. Sir is massively in debt, and there are painful intimations that his once lauded talent is now derided as so much antique fustian.

Egregious narcissists like Sir particularly resent the loss of loss and vigor brought on by old age, as if they and they only were being done in by a malignant fate. Add arteriosclerotic or Alzheimer dementia to the picture, and one has a Falstaff at the end of his tether, not about to go gently into any dark night. Harwood’s public rehearsal of Sir’s mortality is reminiscent of the dramatic self-sendoffs of earlier centuries, e.g. John Donne taking the measure of his coffin, preaching his own funeral sermon, and declaiming: “I were faint that I would not die”.

Sir seems *compos mentis* with a vengeance in *Othello*;
dispirited but still reasonably intact backstage with Norman to prop him up. Next morning finds him flamboyantly back at the top of form, roaring a train to halt in a voice accustomed to decades of intimidation. But during the journey to the next town and performance Sir slips into travel psychosis. It’s an ailment not to be found in DSM-IV, afflicting psychologically marginal or mildly demented individuals, shaken loose from familiar surroundings and put on the move. (I saw several cases during my military service, in simple souls who had traveled long distances from rural environments to basic training).

Sir’s deficits become glaringly apparent the following afternoon, when Norman finds him raving wildly in the town marketplace. He’s hospitalized and rapidly plunges into delirium. In full bravura, he moans that he wants to die: he’s done in, used up, literally played out. No one, with the possible exception of his doctor, wants to listen to him, not his troupe, and Norman least of all. For this is one show that cannot go on under traditionally dire circumstances. Sir has never had an understudy. Who would dare replace him?

Barely an hour before curtain, Sir stumbles into his dressing room after signing himself out against medical advice. He’s returned like a moribund lemming to his native sea. Norman, whose viability is irretrievably bound up with Sir’s survival, ignores his master’s near-terminal state. In the greatest performance of the dresser’s own quirky career, Norman wheedles, bullyrags, and flatters Sir into make-up and costume for the night’s work -- *King Lear*. Senile confusion compounds ordinary stage fright. Nevertheless, Norman is able to propel his failing charge onto the boards. (That Sir is capable of genuine stage fright -- virtually every actors’ perennial curse -- comprises a shrewd observation about his temporary recovery on the brink of the grave).

Sir proceeds to give the performance of his life -- properly, his death -- unfazed by (inter alia) air raids, rickety scenery, and between-the-act amnesia.
Yates and Harwood have opened up the original stage version to furnish a much more generous slice of Lear. For all his infirmities and the ostentatious conventions of 19th century theater, Sir’s power to move us is profound. Indeed, Lear on his blasted heath provides a natural vehicle for the exercise of Sir’s art, as well as his enormous penchant for great complaint. The tragedy offers unparalleled opportunity to vent his frustrations over myriad petty injuries, and the cruel diminishments of age.

Sir’s identification with Lear waxes so intense that he depersonalizes. As from a mighty height, he speaks as if he indeed were the ravaged King, uttering Shakespeare’s familiar lines as if newly minted. One most often sees this phenomenon in performers at the summit of their talents. In the setting of Sir’s decline, it’s uncannily reminiscent of the out-of-body experiences reported on the brink of death. (Shakespeare adroitly portrays one such moment in Hamlet, when the chief actor, reciting a speech on the fall of Troy and Hecuba’s grief, bursts into tears.)

Comparisons -- perhaps a few too many -- are meant to be drawn between the Fool’s clear eyed, mordant affection for the addled Lear, and Norman’s ironic ministry to his foolish, not so fond ancient tyrant. How Sir and his Lear handle their respective organic/depressive psychoses is more fascinating. Actor and character are each intact enough to intuit dementia, and fear the triumph of insanity over intellect (“O, let me not be mad, not mad, sweet heaven. Keep me in temper; I would not be mad!”) Both are consummate rhetoricians: even as they wander in and out of madness, they employ it as a bully pulpit from which to thunder grievances against an ungrateful world. Sir is a shade more self-aware than Lear; even at the summit of lunacy, mad both in craft and fact.

At this point in his own distinguished career, Albert Finney had already begun to take on roles which stretched his voice and appearance beyond the macho working class heroes of his youth to unexpected powerful dimensions. (A notable later example is Leo, the brutal Irish mob boss of Miller’s Crossing). In The Dresser,
Finney fuses his own formidable acting talent remarkably with Sir’s persona. I doubt that a real Sir could bring off such a singular account of Lear himself; of himself as Lear; and himself playing himself. These tantalizing fragments of Finney’s reading conjured hope of see his own Lear one day, stripped of Sir’s histrionics (sadly, Finney has yet to take on the part).

Of course, The Dresser is Norman’s vehicle as much, if not more than Sir’s. The drama’s central dramatic tension is informed by his tempestuous offstage symbiosis with Sir. Over the years the duo’s fortunes have become so inextricably linked that each can no longer function without the other. From a psychoanalytic perspective, both are enmeshed in the omnipotent quest described decades ago by my mentor, Dr. William Silverberg. Under this rubric, the unfortunate pilgrim seeking to attain his particular delusion of Silverberg’s ‘all power over all things’ encounters an equally deluded individual who imagines he possesses such power -- professional, ideological, theological, et cetera.

If Norman is anything like the other questors after omnipotence I’ve encountered of the years, his surface façade conceals immodest yearnings, and probably a narcissistic inflation as extravagant as Sir’s -- albeit hidden from the world and, most certainly, from himself. Driven by a neurotic version of the healthier adolescent ‘crush’, such a supplicant seeks omnipotent power through adoring and servicing his ideal. The submersion of his ego in the Ideal’s ‘magnificence’ is often unconsciously viewed as a necessary, temporary expedient on the way to his own elevation (even though servitude to one or another master or cause may endure a life time). Meanwhile, he basks in the Ideal’s reflected effulgence, his intimacy (real or imagined) imbuing him with potency and privilege by proxy.

One submits that Norman’s particular quest involves unconscious theatrical ambition, very likely informed by repressed exhibitionistic urges. We know nothing of his history, except that he has serviced Sir as dresser for many years. It’s obvious that he loves the stage passionately, yet appears to have set aside any
desire to display his talents, such as they may be. He would seem content to remain one of the ‘little people’, a Polonius on the sidelines, toiling in the wings while Sir, the very stuff of his dreams of glory, struts his stuff onstage.

I speculate further that Norman may be too frightened to perform in any other public capacity. Perhaps he rates his skills as negligible. Perhaps they are. Perhaps he is loathe to perform before an audience because of the trite, but no less true phobia of success or failure. He’s certainly timorous when asked to make a trifling announcement. (Also, one notes, he’s pathetically anxious about the success of his ‘act’).

Safely alone with Sir, however, he becomes a gifted actor. He changes like a chameleon in playing humble servant to Sir’s tempestuous whims, directing both of them with great subtlety in aid of getting Sir ambulatory and functional. In plumbing Norman’s occulted dramatic gifts; his touchy concern for Sir; his complex blend of meanness and generosity, Tom Courtenay succeeds masterfully at exposing and humanizing Sir’s braggadocio.

Intense ambivalence hallmarks the symbiotic attachment implicit in the quest for omnipotence. Inevitably dependency generates rage, which in turn generates fear of abandonment, escalating dependency, so forth. The Dresser unfolds in an ambivalent dance of its protagonists around each other’s grandiosity. No one deeds away his talents, indeed his life, as has Norman, or submerges his ego in another’s imagined grandeur, without great resentment. For his part, Sir savagely resents the dresser’s increasing intrusions into his own autonomy, whether these are a function of his very real deterioration or Norman’s imperious cheek.

Harwood’s art imitates life: Sir, the more effective narcissist, has the last laugh on Norman. Like Lear, he wins back his sanity, and gently expires in his dressing room, over the first -- and only -- page of his memoirs. Norman discovers, to his distress and fury, that Sir’s dedication contains not one jot of thanks to him. Once
more, the Magnificent Other has left his supplicant questor dangling. In a rage, Norman scrawls something into the dedication (his profession? His name?) and collapses weeping on Sir’s body, as the film ends.

This story may have some foundation in real life. Ronald Harwood was in fact the long time dresser of Sir Donald Wolfit. Sir Donald was trained in the theater of an earlier day; performed for decades on stage and screen nearly until his death. Even near the end of his life, he was still leading companies like Sir’s up and down England. Lady Wolfit apparently protested that Harwood’s scenario had done discredit to her husband’s memory. Yet, having seen Sir Donald perform towards the end of his career, I can think of no more fitting testimonial to him, and the grand and tough tradition he incarnated.

While one may cavil at a few ponderous analogies between Sir, Sir Winston Churchill, and Albion’s foundering empire, the film’s pleasures greatly outweigh its problems. Every part is admirable cast and played. One of many small joys is the rarely seen depiction of make-up art, as Sir painstakingly transforms himself into Lear (Finney’s own transformation into Sir is no less magical!). Yate’s mise-en-scene poignantly captures the surroundings of a World War II provincial stage. The Dresser’s psychological accuracy is even more impressive.

As a final note, some readers have complained that my reading of Norman’s bond with Sir pays insufficient heed to the former’s exuberant homosexuality. Given the usual reservations about analyzing a fictional character, it seems to me that The Dresser presents Norman’s gayness as a given, never as a significant contribution to his, or the pair’s dynamics. Sir, clearly a raunchy heterosexual, does make slighting remarks about several homosexual colleagues, including the company member whose arrest threatens the performance, and another gay actor he deems of slight talent.

But Sir’s mockery in this respect is generic. Few of any persuasion escape his bitchy rapier wit, and later, he speaks with
genuine compassion about the incarcerated gay actor he’s previously derided. In their bouts of Billingsgate invective, Sir makes virtually no mention of Norman’s homosexuality, which I interpret as a sign of the character’s inveterate respect.

While it could be argued that Norman’s symbiotic tangle with Sir springs from unsatisfied and erotized oral cravings, I have never found any evidence that such motives are specific to homosexuals -- as ponderously advanced in several outworn psychoanalytic projects (together with other equally hamfisted theories), Norman’s put-down of an ingenue with a crush on Sir is aimed at keeping Sir firmly under his sway. It’s most assuredly not motivated by sexual jealousy.

“I had a friend!!”, he weeps after Sir’s death. Let us take him at his word.

REFERENCE
