

Joan of Arc: Guilty As Charged

by Ron Maxwell

THE FRENCH ECCLESIASTICS delegated by the occupying English power to the thankless chore of determining whether Joan of Arc was an imposter or a heretic guided by Satan would love *The Messenger*. Luc Besson attempts to prove what even the best prosecuting clerics of her day could not: that Joan was a demented, misled, hysterical, confused, and guilt-ridden phony. But even with the power and money of Sony and Gaumont behind him, he is no more convincing than the inquisitors of Rouen.



Since the historical record of perhaps the most documented trial from the medieval era is mostly ignored, among other things we are never told that Joan heard voices from and saw specific saints—Margaret, Catherine, and Michael. This is not conjecture. This is what Joan herself said under grueling cross-examination over a period of months. Why then is this never

said in the film? Instead, the film presents her voices as nothing more than the wind and the clouds. Nowhere is Joan recorded as saying anything of the sort. But these filmmakers are not interested at all in taking Joan at her own words, nor in the testimony of anyone else who knew her as transcribed in voluminous first-hand accounts in the trial of rehabilitation conducted just twenty years after her execution. The difference between a story of a young girl visited by specific saints and one who witnesses wind and clouds is the difference between the real life Joan of Arc and the fictitious marionette of this film.

Not content with ignoring the facts, the film invents its own. It begins with the child Joan witnessing the brutal murder and rape (in that order) of her sister Catherine by marauding English soldiers. There is no evidence in the historical record that this ever happened, and in any case, it was not English soldiers who ransacked Domremy, but Burgundians from the other side of the river Meuse. Aside from the fundamental

responsibility of any artist to strive for the truth, why does this matter? It matters because, with the subtlety of a pole-axe, the filmmakers are desperate to provide the young Joan with "motivation." Revenge, the all purpose motivator of Nineties movies! This gratuitously violent and graphically filmed scene (qualifying the film for an R rating, thereby keeping young people away from a story about a young person) is followed by a scene with a priest in which she rails at God for permitting these atrocities. There were many horrors that took place in the Hundred Years War, and much to rage at both God and man, but this made-up incident wasn't one of them. When a film is founded on a lie, and a perverse one at that, nothing that follows can be trusted. In the case of *The Messenger*, a true story of love and sacrifice, of dedication and faith, is reduced by the morphing of skillful cinematic hacks to a false one of hatred, bitterness, fury, and revenge. How was this incredible revelation overlooked by playwrights Shaw, Schiller, Anouilh, Peguy, Brecht, Anderson; historians Duby, Pernoud, Michelet, Warner, Contamine, Luce; novelists Twain, Tournier, Vioux, Keneally; and filmmakers Dryer, Gastinet, DeMille, Fleming, Preminger, and Rivet?

So what are we to make of all this nonsense?

Perhaps this is a new-age, windy, cloudy Joan, one who not only never names her saints but doesn't ever say the names Mary or Jesus, even though she had these names sewn into her banner and regularly prayed. But it would be too insulting to new-age philosophers to posit this Joan in those terms, because new-age philosophies are deeper and more sophisticated than the simple-minded imagery of this film.

Perhaps this is a feminist Joan, one who carries the torch of womankind into a man's world. If that was the case, the filmmakers would have done well to avail themselves of Christine de Pizan's epic poem on Joan, the only poem written by a contemporary. It is a paean to womankind, an ode to Joan as liberator and woman of faith in the tradition of Judith and the selfless saints of antiquity who Joan herself adored. If Joan was indeed the boorish, screaming, hysterical, frenzied, petulant, angry, and weepy female as portrayed in this film, no one of either sex would have followed her out of her pasture let alone for a campaign to liberate France.

Perhaps this is a cartoon Joan, a comic-book heroine who can do anything the men can do, only better, a medieval "Annie Get Your Sword," sans humor. Look, she can ride a horse, swing a sword, scream, threaten, taunt, and as the film irresponsibly suggests,

even kill. But cartoon characters have to be funny as well as fantastic. This Joan has the sense of humor of a stone. Even Ingrid Bergman's Joan, in an otherwise mannered and dated film, retains a convincing charm, a disarming naivete.

Perhaps this is a psychological film. After all, as any rational person knows, people who claim to hear voices are delusional or schizophrenic. At the very least, the sound of bells ringing in your ears can be diagnosed as tinnitus. But these filmmakers obviously didn't avail themselves of Julian Jayne's fascinating treatise, *The Origin of Consciousness*, in which he suggests the relationship of the brain's left and right lobes as separate personalities in a lifelong dialogue. Such an exploration might have made for an interesting and worthwhile film, but this film tosses out the possibility of Joan as delusional maniac like a sensational grenade instead of as a valid idea for serious exploration. If you're looking for a film that at least tangentially deals with these themes, see *Breaking the Waves*, or *The Anchorite*, or *Therese*.

Perhaps this is a humanist film, showing the emptiness of faith and the corruption of religious institutions, in particular Christianity. But even secular humanists acknowledge the authenticity of the faith of others. Is the intention behind portraying Joan of Arc as a mistaken and misguided believer a parable on the mistaken-ness of all believers? Near the end of the film, Dustin Hoffman appears as one of her voices, ostensibly her conscience, his mission being to debunk the mythology of Joan's belief system. There follows a laborious sequence where the "miraculous" appearance of Joan's sword in her youth is recalled and then explained by circumstantial evidence. So, we've endured two and a half hours of gibberish only to have Mr. Besson set up a historical straw man so he can tear it down. In keeping with all the other historical infidelities of this film, there was no sword in the field, and the real Joan never claimed that her sword fell down to her from heaven. But this is revealing of a more profound absence in this film, the total inability to comprehend and to express the miraculous. There is undoubtedly much mythology and folklore that has accrued to the Joan of Arc story. One need hardly add to it as this film has done. The point, however, is not that this or that miracle occurred or didn't occur. The miracle is Joan herself. How did a seventeen-year-old girl, a peasant from the fringes of the kingdom, manage to enlist the trust and support of a nation and play a pivotal role in expelling a foreign invader? Not only does this film fail to pose this central question, it seeks to remove the authenticity of Joan's faith and the faith of her countrymen as at least a factor in these complex events.

Perhaps this is a film about repressed sexuality and what can happen if the hormones are not given their due? Also a valid area of inquiry with more than fertile entertainment values. Is the adolescent writhing in the tall grass supposed to be suggestive of sexual longing? Okay, and ... ? Not exactly Nabokovian.

Maybe the whole exercise is an excuse for the murder and mayhem scenes reminiscent of *Braveheart*, hacked off limbs, decapitations with blood gushing forth, maulings and maimings, and spilled entrails. There's plenty of this superficial movie mucous. But there is none of the dark beauty of equally violent films by Kurosawa such as *Yojimbo* or *Sanjuro*, with their existential undertones and potent sense of a character imbedded and connected to a specific time in a specific place. Ms. Jovovich's Joan is a "thoroughly modern Milla" who struts and poses across the battlefields as if she's doing a layout for *Vogue*. She is surrounded by a motley crew of armored buffoons and clowns who have as much to do with Dunois, Lahire, and Giles de Rais as La Cirque du Soleil. Real jeopardy is replaced by theatrical bravado and clichéd camaraderie, the kind of movie where every other stunt is supposed to be a joke. So much so, that Joan's wounding at Les Tourelles arouses neither sympathy nor apprehension. It is emotionally empty. When it comes to scenes of battle, this film has neither the character-based grittiness of Kenneth Branagh's nor the sheer visual splendor of Laurence Olivier's Henry V films, both set in precisely the same epoch.

Perhaps this is an MTV Joan. After all, Milla Jovovich is fetching, there's lots of fast motion and slow motion, and stop-motion photography. But no, MTV films run about two and a half minutes, not two and a half hours, and there are lyrics besides the FX.

What is this film anyway? Might it be *Vanity Fair*, or, to put it in its proper historical context, a bonfire of the vanities?—the vanities of arrogance (thinking a film on Joan can be made with little regard to the research and the record), of self-adulation (believing that cleverness can substitute for a genuine search for truth) and of vanity itself (aside from being Mrs. Besson, what other qualifications did Ms. Jovovich have for this role?).

One cannot and should not attempt a film on Joan of Arc without a sense of humility and a willingness to listen; perhaps not to the saints who visited Joan, but at least to the hundreds of real life people who knew her and whose testimony has been recorded for posterity, to the hundreds of scholars who have studied her over the centuries and

to the artists who have written poems and plays and novels and made movies about her. If and when one can practice this kind of humility, to avail one's self of this kind of knowledge, to take one's valid place in the collective effort of generations seeking illumination and truth, then perhaps a filmmaker might make a lasting contribution to our understanding and our continuing fascination with this remarkable woman.

Regrettably, *The Messenger* stands off by itself, disconnected from any authentic witness or tradition or community, whether religious, artistic, cinematic, historic, or scientific. It is the ultimate ego trip, the polar opposite of the historical Joan, who surrendered her ego to a higher calling. She came to be a liberator at the head of armies because she earned their trust, because she was selfless, she was viscerally connected with her people, she was authentic, she was loyal, she was courageous, she was possessed of the inner strength and composure of absolute faith and she was loving—immensely loving. That is partly an understanding of her power—the power to rally soldiers, inspire the common people, win over princes and prelates, and the power to endure in our hearts over the centuries. All else is mystery. The failure to distinguish between what is historical and what is mysterious is the failure of this motion picture.

In 1899, the Melies brothers produced the very first film on Joan of Arc. There is more truth in any frame of that silent, awkward beginning than in this entire inflated state of the art mega-release. It's not Joan of Arc who should be judged as a fraud. It's this silly, heartless, mean-spirited, small-minded, and completely phony film.

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