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## Review: Quartet (2012)

### **Keywords**

Quartet, Dustin Hoffman

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**Reviews**

edited by

Gregory W. Harwood

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***Quartet* (2012) [DVD]**

Bob Kosovsky

Director: Dustin Hoffman

Producers: Finola Dwyer and Stewart Mackinnon

Screenplay: Ronald Harwood, based on his play of the same name

Actors:

Maggie Smith as Jean Horton

Tom Courtenay as Reginald (“Reg”) Paget

Billy Connolly as Wilfred (“Wilf”) Bond

Gwyneth Jones as Anne Langley

Music: Dario Marianelli

Cinematography: John de Borman

BBC Films / Momentum Pictures

Reviewing Dustin Hoffman’s directorial debut provides an opportunity to view the film *Quartet* from musical and operatic viewpoints. The 2012 film is based on Ronald Harwood’s play of the same title, first staged in London in 1999. (The playwright acknowledges the 1984 documentary film *Il bacio di Tosca* (*Tosca’s Kiss*), a group of interviews, conversations, and reminiscences about opera by the residents of the Casa di Riposo, as the initial inspiration for his play.)

Using the setting of “Beecham House” (an imaginary retirement home in Buckinghamshire, England, named for conductor Thomas Beecham and modeled on the Casa di Riposo per Musicisti in Milan, built by Verdi), the narrative of both the play and the film is based on the question of whether four aged opera singers will be able to put aside their strong personalities, emotionally laden relationships, and physical infirmities to perform the quartet from Verdi’s *Rigoletto* for a fundraising gala intended to alleviate Beecham House’s precarious financial state. Waiting for this question’s resolution (which occurs only in the final moments of the film) holds the narrative tightly together. Aside from this obvious device, the story gives voice to reflections on life from the vantage point of those for whom musical activities were among the most precious moments, and who are aware (sometimes painfully so) that they are in the final act of their lives. In a brief interview included among the DVD’s bonus features, Harwood calls this “surviving with dignity,” while Hoffman bluntly sums it up as “In this short life, don’t be a shmuck and waste it.”

Of course, readers of this journal will take a particular interest in this film because of its operatic topic and setting. But as Hoffman’s running audio commentary (available on the DVD

as an alternative track) makes clear, as does the aforementioned interview with Harwood, the musical setting of the story is intended as a metaphor for broader issues. Although Hoffman admits to having studied and played classical music since his youth, he reveals where his true passion lies when talking about actors and the craft of acting. Like opera singers who no longer receive offers, Hoffman identifies and sympathizes with actors who are unable to get parts because they're perceived as being too old. But opera singers and actors alike, once retired, retain the passion to be connected to the art form, as it serves to keep them alive by giving their lives meaning.

Although the operatic setting of the story may suggest exaggerated or extreme histrionics, the British playwright and cast keep most emotions subdued. This in turn highlights a few brief emotional outbursts, while serving as a reminder of the characters' struggles to maintain and enjoy their lives while there is still time to do so. (In one of the many bits of British humor, diva Jean Horton—played by Maggie Smith—reminds the audience that the family inheritance of the house's namesake came from the manufacture of laxatives.) The attractive cinematography (by John de Borman) lovingly captures the gardens and the interior of Hedsor House, the mansion used as Beecham House. Many shots are created with care, making this operatically themed film harken back to a time when visual beauty was considered (at least on occasion) a desired attribute in opera sets and costumes.

Being elderly has at least one advantage: Hoffman notes numerous times on the commentary track the expressiveness of almost every cast member's face. The younger cast members may be deemed beautiful or reflective of innocence, but Maggie Smith receives the greatest admiration from Hoffman for ineffable subtleties of mood and emotion in her facial expressions.

A musical purist may cringe at the film's use of music. Except for seventeen minutes of music written by Dario Marianelli, nearly all of the soundtrack is adapted from classical music or opera. (One excerpt intended to be an actual performance is the character Anne Langley's performance of "Vissi d'arte" from Puccini's *Tosca*—portrayed and sung by Gwyneth Jones.) Occasionally musical excerpts are selected for a narrative purpose: arrangements of the *Rigoletto* quartet (the work upon which the plot depends) occasionally underscore scenes where the plot's outcome is in doubt, while an amusing arrangement of "Caro nome" provides a light commentary when the elderly but comic Wilf (portrayed by Billy Connolly) engages in flirtatious banter with a young female doctor. Yet the border between background music and diegetic music (music playing a part in the story) is occasionally porous. At one point we see an elderly cellist and a pianist playing Saint-Saëns's *Le Cygne*; the true purpose of this accompanying music—to tell the audience that there's something unspoken going on—becomes clear when we see Reg (played by Tom Courtenay), Jean's ex-husband, looking longingly into her window. Filmed as a near-continuous zoom shot, the scene concludes with a close-up of cellist and pianist, who are totally unaware of the emotions that their playing has evoked. Other musical excerpts furnish both aural counterpoint to the visual by means of a steady rhythm and an optimistic mood that quickens the pace of non-verbal scenes: one such example is the use of the "Celebrated Minuet" from Boccherini's String Quintet, op. 11, no. 5, to underscore a long walk in the house's gardens.

The film's final credits present an interesting situation. While the names of cast and crew scroll by, we see several cast members in paired photographs: an image from their careers as opera singers (or actors) placed next to an image from the film. This creates an extra-narrative

layer, in that the elderly residents of Beecham House really are retired musicians portraying retired musicians—they are acting and yet they are being themselves.

True to his Method-acting roots, Hoffman in fact included several scenes in which he had the cast improvise during filming, such as his encouragement to “make jokes that opera singers would make.” The commentary generally stays somewhat superficial as Hoffman points out various passing phenomena, most often how certain shots were set up or which dialogue lines were improvised.

Containing no egregiously incorrect statements about music or opera (as so many films do), *Quartet* is one of those all-too-rare films that show an appreciation and a respect for the people who devote their lives to opera and to music.