

REVIEW

The chaos that was rural Sicily

Paolo and Vittorio Taviani flawlessly execute book-to-screen adaptation

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BEIRUT: There is more to Sicily, it seems, than the mafia. In Paolo and Vittorio Taviani's 1984 film "KAOS" ("Chaos"), it is a strikingly beautiful landscape, populated by sturdy stone architecture, peculiar characters and the stories they recollect and recount.

Adapted from the work of Sicilian-born philologist, fiction-writer and playwright Luigi Pirandello (1867-1936), the stories related that are in this film have the shimmer of folk tales about them, although the film's visual language suggests the Tavianis' aims to transcend popular cinema.

The tales have no obvious connection to one another apart from location. They drift in a thematic continuum that evokes the film's title — which Pirandello once wrote is the etymological origin of "Cavusu," the name of a wood near his native village of Girgenti. The wood, "nature" if you like, provides the irrational counterpoint to whatever order the human beings in Pirandello's universe imagine, in their hubris, that they can impose upon their lives.

"KAOS" is part of the 11-movie "Books to Screen" film cycle currently running at the Metropolis-Cinema Sofil. This collaborative project — sponsored by Beirut's several European cultural centers and the Metropolis — has been arranged to mark Beirut's being declared World Book Capital for 2009-2010. The object has been to demonstrate that, though books

are not infrequently adapted for the big screen, this trans-mutation has at times been done well.

In the case of "KAOS," the Tavianis embraced the theatricality embedded in Pirandello's writing and wedded it with the visual possibilities afforded by the Sicilian countryside where the stories are played out. When realizing these adaptations, fortunately, they had director of photography Giuseppe Lanci on hand to capture these locations. The effect is, at times, stunning.

The film is comprised of four stories sandwiched between an untitled prologue and a formal epilogue. In the former, a group of shepherds find a male crow roosting a clutch of eggs. This is an abomination to their (admittedly narrow) sense of propriety, and they commence an earthy debate as to the most appropriate fate for the offending bird.

Before the crow can be done in, though, one of the shepherds ties a bell around the bird's neck and sets him free. The jangling bird provides a visual — and allusive thematic — bridge among the ensuing stories.

"The Other Son," the first proper story, seems (from the perspective of today) the most forward-looking in its themes. A Sicilian mother (Margarita Lozano) pines for her two sons, who emigrated to America 14 years before and since then have communicated not a word.

Illiterate herself, mom still sends letters to her sons — dictating them to a mischievous young woman who ignores the mother's well-rehearsed script and writes down nothing but elaborate scribbles. Mother routinely gives each letter to one of the

cluster of emigrants who every week trickle away to America.

The film finds the mother in the midst of this ritual, when the village doctor reveals to her that her most-recent letter to her loved ones is nothing but nonsense. He promises to re-write it for her, then discovers that, much as she pines for her two



The Tavianis' imagining of one of Pirandello's stories.

migrated boys, she scorns her third son with equal vehemence.

Since a broken wagon wheel has delayed the emigrants' departure by four hours, the doctor demands she explain her inconsistency. Sighing, this most unreliable of narrators takes up the story of how her third son is the bastard child political revolution.

The second story, "Moon Sickness," takes up another family story — not the relationship of a mother and her offspring but a wife and her husband.

Sidora (Enrica Maria Modugno) is newly wed to Bata (Claudio Bigagli), who owns an isolated homestead a couple of kilometers from town. The story opens on the afternoon of the



Pirandello, the author, shown in reverie in the epilogue of "KAOS."

it's begun to rain, saving Bata from his affliction.

The comic third segment, "The Jar," takes up a story of family and political power. A wealthy landowner, Don Lollo (Ciccio Ingrassia) finds himself with such a bountiful olive crop that he orders a man-sized terra cotta jug to hold the oil he plans to press. A synecdoche for Don Lollo's pride, the jug stands in the middle of his courtyard until, one night, a shadow passes briefly over the face of the moon, leaving the jar is split in two.

Don Lollo's Uncle Dima (Franco Franchi) is summoned to mend the jug and in the process seals himself inside. Forced to choose between saving Dima and preserving the Don's power, the villagers connive a way to free Dima by having the Don himself destroy his jar.

The fourth story, "Requiem," follows the efforts of a group of villagers to bury their dead closer to where they live. Having no rights over the land, must pay to bury their dead in the graveyards of other towns. Finally they lodge a protest with the Baron (Pasquale Spadola), upon whose land they live.

The Epilogue, "Conversing with Mother," finds Pirandello

himself (Oméro Antonutti) return to the town of his youth.

While contemplating his own nostalgia, the author is visited by the apparition of his departed mother (Regina Bianchi), who relates an anecdote of her own childhood.

Arguably Pirandello's greatest contribution to 20th-century literature, and thought, was made in his plays and their preoccupation with issues of identity. This is evident in his best-known (at any rate his most-anthologized) work, the 1921 play "Six Characters in Search of an Author."

Here, the crisis of identity is set on the stage itself, the symbol of appearance versus reality, and is played out among an ensemble of characters, and the (rather uninteresting) actors meant to represent them.

The themes taken up by "KAOS" seem much simpler than those of "Six Characters" (which has been adapted for television several times but never to film). This, perhaps deceptive, simplicity may be one of the reasons this film represents a relatively successful adaptation.

"Books to Screen" continues at Metropolis-Cinema Sofil until Sunday. For more information call +961 420 243.

L'Europe, du livre au cinéma

N.T.

Du 11 au 17 janvier dernier, les centres culturels européens présents au Liban ont uni leurs efforts et leur patrimoine dans un nouveau festival cinématographique, *Book to screen*, projetant uniquement des adaptations de livres.



Effi Briest, l'ouvrage du poète et romancier allemand Theodor Fontane publié en 1894, a été plusieurs fois porté à l'écran. Le festival *Book to screen* en a proposé deux adaptations (1974 et 2008).

Le livre et le cinéma font bon ménage. Et ce depuis des décennies tant les scénaristes des cinq continents ont allègrement pioché dans le patrimoine littéraire pour en tirer des adaptations. A l'occasion de Beyrouth Capitale mondiale du livre, plusieurs centres culturels européens ont joint leurs efforts pour proposer un festival original, *Book to screen* («Du livre à l'écran», en anglais). Ainsi, le Centre culturel français, le Goethe Institut, le Centre culturel italien, l'Institut Cervantes et le British Council ont travaillé main dans la main avec l'association libanaise Metropolis Cinema pour proposer une sélection de onze films européens tirés du patrimoine littéraire du Vieux continent. Hania Mroué, la directrice de Metropolis Cinema a d'ailleurs, dans son mot de bienvenue, souligné que cette opération était un bon moyen de rendre hommage à Beyrouth Capitale mondiale du livre.

Pendant sept jours, la salle de cinéma Empire Sofit a donc accueilli les cinéphiles libanais. Voici le programme de la manifestation:

Lundi 11 janvier

- *Soldados de Salamina*, de David Trueba (Espagne, 2002)

Mardi 12 janvier

- *Effi Briest*, de Hermine Huntgeburth (Allemagne, 2008)
- *Honor de Cavallera*, d'Albert Serra (Espagne, 2006)

Mercredi 13 janvier

- *Le mépris*, de Jean-Luc Godard (France, 1963)
- *Great expectations*, de David Lean (Royaume-Uni, 1949)

Jeudi 14 janvier

- *Kaos*, de Paolo et Vittorio Taviani (Italie, 1983)

Vendredi 15 janvier

- *Boy A*, de John Crowley (Royaume-Uni, 2007)
- *Villa Amalia*, de Benoît Jacquot (France, 2009)

Samedi 16 janvier

- *Romanzo Criminale*, de Michele Placido (Italie, 2006)
- *Fontane Effi Briest*, de Rainer Werner Fassbinder (Allemagne, 1974)

Dimanche 17 janvier (hors programme)

- *Bab el-Shams*, de Yousry Nasrallah (Egypte Liban, 2004)

