



Jesus of Nazareth



ITALY, 1977, 269 MINUTES, COLOUR

Robert Powell, Olivia Hussey, Anne Bancroft, Ernest Borgnine, Claudia Cardinale, Valentina Cortese, James Farentino, James Earl Jones, Stacy Keach, Tony Lo Bianco, James Mason, Ian McShane, Sir Laurence Olivier, Donald Pleasence, Christopher Plummer, Anthony Quinn, Fernando Rey, Ralph Richardson, Rod Steiger, Peter Ustinov. Directed by Franco Zeffirelli.

The 1970s produced an outstandingly successful portrait of Jesus, Franco Zeffirelli's *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977). Designed as a television mini-series, it was also re-edited for cinema release. It was filmed in English with an international star cast. The instant popularity of the film, its being dubbed into several languages, especially Spanish, both for Spain and, especially for Latin America, led to its being screened all over the world and Robert Powell becoming the best-known Jesus face everywhere.

Why did audiences respond so well to *Jesus of Nazareth*? Robert Powell, his presence and his fine voice? He was certainly a strong reason for its success. The cast and the attractive re-creation of the Gospel era?

A suggestion for the popularity of *Jesus of Nazareth* is that, overall, the interpretation of Jesus is very congenial. Perhaps it is a dominant presence of episodes from Luke's Gospel, with such sequences as the parable of the prodigal son in the context of Matthew's banquet or the episode of the sinful woman coming to Simon's house. Robert Powell personalises his interpretation of Jesus. It is almost the opposite of what Pasolini does with his austere Jesus and the opposite of George Stevens' direction of Max Von Sydow in being a speaking icon in *The Greatest Story Ever Told*.

Franco Zeffirelli had far more screen time available for *Jesus of Nazareth* than previous Jesus films. It was a television mini-series running for eight hours. When it was later cut for cinema, it ran for two and a quarter hours.

Zeffirelli collaborated with veteran Italian screenwriter Suso Cecchi Damico, well-known and respected for her work with such directors as Visconti, and with British novelist Anthony Burgess, best known for *A Clockwork Orange*. Together they fashioned a screenplay that incorporated the key incidents of each Gospel but also provided a great amount of historical and social background, rearranging Gospel incidents much as the early Christian communities assembled the Gospels as we now have them. They created characters like the secretary of the Sanhedrin (played by Ian Holm) as a way of dramatising the Gospel tensions. Even with familiar incidents they added dialogue that gave the events more psychological and dramatic credibility. For instance, with the story of the rich young man who approached Jesus, they get him to repeat, hesitatingly and with puzzled intonation, Jesus' invitation to sell everything. And he leaves Jesus, continually glancing back, bemused but unable to stay.

The screenplay and direction, with a blend of 'realism' and 'naturalism', meant that any audience would not feel that the material was too much 'above them'. They could identify with the events and with Jesus himself.

In this way, Zeffirelli's Jesus is personalised far more persuasively than Jesus in other films. The audience appreciates Jesus as a human being with feelings and warmth as well as intelligence and strong will.

Fr Peter Malone MSC

Peter is a former president of SIGNIS - the World Catholic Association for Communication. He's a highly experienced film critic and author who has travelled the world watching, writing on and talking about movies. Since 1968, he's written reviews for a number of Catholic magazines and periodicals. He has also written many books on cinema including Films and Values, Movie Christs and Antichrists, Cinema Down Under and the excellent Lights, Camera, Faith (Movie Lectionary) series.