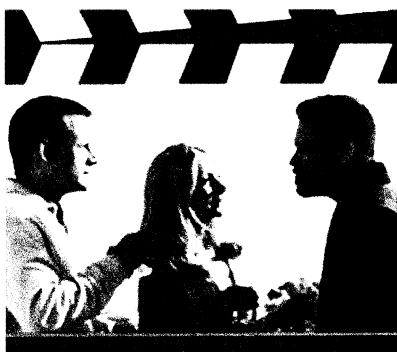


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Review: The Dying Gaul and Other Screenplays by Craig Lucas



The Dying Gaul and Other Screenplays
Craig Lucas

Published by Alyson

Reviewed by Garth Green

by Craig Lucas

includes *The Secret Lives of Dentists* and *Longtime Companion*



I was excited when I first flicked through this book and saw the names of great films by Norman Rene, Alan Rudolph and Craig Lucas himself. On the cover is a gorgeous still from Lucas's own directed *The Dying Gaul* (2005); the book's medium - format design is compact yet classy and easily manageable. I read through it all in one sitting.

Campbell Scott's short Foreword unfolds in sparklingly clear prose as he defines the essence of great screenplays, based on well chosen words to resemble the "ropes in a suspension bridge". He suggests that this is a great art which Lucas has and that his words are arranged like "great pieces of music". Scott's mini essays on the three screenplays in the volume, even though just a paragraph apiece manage to convey the most trenchant analysis.

There is also an interview with Lucas conducted by the book's editor, Steven Drukman. Drukman also replays the analysis of the three chosen screenplays and places them into political, social and movie context, or what he calls "movie-land". One gets the feeling that Drukman feels "movie-land" has replaced "wonderland" and allows Lucas to define his own roles between scriptwriting, movie directing and stage directing.

But at times reading the book is a bumpy ride, due to it's screenplay

formatting. As a university lecturer I am used to reading plays in play format, but I found reading the screenplay script with its various abbreviations and scene changes a bit heavy going and had to learn a new " language " as it were, in order to appreciate them. One other quibble which I have with the editing of the screenplays is the appending of the film's cast lists and stills from the movies - why only stills from two of the three films ? - and why not full production lists of the films, noting all the details, such as the years that they were produced and released ? As the films are the finished products of the screenplay production, surely an important and essential aspect of this type of book ?

It's a pleasure to see the female perspective on the screenplays and on Lucas's work through the commentary of Mary-Louise Parker, who starred in *Longtime Companion*. She describes Lucas " like some giant sea creature, all tentacles and neon suction cups that trap and filter any conversation ... " and a writer who writes " for people who will bother to listen; his is not a passive theater ".

While reading the book, I have borne in mind the very great pleasure that cine lovers derive from Lucas's work and have tried to answer in my own mind why he has such popular appeal. Given that the world which he portrays for the spectator is so emotionally violent in its passive aggression, it would be quite possible to find his films both repetitive and alienating. Such is not the case, however, as his huge " listening " audiences make clear. I may suggest that, while his narrative closure is often one of death, nonetheless the overriding message taken from his films is that there is hope. Robert Sandrich, a character in *The Dying Gaul* can be taken as a representative for many of the major characters in his scripts, and Lucas describes him as " pushing all the rage down deep within, not allowing it any vent " and yet by the end of the script we are told " the process therefore consists in becoming what you are." Hope comes in the form of creative choice for the protagonists even though it entails for nearly all a fatal ending. The point is, though, that each character chooses their end, working from deep rage, and that choice takes the form of a direct challenge and/or resistance to the major institutions that govern us - in particular the society of technology and surveillance, the society of consumption, the institutionally sanctioned notion of the family, and not least the society of new age religion with its therapies and new dysfunctional paradigms. Lucas amusingly ends *The Secret Lives of Dentists* with an image which shows us clearly this choice in operation: Dave, the dentist tells us in a voice over that " Teeth. I am still struck by the mystery ... " and we are told " He continues probing."