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Eliot play that film couldn't spoil

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We have waited a long time, but here at last is what will, for many, be their first chance to see the 1952 film version of *Murder in the Cathedral* (Cert. PG), courtesy of a 2K remastered DVD.

There had been films in 1910 and 1923 about the assassination in 1170 of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Becket, in his cathedral. T. S. Eliot's version appears to be the first talkie about 'this meddlesome priest' — not that anybody knows for certain if an enraged Henry II ever uttered these words. There is no mistaking, though, the king's exasperation with a Church unprepared to subject its clergy to the 'customs of the realm'.



Henry hadn't reckoned with the upsurge of public grief over Thomas's death. Its effect was to thwart Henry's efforts to revise church-state relationships. It wasn't until the reign of Henry VIII, several centuries later, that Becket's legacy of church supremacy was finally quashed.

The film, through those who killed Becket, bids us remember that their actions were the first step towards a secular society built on welfare and justice. Yet 800 years later, 'you still call us murderers.'

The film is based on the play about the assassination of Thomas Becket which George Bell, as Dean of Canterbury, commissioned for the city's annual arts festival. Eliot had already collaborated with Bell on *The Rock*, a pageant with music by Martin Shaw, which includes some of the poet's words, as well as others by the Revd R. Webb-Odell.

From what we can gather, this priest was involved because performances of *The Rock* were in aid of the Forty-Five Churches Fund, for which Webb-Odell was raising money to build new churches in the suburbs of London. The pageant's director, E. Martin Browne, had the job of shaping the final text.

It might strike us as a brave thing to tamper with the verses of an already famous poet. Eliot seems to have borne him no grudge; for Browne went on to direct the first performance of the Becket play. It took place in the Chapter House of Canterbury Cathedral on 25 June 1935. This was Eliot's first full-length play, and, while it cemented the writer's reputation, critics and audiences have appreciated the words rather more than its staging.

Ironically, this was what most attracted George Hoellering to make a film version. If *Murder in the Cathedral*, he said, had been written more in keeping with a conventional theatrical structure, he would have had less incentive to transfer it to the screen. 'I could only have spoiled something that was already perfect in its way.'

Hoellering was a refugee from the Nazis but, because of his Austro-Hungarian origins, was interned on the Isle of Man during the Second World War. During this time, a friend lent him a copy of the play. Its themes of self-sacrifice and martyrdom deeply impressed the man. On release, he met Eliot, who, reluctant though he was, eventually agreed to the film. This was mainly because of Hoellering's enthusiasm and insight about the piece; but the deal was only finally struck after Eliot was invited to a special showing at the Academy Cinema (where Hoellering was managing director) to watch his film *Hortobágy* (about Hungarian country folk resisting agricultural mechanisation), which he had made pre-war in Hungary.

Other concessions followed, Eliot agreeing to write a new court scene near the beginning which sets out more clearly the nature of disagreement between monarch and prelate. Also new to the film is the Prior's explanation of Becket's exile, the First Knight's justifications, plus what Eliot was to acknowledge as an 'ingenious rearrangement and abbreviation' of some other speeches, a new women's chorus, and (best scoop of all) employing an unseen Eliot to voice the Fourth Tempter's lines: 'The last act is the greatest treason / To do the right deed for the wrong reason.'

The *Church Times* loved the film when first released. It was impressed on several levels. Meticulous attention had been given to the sets. Most of these were located in St Stephen's, St John's Wood, in north-west London. Close-ups can be very revealing of anachronisms; so the tapestries and costumes were hand-woven in accordance with medieval stitchcraft, though, interestingly, the cathedral's murals and reredoses exhibit icon-like images more associated with the Eastern Church.

Many of the actors were amateurs. One such was Alban Blakelock, son of a clergyman who played Foliot, the Bishop of London, a character not in the original play. Though he was surrounded by accomplished professionals like Alexander Gauge (Henry), Michael Aldridge, Leo McKern, and Paul Rogers (Second, Third, and Fourth Knights), the greatest praise was heaped on the Revd John (St John) Groser, a renowned Christian Socialist working in the East End of London.



Hoellering had visited the Stepney church several times to hear Groser preach, and was convinced that he was the man to play Becket. He was right. One can still sense a holy presence in this performance. The serenity that emerges has not been without a struggle. Historically, Thomas has had his snout deep in the royal trough, licentious, and gorging on its luxuries. Somehow the movement from indulgence to losing oneself for the sake of the gospel is etched on Groser's face.

But has the film stood the test of time? Or should we put that in the plural; for the DVD contains an alternative Festival cut, some 25 minutes longer. Even the same scenes as the cinema release are sometimes edited differently.

The Festival's extended portions of dialogue raise an important issue. Film is primarily a visual medium. Fewer

words are necessary in film. It raises the question how to reconcile a script by one of the world's leading poets with the discipline that cinema imposes on its artists. But it would be mistaken to consider *Murder in the Cathedral* any more talkative than many, say, screen adaptations of Shakespeare. Indeed, its structure allows for techniques often avoided (with few exceptions) in mainstream films. There are straight-to-camera speeches that address and challenge us. The Knights, for instance, have no need to play to the gallery. Rather, they address each of us individually. This is very powerful.

The close-up and camera angles prevent a fixed point of view, which appropriately reflects Eliot's even-handedness in his treatment both of Becket and his persecutors. The women's chorus laments the continuing tale of Christ's affliction here on earth through its saints, and Becket's final sermon neatly explains why the joy of Christmas Day is followed by honouring Stephen, the first Christian martyr. Violent death isn't something eagerly sought but, if it comes, then must be freely embraced.

The sentiments of the film encompass that notion admirably without ever falling into sentimentality. What a treasure chest this DVD is, containing

as it does William Temple's moving wartime sermon (*A Message from Canterbury*), a clip of the Glasgow Orpheus Choir, and *Shapes and Forms*, a Hoellering short about primitive and modern art.



The DVD is available from the BFI Shop, phone 020 7815 1350; or via www.bfi.org.uk/shop.