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## **Tale of Tales (15)**

*dir:* **Matteo Garrone**

*Starring:* **Salma Hayek, Vincent Cassel, Toby Jones**

*Sponsor:* **Lincoln Print and Copy Centre**

**Synopsis:** *Tale of Tales* is a collection of forty-nine fairy tales within a fiftieth frame story, from 16th century Italian author Giambattista Basile. They contain the earliest versions of celebrated stories like Rapunzel, All-Fur, Hansel and Gretel, The Goose That Laid the Golden Egg, Sleeping Beauty, and Cinderella. Bawdy, irreverent but also tender and whimsical, they are acute in psychological characterization and encyclopedic in description.

3 are linked together in this striking film from Matteo Garrone. In the first, a king and queen wishing for a child are instructed by a necromancer to kill a sea monster, after which the queen must eat its heart. In the second, a king becomes obsessed with an oversized flea. After it dies the king has it skinned and promises the hand of his daughter in marriage to anyone who can identify the creature from the skin alone. The winner is an ogre, who carries the princess away to its cave. In the final tale, a king is entranced by the voice of a singer who refuses to be seen. He persuades the singer to visit him, promising to respect her anonymity. But he breaks the agreement and triggers unforeseen consequences.

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It never rains but it pours in the world of fairytales: there are no half measures, only extremes - surpassing beauty, surpassing riches, acmes of lack and ugliness. Death, in monstrous guises (as wolf, witch, starvation), squats at every fork in the road. The turbulence of the fairy tale is amplified in this first English-language feature from director Matteo Garrone. *Tale of Tales* braids together 3 stories based on only a fistful of the 50 collected by Neapolitan poet Giambattista Basile, and this braiding results in the fables' fireworks going off in a climactic sequence.

The 3 fables, being not as often adapted as 'Puss in Boots' or 'Sleeping Beauty' (both of which were collected in Basile's *Pentamerone* before being seized on and altered by the French Charles Perrault and the German brothers Grimm), are well chosen. They are, in the words of Goldilocks, "just right": even for those viewers to whom they are new, they are cosily familiar. The particulars of the stories' plots may take us by surprise (a flea the size of a sow, a crone pitched from a palace window and so on) but the fairy-logic or *illogic* - the moral and magic reasoning - belongs to a macro-pattern that is household.

One story pits a mother's love against the bond between identical brothers. Another tells of a king's affection for a giant flea, which so absorbs him that he marries off his daughter to an ogre, who hauls her to his escarpment home and sets her down among the bones of breakfast past. And in the last story, a satyric king enters into a sexual bargain with the unseen owner of a singing voice that works on him like Spanish fly, never guessing that she's not the supple, nubile girl she sounds like but one of the least prepossessing of his subjects, the lined,



liver-spotted Dora.

Reacting to the film's premiere at Cannes 2015, some complained that its three tales were artlessly tossed together. I can't agree: for me, the film's open weave is an evocation of the oral tradition wherein all fairy tales have their beginnings. There is something conversational, suitably pedestrian, about Garrone's loose, informal structure. By omitting to fit a framing device (an omniscient narrator, say) or knock in signposts (intertitles along the lines of 'Meanwhile, in a nearby kingdom?...'), he reminds us that folklore is first spoken and only later set down on the page. In other words, *Tale of Tales* tells itself.

What serves as a fixing agent instead are the film's authentic locations (castles in the south of Italy and in Sicily), the medieval flavour of its costumes and, above all, the eye-watering opulence of Peter Suchitzky's photography. Detailed (and gory) as a Doré engraving, vibrant as Bilibin illustrations, the film's every frame has the gold-leaf grandeur of the kinds of colour plates one finds in a fairytale compendium. In such volumes, these plates are placed apart; *Tale of Tales* looks as if plate after perfect plate has been bound together with catgut. The images hand in the mind long after the film has finished, among them the medium shot of Bebe Cave's Princess Violet, returned to her father's castle a widow, wearing in place of the pearls and sausage-curls she wore before, the drying blood of her murdered husband and a heavy look of womanhood.

Though one wouldn't guess it from the above precis, the women of *Tale of Tales* fare well, prevailing either by their handling of adversity or through the admirable heat of their feelings. As such, this film is as near a translation of Angela Carter's feminist re-imagining of folktales and fairytales as I have come across. *Tale of Tales* shares not only the violence and eroticism of Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*, but also its self-reflexive sense of humour, as when Salma Hayek's queen prompts a black-coated necromancer, "Be less mysterious, come to the point!" Further fastening the film together are those things you cannot see but feel: a director's assurance, and a directness to the presentation of elements of fantasy. The film does not labour the point: it is almost off-hand in its provision of magic, of which there is plenty and some of it surplus to the story.

The fairytale realm that Garrone creates here is as frightening as it is glamorous; there is as much to recommend it (exotic pets, erotic opportunity, landscapes to take the breath away) as there is to make a viewer relieved she isn't enmeshed in its matrix.

#### Credits

<b>Salma Hayek</b>	Queen of Longtrelis
<b>Vincent Cassel</b>	King of Strongcliff
<b>Toby Jones</b>	King of Highhills
<b>Shirley Henderson</b>	Imma
<b>Hayley Carmichael</b>	Dora
<b>Bebe Cave</b>	Violet
<b>Stacy Martin</b>	Young Dora
<b>Christian Lees</b>	Elias
<b>Jonah Lees</b>	Jonah
<b>Guillaume Delaunay</b>	Ogre
<b>Alba Rohrwacher</b>	Mother Circus Performer
<b>Massimo Caccherini</b>	Father Circus Performer
<b>John C Reilly</b>	King of Hightrelis
<b>Director</b>	Matteo Garrone
<b>Screenplay</b>	Matteo Garrone, Ugo Chiti, Eduardo Albinati, Massimo Gaudioso
<b>DoP</b>	Peter Suschitzky
<b>Editor</b>	Marco Spoletini
<b>Costume</b>	Massimo Cantini Parrini
<b>Production Design</b>	Dimitri Capuani
<b>Original Score</b>	Alexandre Desplat
	<b>Italy/France/UK 2015</b>
	<b>133 mins</b>

#### Another view

Matteo Garrone's *Tale of Tales* is fabulous in every sense: a freaky portmanteau film based on the folk myths collected and published by the 16th-century Neapolitan poet and scholar Giambattista Basile – Garrone worked on the adaptation with Edoardo Albinati, Ugo Chiti and Massimo Gaudioso.

It is gloriously mad, rigorously imagined, visually wonderful: erotic, hilarious and internally consistent. The sort of film, in fact, which is the whole point of Cannes. It immerses you in a complete created world.

Ovid is mulched in with Hansel, Gretel, the Beauty, the Beast, the Prince, the Pauper, in no real order. At times, Garrone seemed to have taken inspiration from Michelangelo Antonioni's own fabular tale *The Mystery of Oberwald* – at others, it felt like he had deeply inhaled the strange and unwholesome odour still emanating from Walerian Borowczyk's *Immoral Tales*. But there's also a bit of John Boorman's *Excalibur*, Monty Python and the Holy Grail, *Blackadder*, *The Company of Wolves*, the Tenniel illustrations for *Alice in Wonderland*... and *Shrek*.

Yet perhaps it is more that all these things are analogues rather than sources, and that Garrone's film just participates in that general anti-rational, anti-Enlightenment tradition of weirdness and gracefully surrendering – in one's dreams – to something sinister and sensual. Stephen Sondheim's *Into the Woods* never managed anything like as creepy.

It is basically an alignment of three neighbouring kingdoms. In one, Selvascura, a careworn king and queen played by John C Reilly and Salma Hayek, are tormented by their lack of children. A soothsayer tells them that killing a monster in a lake will cure their problem, in tandem with a ritual involving a virgin among their servant staff. It results in the birth of weirdly matching albino twins, one for the queen, one for the servant.

Meanwhile, in the adjoining principality of Roccaforte, Vincent Cassel plays a hideously corrupt, epicurean and sex-addicted

monarch who becomes entranced by the singing voice of an aged crone, Dora (played successively by Hayley Carmichael and Stacy Martin) hidden in her murky pigsty. He mistakes her for a comely young maiden. She agrees to have sex with him under cover of darkness and when, the next morning, he lets daylight in upon magic – to coin a phrase – a nightmare ensues.

Thirdly, there is the eccentric King of Altomonte, superbly played by Toby Jones, who picks a flea off his arm and nurtures it under his bed until it grows to the size of a Fiat Uno. Quite clearly caring more for his giant flea than he does for his own daughter, he makes his mega-flea the centrepiece of a ritualistic test for any suitor who wishes to marry his daughter Viola (Bebe Cave) – with horrendous results.

It is a masterpiece of black-comic bad taste and a positive carnival of transgression. The secret is the deadpan seriousness with which everything is treated. More or less everyone has the expression of severity that Anthony Quayle had, playing the king in Woody Allen's *Everything You Always Wanted to Know* – as he scowls at Allen's jester, calling him "not funny". The tone is set by John C Reilly at the beginning as he prepares to do battle with his sea monster, climbing into armour which is more that of a deep-sea diver.

Nothing in Garrone's previous films *Gomorrah* and *Reality* prepared me for this adventure, although those movies were themselves galleries of grotesques, themselves scarcely believable. *Tale of Tales* is a treat: surely in line for a major prize here, and Toby Jones has to be in with a chance of best actor for his conceited, melancholy, ridiculous king.

**Peter Bradshaw (The Guardian)**

#### Our next screening: Friday January 13th, 7.30pm Bande à Part (France 1964. Cert PG)

This season's classic is Jean-Luc Godard's playful re-imagining of the Hollywood crime films of the 1940s. It follows 3 young misfits - Franz, Arthur, Odile - as their plan to burgle a rich old lady goes tragically wrong. Shot in just 25 days on the wintry streets of suburban Paris, this is one of Godard's most loved films. Coming towards the end of the New Wave period - which was a deliberate attempt to break with the conventions of classic, studio-bound film-making of the 1950s- it's willingness to challenge audience expectations in its own way influenced later generations of film-makers, not least Quentin Tarantino, and gives it an important place in the cinema canon.