

The Telegraph

Jesus, Mary and Martha Fiennes – a moving Christmas story like no other

Award-winning film-maker Martha Fiennes's 'Nativity' gives holiness the hi-tech treatment.



Star of Covent Garden: Martha Fiennes's 'Nativity' has a global pedigree

By Peter Stanford

6:50AM GMT 23 Nov 2011



1 Comment (http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/8908132/Jesus-Mary-and-Martha-Fiennes-a-moving-Christmas-story-like-no-other.html#disqus_thread)

Films were originally referred to as “moving pictures”, so there is a back-to-the-future element to the new hi-tech installation by Bafta award-winning director Martha Fiennes at one of London’s most prominent landmarks. Last week saw the unveiling, in a pavilion on the piazza at Covent Garden, of her Nativity. “At its simplest,” explains the film-maker, “it is an image that is alive, that brings together ideas, creativity and technology.”

Visitors to the temporary pavilion – “it looks a bit like a chapel,” she admits with a laugh when I meet her in the central London editing suite, “but not deliberately” – will see 47-year-old Fiennes’s own “painting” of the Nativity. It is, she says, inspired by every great Renaissance artist’s representation, right down to the inclusion of a dog rather than a donkey, but with one crucial difference. All the details in her version

are constantly moving. The idea is that you sit or stand before it for minutes – or even hours – and watch the central figures, the architecture of the stable, backdrop and lighting all seamlessly changing before your eyes.

As in her acclaimed big-screen credits such as *Eugene Onegin* and *Chromophobia* (both of which starred her brother Ralph), Fiennes has cast and filmed the actors who play Mary, Joseph and the shepherds – “13 in all and all the usual suspects”.

But where this project breaks new ground is that she has shot each of them individually against a blank backcloth. Then, using cutting-edge technology, so new indeed that the software programming required is still being fine-tuned on the floor below where we are talking, these “human” sequences are placed in the multi-layered canvas of a computer-generated stable and backdrop. These then begin to change form while the characters move around and interact, all according to random computer codes that mean the image is forever altering. “Effectively, we wind it up,” says Fiennes, “and then see where it will go.”

You can tell Martha and Ralph Fiennes are siblings. There is something of the famed intensity of his face in her piercing eyes and prominent cheekbones, but this tall, willowy film-maker, dressed in jeans and a cardigan, with unruly hair, is her own woman. She has a warmth and almost child-like enthusiasm not often seen in her older brother’s screen performances.

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She sounds like a novelist describing creating characters and then being surprised by what they do. This image will take on a life of its own with only the barest parameters encoded in its computer programme. The Virgin Mary, for instance, never steps off the canvas, though everyone else does. “Without her, there is no heart to the story.”

It is, Fiennes believes, the first time that such a self-generating “moving picture” has been attempted, but its creation represents a logical next step from the computer-generated images of Harry Potter and the performance-capture 3D techniques of *The Adventures of Tintin*. “Which makes it sound complicated,” she admits, “but the effect will be simple, compelling and beautiful. My aim was to create a contemplative piece of art.”

In the world of shopping centres competing to put on the best Christmas display, Covent Garden has arguably stolen a march on its rivals by securing Fiennes’s *Nativity*. First, by working with Fiennes, it is presenting itself as a cut above the standard garish lights and inflatable Santas. And, second, the technology of this installation is tailor-made to appeal to the younger generation whom retailers are keen to attract. “I tested it on my 16-year-old son,” says Fiennes, “and he said he’d go in to see it.”

She has three children from her 20-year partnership with George Tiffin, the cinematographer and novelist, which ended earlier this year. She is now seeing Issami Kabbani, a Syrian-born, Switzerland-based hedge fund magnate, but, contrary to reports, she insists that the couple have no plans to marry.

Since winning a Bafta in 1999 for her debut feature, a haunting, snow-swept adaptation of Pushkin’s verse novel, Fiennes has been as critically fêted as her actor brothers (Joseph starred in the Oscar-winner *Shakespeare in Love*), her documentary-maker sister Sophie and her musician sibling Magnus (who provides the score for *Nativity*). Fiennes has spoken of the benefits of her famous name being outweighed by the drawbacks. Hearing there is a Fiennes on the line may prompt those who control the purse-strings in the film world to return her calls, but the downside is the perception that she and her siblings are all part of the “same blob”.

By contrast, funding *Nativity* seems to have been more straightforward. Fiennes is also working in partnership with MPC, the international post-production house that has put its best programmers and coders around the world at her disposal. “It means the shepherds are being coded in New York, the Magi in Bangalore, and Joseph in Beijing,” she jokes.

Her choice of the *Nativity* as a subject may surprise some. Religion and film directors rarely go together, unless it’s Monty Python send-up, or Mel Gibson in preachy mood. Though Fiennes comes from a Catholic background – her uncles are a Benedictine monk and the retired professor of divinity at Cambridge – she rejects any suggestion that this project has its roots in a childhood that included spells in various Irish convent schools. “It really doesn’t,” she stresses. “I am interested in all esoteric matters, from Sufism to Kabbalah.” Kabbani has spoken of how he and Fiennes “share a lot from the spiritual world”.

“What fascinated me most,” Fiennes explains, “were all these Renaissance paintings of the *Nativity*” –

and to demonstrate she flicks through images on her computer screen as we talk. “Jan Gossaert in the National Gallery was my starting point. And what drew me in were things like the representation of women, the place of the mother figure, all of which have been lost in Christianity. The pull for me was to interpret anew the world of this iconic story by making use of this incredible technology.”

Efforts to make the Nativity “relevant” can often provoke debate when key aspects of the story are reshaped. Is she hoping to draw crowds to her pavilion by courting controversy? “Oh no, not at all,” she replies, apparently shocked at the very suggestion. “It’s very reverent. There’s nothing controversial I can think of...” she pauses for a moment as if considering whether to confess. “Except for the dog. But you’d have to blame the Renaissance for that.”

'Nativity' is on show at Covent Garden Piazza until January 5

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