



Columbia Pictures

Albert Finney and Tom Courtenay in *The Dresser*.

# The Dresser: ode to theater

By Steve Abariotes

There is an ineffable dramatic quality in the theater that film just can't quite reproduce. At a play, the actors occupy real three-dimensional space beyond the proscenium arch. They must find the energy to perform from night to night. They affect, and are affected by, the audience. And during a live play, there is always the possibility of something going wrong, be it missed cues or forgotten lines.

Much of the energy and excitement of the theater has been recreated in *The Dresser*, an ode to the art of acting. The film, which is set in war-time England, follows an older Shakespearian acting troupe to the city of Brighton, where they are to perform *King Lear*, as German bombs fall in the distance.

The leader of the troupe (Albert Finney) is simply and respectfully referred to as "Sir". As the leading actor and manager, Sir gets what he wants by ranting and raving in grand theatrical style. He has a volatile temperament that explodes with bursts of different emotions, and is completely oblivious to any stage boundaries.

Indeed, Sir would probably never make it to the stage at all if it were not for the overly devoted and underappreciated assistance of Norman (Tom Courtenay), his dresser. Norman dutifully tends to every one of Sir's outrageous needs. When Sir slips into one of his delirious jags, it is Norman who constantly reminds him what play they will be performing that night.

Norman is effeminate and matronly, with flailing wrists and the whole bit. He is a frustrated actor who is overly protective of his master's dramatic space and sees that no one interferes.

Following their arrival at the theater, Norman helps Sir prepare to go on, succeeding just in time. One gets the feeling that Sir's pre-show hysterics take place every night. Sir consciously ignores his opening cue and, after some desperate but commendable improvisation by the cast, is finally coaxed onstage by Norman, who reminds him what his first line is.

A backstage look and feel is maintained throughout the entire film. One of the best images is of Norman and the rest of the shorthanded backstage crew pounding, whipping, shaking and fluttering various noise-making apparatus for the sound of the storm. The excitement of being backstage is substantially recreated here. *The Dresser* is a tribute to acting and theater. The primitive stage scenery and technique seem hokey at first, but we witness everything coming together. *The Dresser* leaves no physical or mental theater phenomenon unexplored, and conveys this with a knowledgeable and understated film style.

Finney as Sir as Othello as Lear conveys a powerful style of his own. Finney breathes his words out in long, husky breaths. He is authoritative and maniacal, tyrannical and frightening, but Norman knows how to deal with him. Finney does an excellent job. He seems so wound up through most of the film that he leaves the audience exhausted.

As Norman, Courtenay matches Finney's explosive energy with subtle feeling. And when called upon, he is no less forthright. His performance is sincere and convincing.

*The Dresser* impressively succeeds in its intent to relate the feeling of theater on film. It stands as an excellent film as well.

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