

TITANIC (1997)

BBC1, Christmas Day, 5.45 pm

James Cameron's old-fashioned romantic epic set aboard the doomed White Star liner is not only the most expensive film yet made, it is also the highest-grossing film ever, having become the first film to exceed \$1 billion worldwide. While its detractors may grumble about the ethics of such a monstrous budget and highlight the film as a bloated example of the dumbing-down of popular cinema, the majority of us just enjoy it for what it is — a sweeping, awe-inspiring spectacle.

Fresh-faced stars Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet play the pair of star-crossed lovers from opposite ends of the social spectrum — he a penniless artist called Jack (a role the studios wanted to go to Matthew McConaughey) who has gambled his way onto the boat, she a society girl named Rose engaged to the wealthy cad Cal Hockley (Billy Zane). Naturally it is love at first sight and for the first two of the film's three hours, a plot unfolds involving Jack and Rose's illicit courting and Hockley's seething contempt. When the iceberg finally hits, the sinking scenes, are both breathtaking and horrifying, holding a grip even on the small screen.

The central love story is, of course, predictably mushy and the dialogue is hopelessly banal, but Cameron manages to keep the whole thing afloat by pressing all the right audience-pleasing buttons. It's the biggest pantomime on this Christmas and, lest we forget, the winner of 11 Oscars.

(The Times, Play)

101 DALMATIANS – The remake from hell. In 1961 Disney made a perfectly respectable and surprisingly mush-free animated version of Dodie Smith's novel. In the new live-action version, directed by Stephen Herek, the dogs no longer talk but merely cock their heads and bark, reminding us that Dalmatians are not exactly the brightest of their species; and the humans, led by Jeff Daniels and Joely Richardson, go through the whole affair with a sort of dazed, disbelieving look, as well they might. In her initial scenes as Cruella DeVil, Glenn Close displays a certain scarlet relish for her own monstrosity, but soon the film betrays her, too, reducing her to the level of undignified stooge and landing her in a variety of noxious substances. By the end, the charm and delicacy of the original cartoon have long been replaced by laborious gross-outs. Is this now official Disney policy?

(*New Yorker*)

BLACK COFFEE

Just when it seems almost every mystery you open features a serial killer or a designer virus, along comes this bracing throwback to a time when even crime – at least the fictional kind – was considerably more genteel. *Coffee's* retro flavor is the real deal. Penned for the stage in 1929 by the British suspense doyenne, the vintage tale – about a prominent physicist who summons detective nonpareil Hercule Poirot to his Surrey estate because he suspects a plot to purloin his latest discovery – was adapted into a novel by author Charles Osborne (*The Life and Crimes of Agatha Christie*). Fanciers of the English chintz-and-crumpet caper will savor all the deliciously old-fashioned conventions here, from the locked-room crime scene to the viperous family circle of suspects. Like antique china, you wouldn't want to trot out *Coffee* every day – but for a gracious pick-me-up, it's just what the butler ordered.

(*Reviewed by Pam Lambert, People*)

CARAVAGGIO AND THE LIGHT OF TRUTH

BERGAMO, Italy — Caravaggio is currently the star of two exhibitions in Lombardy. In one of them, in Bergamo, he is the triumphant curtain-raiser of a dazzling display; in the other, in Milan, he is the final act of an oddly-skewed production where the more distinguished members of the cast are often eclipsed by a clumping chorus of mediocrities.

The superior lineup, of nearly 40 paintings and engravings, has been gathered together here in Bergamo's Gallery of Modern and Contemporary Art for “Caravaggio, La Tour, Rembrandt, Zurbaran: The Light of Truth”.

These masterpieces are pretty well allowed to speak for themselves and bear witness to how the shock waves of Caravaggio's advent fanned out across Europe, only to be given further force in different ways by other artists of genius who were able to absorb the lessons of this earthquake.

Practically all the pictures are religious, and the organizers, the local Roman Catholic Jubilee year committee, draw attention to the spiritual interpretations of these artists' use of light. There is no question but that all four were deeply conscious of the metaphorical implications of light in scripture and the traditions of Christian

art. But light for Caravaggio — and later La Tour, Zurbaran and Rembrandt — was also a tool, a device.

For, on the one hand, Caravaggio proposed a new form of realism, scandalizing the church authorities by using as models the genuinely poor and humble, street urchins, tavern loafers, girls of easy virtue. On the other hand, it was his artificial, theatrical use of light that lent a heightened sense of drama to the scenes they played out, charging them with an almost unbearable pathos.

To take but one of many possible examples, in the Vatican's "Entombment," on show here, it is by means of an oblique light shining in from offstage beyond the edge of the canvas that he directs an invasive brightness into the thunderously portentous darkness, emphasizing the deathly pallor and weight of Christ's corpse, and picking up the detail of St. John's and St. Nicodemus's furrowed brows and straining muscles as they lower the lifeless body, and the traumatized despair on the faces of Jesus' mother and his other female mourners. And it is precisely through his control of this light, at once convincing and contrived, that he illuminates not only the tragedy of the crucifixion, but of the entire human condition.

Little illumination is to be found, by comparison, in "The Lombard Sixteenth-Century: From Leonardo to Caravaggio" (which runs at the Palazzo Reale in Milan until Feb. 25). The usefulness of this survey of "Lombard" painting is severely compromised by being structured around the tendentious thesis that a logical, linear progression, characterized by a distinct local tradition of realism and the treatment of light, led from Leonardo at the beginning of the century to Caravaggio at its close.

In the final analysis, Caravaggio was no more a Lombard painter than William Shakespeare (who, curiously enough, was born only few years before him) was a Warwickshire or Stratford-on-Avon writer. Both great dramatists soon left the regions of their births behind them, showed an exceptional ability to absorb the most varied and vital elements of complex national cultures in ferment, achieved total mastery of their crafts with breathtaking speed, and by transcending provincialism permanently placed their mark on European culture at large.

(by Roderick Conway Morris, International Herald Tribune)