

Julia (PG) US 1977

17 February 2020

DIRECTOR: Fred Zinnemann

Running time: 112 minutes

LEADING PLAYERS: **Jane Fonda** (Lillian), **Vanessa Redgrave** (Julia), **Jason Robards** (Hammett), **Maximilian Schell** (Johann), **Hal Holbrook** (Alan), **Rosemary Murphy** (Dottie), **Meryl Streep** (Anne Marie), **John Glover** (Sammy), **Lambert Wilson** (Walter Franz), **Lillian Hellman** (woman in boat), **Antony Carrick** (butler).

SCREENPLAY: **Alvin Sargent** based on the story by **Lillian Hellman**. PHOTOGRAPHY: **Douglas Slocombe**.
EDITING: **Marcel Durham, Walter Murch**. MUSIC: **George Delerue**.

Made at a time of singular cultural drought in Hollywood, *Julia* was a film of impeccable, almost anachronistic, artistic pedigree. A director who had only ever made masterpieces; Fonda, Redgrave, Robards, every one a seasoned professional, and a supporting cast to match (including our very own Antony Carrick!); and every department, whether cinematography, editing, music or production design, headed by members of the industry's 'A' list. This was a film with 'quality' written all over it, of a kind that Hollywood had traditionally reserved for its prestige productions, of the kind that Truffaut had termed 'cinéma de papa' and the New Wave (on both sides of the pond) had rendered unfashionable, that David Lean had preserved and Merchant-Ivory would shortly revive, etc., etc.

And yet it would appear that the film is a phoney. Based on a story included in her 1973 collection *Pentimento* by Lillian Hellman (*The Little Foxes*, *The Children's Hour*, *The Chase*), *Julia* recounts an autobiographical tale of Lillian's friendship with the eponymous medical student and fellow Jew, a close relationship which began in privileged childhood in the United States and ended in Nazi Germany with adversity and tragedy. The only problem is that, despite Hellman's assertions to the contrary ("This is not a work of fiction," she wrote in a letter to the producer regarding the screenplay), the film-makers increasingly came to the conclusion that it was. Zinnemann himself later said: "She would portray herself in situations that were not true ... My relations with her were very guarded and ended in pure hatred." The real subject of the story would appear to be a certain Muriel Gardiner, a New York psychiatrist, who in 1983, brought a libel suit against Hellman, and who for more than a decade had let half of her house to Hellman's lawyer. He, it is suggested, may have

related her story to Hellman, who then turned it into a fiction, recast as memoir.

Does any of this matter? I hear you ask. Naturally not, if one is content to view the film on its own terms. Except that having Lillian's character as the main focus of the narrative, with her relationship with partner Dashiell Hammett and vicissitudes as a writer occupying a disproportionate amount of screen time, risks upsetting the balance of the screenplay. There is little doubt that Julia is the braver of the two characters, and lives through the more dramatic events, but much of that takes place off-camera. Roger Ebert wrote: "The film never really establishes a relationship between the two women. It's awkward, the way the movie has to suspend itself between Julia – its ostensible subject – and Lillian Hellman, its real subject." The same arguably goes for the viewing pleasures of watching Redgrave compared to those of watching Fonda!

As a footnote, it was Redgrave who picked up the Oscar – significantly, for Best Supporting Actress – though the ceremony was picketed by Jews who objected to her participation in a documentary supporting the creation of a Palestinian state.

So where does that leave us? Well, speaking as one who has not seen the film in close on forty years, I shall be keen to assess how well it has aged. Approaches to 'period pieces' have changed greatly, but *The Nun's Story* and *A Man for All Seasons* carry their years lightly, so the augurs are good. If all else fails, we can always walk through and, metaphorically or otherwise, admire the drapes!

David Clare

The film will be preceded by a short introduction by Antony Carrick who played the role of the butler in the film.