

Farinelli

France/Belgium/Italy, 1994

U.S. Release Date: 3/17/95 (limited)

Running Length: 1:36

MPAA Classification: R (Sexual situations, nudity)

Theatrical Aspect Ratio: 1.85:1

Cast: Stefano Dionisi, Enrico LoVerso, Jeroen Krabbe, Elsa Zylberstein, Caroline Cellier, Omero Antonutti

Director: Gerard Corbiau

Producers: Vera Belmont, Linda Gutenberg, Dominique Janne, and Stephane Thenoz

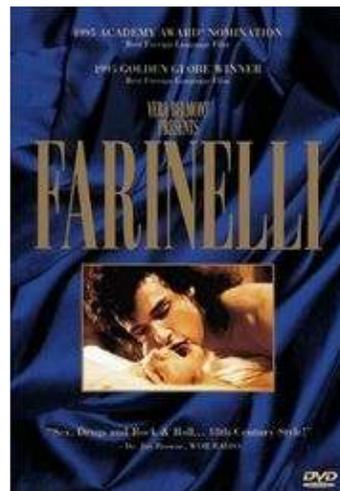
Screenplay: Marcel Beaulieu, Andree Corbiau, and Gerard Corbiau

Cinematography: Walther Van den Ende

Music director: Christophe Roussette

U.S. Distributor: Sony Picture Classics

In French and Italian with subtitles



"A castrato was a male soprano or contralto singer whose unbroken voice had been preserved by castration performed before puberty so that the larynx would not develop. As a result his voice retained its high range, but because his lungs and chest matured they were able to produce sounds of great power. Although the range of the castrato was similar to that of the female soprano or contralto, the voice was stronger, often more voluptuous in tone, and capable of the utmost delicacy and technical brilliance. Castrati were in great demand as leading singers during the 17th and 18th centuries in opera houses throughout Europe..."

-- Robert M. Cammarota, Academic American Encyclopedia

Farinelli brings to the screen a segment in the life story of one of the greatest singers of the 18th century. Born in 1704 with the name of Carlo Broschi, Farinelli (Stefano Dionisi, who resembles Daniel Day-Lewis) became the most celebrated singer of his day in Italy, England, and Spain. It is the London period (from 1734 to 1737) that this film concentrates upon, using Farinelli's relationship with his brother Riccardo (Enrico LoVerso) and his rivalry with composer G.F. Handel (Jeroen Krabbe) as the cornerstones upon which to build a narrative.

Despite its historical inaccuracy, the most interesting facet of Farinelli is the complex interaction between the title character and Handel. Fine performances by Stefano Dionisi and Jeroen Krabbe deepen the intensity of these scenes, but it doesn't take long to recognize that the composer is perhaps the more interesting figure. There is such potent rage, scorn, and passion in Krabbe's portrayal that it makes one wonder what Handel might be like when not locked in combat with the castrato. The glimpses offered here are tantalizing, but their prime function is to provide a suitable foil for the protagonist and, as such, they fail to sate the appetite.

Farinelli is not a likable man and, regardless of attempts by the script to show a more human, misunderstood side to his personality, the character comes across as a narcissistic egotist. His duels with Handel are concerned with power, not music. Neither is willing to give in to the other. Handel will not concede that the voice of a castrato is necessary for his compositions to attain their full impact; Farinelli initially refuses to admit that he needs Handel's music for fulfillment. Of equal, if not greater, importance to the film's structure is Farinelli's relationship with his brother Riccardo. Although marred by betrayal and jealousy, this interplay lacks much of the raw energy of the Handel/Farinelli scenes. Often, whether the brothers are sharing a woman in bed or arguing over Riccardo's unfinished opera, little is revealed of the real ties binding them. There is much background we're not privy to, and when the secret between them is eventually uncovered, the disclosure is anticlimactic.

On the technical side, Farinelli is imperfect. Since no castratos exist today, reproducing the resonant, three-and-one-half octave voice presented difficulties. Director Gerard Corbiau overcame the obstacle by recording the voices of Derek Lee Ragin and Ewa Mallas Godlewska, then electronically combining them. This effect is marginally successful, but the poor synching of the audio track with Dionisi's lip movements destroys the magic. Often, Farinelli's performances, which are meant to be among the film's centerpieces, come across as awkward. Considering all the expense and trouble devoted to costumes and settings, the overall result is disappointing.

Farinelli represents a fascinating, if occasionally overly melodramatic, recreation of a period when Baroque music ruled Europe. The story is perhaps not as cohesive or coherent as it could be, but there is enough narrative momentum to retain the viewer's interest. The result is an intriguing, if flawed, film about the power of the voice and the effects of fame and ego upon interpersonal communication.

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