

Additional Movie Review #2: The King of Comedy (Martin Scorsese - Director, 1982)

I'm going to start this review with a personal anecdote.

I was sitting in the bar at the Bridgeview Hotel, on Willoughby Road on Sydney's North Shore, enjoying a beverage when I noticed some gentlemen over by the bar. I recognized two of them instantly as Ray Martin and Geoff Harvey of the Channel 9 noon television variety show *Midday (with Ray Martin)* (1985-1998)¹. Channel 9 studios are just around the corner from the Bridgeview Hotel and this was known to be a favorite watering hole of theirs after the show. I was watching them, amused by the concept when a very strange thing happened; Ray Martin was looking around the room and, for a second or so he looked straight at me and an insane thought filled my mind: *what if he recognizes me?* Immediately I realized the lunacy of the idea, but it left me with an interesting impression of film and television (especially television and anything particularly in the first-person): the line between reality and the screen can become blurred. Because I watched this guy every day on television (I was a student at Macquarie University at the time - circa 1990 - and his show was between classes) I felt a personal closeness. I knew him. So why shouldn't he know me?

This is the subject of Martin Scorsese's *The King of Comedy*, the second film that I have chosen to view and review independently, as required by this course. In my opinion, *The King of Comedy* is an underrated gem that draws from a smorgasbord of fascinating psychological perspectives which makes it ripe for analysis as well as the enjoyment of the surprising performance of Jerry Lewis and consummate mastery of Robert De Niro.

Rupert Pupkin (Robert De Niro) is an aspiring comedian who idolizes late night talk show host Jerry Langford (Jerry Lewis) and dreams of becoming "The King of Comedy." Somewhere along the path he loses his way between the boundaries of reality and fantasy, with the help of fellow Langford fanatic Masha (Sandra Bernhard) who Pupkin, ironically points out "is a wacko" (Zimmerman, 1982). Much of what drives Pupkin to be a success is the desire to impress Rita Keane (Diahnne Abbott), a local barmaid.

While apparently grounded in reality - Pupkin is capable of carrying out a conversation with normal people, such as the dialog between himself and Langford's secretary (as Langford referred to her in the opening limousine scene - she later introduces herself as Assistant to the Executive Producer), but he progressively loses touch with reality as he demonstrates a deliberate ignorance of the machinations of network studio processes. We know that he has always had a shaky foothold on reality as we see him pretending to be on the Jerry Langford Show, much as a child would. But we see that his obsession goes beyond simple childlike play as he interacts with cardboard cutouts. His daydream about Langford begging him to take over the show for six weeks is interrupted by the reality of his mother's voice. It is a

¹ I remember a third gentleman whom I did not recognize - I assume he was a member of the crew.

similar technique to the one I discussed in my examination of diegesis, in 1984 Milos Forman film *Amadeus* where the concert happening in Mozart's (Tom Hulce) head is interrupted by his wife's screaming, but unlike Hulce who rapidly snaps to attention, Pupkin finishes his daydream - it is more important than anything his mother needs.

In his fantasies he sees himself as a success and pretends to be one, not realizing the work required to get there. The depth of his mental instability is pronounced in the scene where he stands in a sterile, empty room in front of a mural of a laughing audience. The camera slowly pans back as he starts his routine (the same routine that we hear in totality on the Jerry Langford Show towards the end of the movie) and we see more and more of the newspaper mural audience and the chimeric laughter becomes more and more intense, as though we are being absorbed deeper and deeper into his fantasy and his psychosis. We are given clues that he doesn't see things as they are from the familiar way he addresses Langford but there is a turning point in the film where his fantasy transcends into reality. Based on a daydream in which Langford invites Pupkin to his summer house for the weekend, Pupkin actually shows up with Rita Keane in tow.

At this point his fantasy world comes crashing down; Rita realizes how deluded Pupkin has been and we see a performance from Jerry Lewis unlike any other. De Niro, a fervent Method Actor, refused to dine with Lewis in real life as their respective characters were enemies. Lewis was amazed by this, once stating "He just could not forget this part at the end of the day's work." (Grierson, 2017) But not only was De Niro adamant that his role be perfect, he was also determined to make Lewis's perfect as well by goading and teasing Lewis with anti-Semitic remarks prior to shooting, hoping to prompt him into anger. Jerry Lewis claimed that the technique worked: "I forgot the cameras were there... I was going for Bobby's throat." he is reported as saying (Goad, 2019).

Robert De Niro made *The King of Comedy* near the beginning of his career, before *Goodfellas* (Martin Scorsese, 1990), *Casino* (Martin Scorsese, 1995) and *Shark Tale* (Bibo Bergeron, Vicky Jenson & Rob Letterman, 2004) made his most recognizable persona a mafia thug, and near the end of Jerry Lewis's, (Television Academy Interviews, n.d.), as he continued to shed the goofy teenager character he had adopted in his days with Dean Martin. *The King of Comedy* being preceded by the Nazi Holocaust drama *The Day the Clown Died* (Jerry Lewis, 1972). In many ways they are opposite reflections of each other; at the time, De Niro was young and Lewis was old. Lewis was known for comedy, De Niro's brief career focused on the dramatic in films such as *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, 1976) and *Raging Bull* (Martin Scorsese, 1980). In this film their roles are reversed.

The audience is led into a feeling of ambivalence where the character of Jerry Langford is concerned. On the one hand we see his true life - he is a lonely man and his only contact of an evening is a crazed stalker (Bernhard). We see him come in from a game of golf, but we might be forgiven for thinking that his is playing alone as he has no compunction about abandoning his game and, when Pupkin and Rita leave, he makes no effort to rejoin his fellow golfers; in fact, quite the opposite. He orders his butler to

lock the doors. He's bunkering in. So, we might start to feel sorry for him. That is, until he confronts Pupkin - another paradigm shifts; we no longer feel sorry for him and, despite the fact that Pupkin is a deluded lunatic, think he's kind of a jerk. There's a hint of this attitude earlier when a woman stops him on the street and asks him to talk to her daughter to which he refuses. The woman responds by wishing cancer on him.

But by the time he's kidnapped we can see that the man has no morals - Masha is right; if they went back to his office then they would be arrested. Langford knows it. The final blow to his credibility as a nice guy comes when he cons Masha into releasing him. He then takes the gun they've been holding him with, and we find out that it's a toy. How do we know? Because he tries to shoot Masha with it. Had it been real she would have been dead. And to the situation he shows no other emotion other than frustration that he expresses by savagely slapping her across the face². Several times he makes comments about the pressures of the business (once in Pupkin's imagination) and it becomes clear that while he's a charming and comedic entertainer, Langford is, at heart, a complete misanthropist with a dark side (Robin Williams immediately jumps to mind).

These are only a few of the aspects that make *The King of Comedy* an underrated gem. One could spend hours discussing the character of Masha and her obsessive behaviour or the flatness of Cathy Long and the other petty bureaucrats at the offices of the Jerry Langford show or the fact that the voice of Pupkin's mother comes from the mother of director Martin Scorsese or the oddly civil rapport between Pupkin and the producer and on and on, but I trust that I have proven my point that *The King of Comedy* is a psychological playground of almost infinite proportions.

References:

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² Actually, Masha comments earlier, saying that it "looks real", but it's still revealing that Langford tried to use it.

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Taxi Driver (Martin Scorsese, 1976) IMDb: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0075314>

Raging Bull (Martin Scorsese, 1980) IMDb: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0081398>