

De Niro's Stardust

In the movie Stardust, Robert De Niro plays the seemingly tough guy captain of a sailing vessel who is in actuality a sensitive poof (a flaming homosexual). Underneath that mean, callous pirate exterior is the heart of a cross-dressing queen.

In this day and age, that tidbit is hardly worthy of comment in and of itself, rather what drives me to my typewriter is the fact that De Niro is at the heart of it all a tough guy. As far as I can tell he has always been a tough guy (see Taxi, or Deer Hunter), and, if this movie is any indication, he will always be a tough guy. If you want more of a feel for what I am talking about, and perhaps think that the endless repetition of a phrase like "tough guy," does little to shed light on the matter, let me expand the idea by noting that to me De Niro seems to say his lines matter-of-factly, as if that's just the way things are, as if he is just relating points of truth. For an example, in Stardust as the captain De Niro "negotiates" with a merchant, the comically played merchant offers varying amounts of money while intersperses his lines with a little color, feeling, emotion, and humor, to which De Niro plays the simple straight man as he says more or less the same line over and over. Trust me, even if the words are slightly different, the lines are identical.

To start the action the merchant offers 150, to which De Niro replies, "How about 200." Note that De Niro is not asking a question. Apparently he has read ahead in the script and knows how this scene ends. When the merchant offers 160, De Niro replies, "You're getting closer, 200." Can you sense De Niro's feeling? The inner struggle driving the character forward? Or perhaps it's the squinting of eyes to make out the words on a teleprompter?

After a few more interchanges where the merchant ups his price and De Niro holds at 200, the merchant finally offers 195, which De Niro accepts. "195? It's a deal. With tax, that's 200." What De Niro is really saying in this scene is, I'm De Niro. I'm not human, and I don't negotiate. What I say is law. The sooner

you accept whatever I say as truth, the sooner we can move on to the next scene. Now be gone two-bit actor you're standing in my light.

To me, the interchange feels flat. Not that there is nothing intrinsically wrong with a flat character. Plenty of folks are flat, and plenty of people's idea of a winning negotiation is to start at your best price and end at your best price. The fact that a person would change their price at all is indicative of weakness, dishonesty, or worse. The bottom line is, if we wanted to show the captain as De Niro is, as a strong willed, capable, force of will to be contended with, then this is great dialogue. However, if the challenge is to show De Niro as a poof struggling to pass himself off as a tough guy, then we have failed. Rather what we have is a tough guy (De Niro) failing in his role at pretending to be a poof that just so happens--in one of life's many ironies--to be cast in the role of a tough guy in the first place.

Perhaps that is not clear, and to get a sense of what irks me most about this character is that it is almost as though we are to expected to believe that all it takes to be a cowboy is the proper kind of hat, that all it takes to be a Indian is a feather in the hair, and that therefore all it takes to be a poof is a trip to wardrobe and the donning of a dress. Oh, if only it were so darling, then we'd all be poofs. I don't exaggerate when I say that I can see De Niro putting on a dress, stomping out onto the soundstage, and asking the director point blank, "OK. I've put on the dress. What now?"

To which the only possibly reply can be, "Act the part darling. Act the part." Is that too much to ask?

Apparently so. De Niro is a strong man. From what little I know of him, I have it on the best of authority he was born a strong man, and have every confidence he will die a strong man. Not a poof, not a fag, not a wishy-washy indecisive whatever, but a strong man. Of course, if you're looking for a bit of irony in the movie Stardust, perhaps there it is. The strong man who plays a poof but who fails miserably in the role because he is in fact so

strong and masculine in the first place... or perhaps casting did a bad job casting De Niro in the role.

You know, I wouldn't be writing this commentary from this particular angle if Robin Williams had played the role. Robin Williams would have lost himself in the role. He would have become a poof and not just any old poof, but a great Madame. With Robin Williams in the role, there would have been no friction, no resistance. A masterful actor playing a poof on the stage, pretending to be a tough guy for the benefit of his crew. It's just the type of role Williams shines best in. I actually wonder if they didn't initially desire Williams for the role, but couldn't get him.

Or as another example along the same vein, take the character Peewee Herman (we will forget that he is a role played by an actor for the moment and just regard him as an absolute entity). If Peewee had been given the role of captain, we would not have wound up with a poof, we would have wound up with Peewee Herman the character as captain of the ship, and if the situation warranted, Peewee might try (and fail or succeed with varying degrees of success) to be a tough guy (and while were at it, you can be sure he'd learn something about himself and that toughness takes inner strength too), but whatever the case, Peewee Herman would play himself and you can bet that he too would fall flat on his face if he was called on to play a poof. It is not something Peewee Herman could achieve--not that the actor couldn't do it, but that Peewee could not (and not that he wouldn't attempt it, or that his failure wouldn't be fun to watch, but that Peewee would not succeed in convincing me that he was a poof, rather he would remain Peewee Herman).

Have I thoroughly confused the issue enough?

The point is, Robin Williams would have made a great poof; Paul Reubens makes a great Peewee Herman; but De Niro pretty much only makes a great De Niro. He is very, very convincing as De Niro, but beyond that, all I see is an overrated actor showing up to read his lines. It is perhaps an unfair criticism (and one I might

live to regret *{What? Why the hell won't he be in my movie?}*), but there it is.

With all of that being said, I should point out that I don't know what my true reaction would have been if Robin Williams (or Peewee Herman) had played the role. There is no doubt in my mind that Robin Williams would have played the role (as written) to perfection, but also upon seeing Mr. Williams in the role, I would have likely been turned off. I can just see myself saying, "There's Robin Williams showboating again," with me never really comprehending that showboating is what the role was all about in the first place. Of course, this bit of self-realization adds another layer to the puzzle. The only reason the captain's role of a poof stands out in such a jarring contrast to the rest of the film is precisely because De Niro does such a crappy job of playing it. He fails miserably at being a poof, and therein may lie some subtle irony. But in truth, if it exists, it's too subtle for me.

When Robert De Niro first appeared on the screen in Stardust, he was the only actor in the production that I'd recognized--totally and completely without any delay. The captain IS De Niro down to the core, and as such the role of "poof" is little more than costuming. For whatever reason, it doesn't seem to take.

There are however other name actors in the production--Peter O'Toole and Michelle Pfeiffer. Have you ever heard of them? Oddly they manage to disappear behind their roles. I didn't even recognize O'Toole. I got his name of the disc sleeve, but I knew the role he played immediately. It is a credit to Peter O'Toole that I didn't even realize he was in this film until I read the credits. Sadly the same cannot be said of Robert De Niro. The moment he walked onscreen, I knew who he was and what he was, and this never wavered, not for one moment.

Is that acting? I don't think so. I think they call it casting.

*{You don't think I can play a poof?
You don't think I can play a poof?}*

OK. Tough guy. Come up here. Show me how to play a poof.

That's right. I didn't think so.

So, you just sit there and watch. And I'm going to show you how you play a poof. And when I'm done, I'm going to come kick your teeth in... just like the poof that I am.}

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