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## **Adaptation, Experimentation, and Performance: Al Pacino's *Wilde Salome***

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### **Looking for *Wilde Salome***

After *Looking for Richard* (USA, 1996) and *Chinese Coffee* (USA, 2000), *Wilde Salome* (2006-11) was the third film directed by Al Pacino, the star famous for his roles as Michael Corleone in Coppola's *Godfather* trilogy (USA, 1972, 1974, 1990) and Tony Montana in De Palma's *Scarface* (USA, 1983). At around the time Pacino was embarking on this lengthy project, other stars were also becoming directors, like Emilio Estevez with *Bobby* (USA, 2006) and Anthony Hopkins with *Slipstream* (USA, 2007). But unlike his peers, Pacino has never directed mainstream feature films. Instead, he has involved himself in low-budget experimental projects - often partly self-funded - and always related to the theatre work which has accompanied his career in film. Where acting is concerned, at this point Pacino had just finished working on Avnet's *88 Minutes* (USA/Germ/Can, 2007), his previous film being Caruso's *Two for the Money* (USA, 2005). During the shooting of *Wilde Salome*, Pacino flew to Las Vegas for a few days to play in Soderbergh's *Ocean's Thirteen* (USA, 2007).

While *Chinese Coffee* was adapted from a play by Ira Lewis, *Looking for Richard*, adapted from Shakespeare's *Richard III*, combines fiction and documentary in a more original way. This blending of genres is what Pacino chose once more for *Wilde Salome*. Although centuries apart in time, in the imagination of Pacino the worlds of Shakespeare and of Wilde share certain similarities. Herod, interpreted by Pacino, somehow resembles Shylock, at the same time a seducer and a buffoon, brow-beating and pathetic. And Wilde's story can also be read through the fate of Shylock – whom Pacino had played in Michael Radford's 2004 film version - with the dramatic legal turnaround he experienced: after suing his lover's father for libel, he loses the case on appeal and is condemned. In addition to the oaths and contracts that bind an individual to his doom, *Richard III* and *Salome* have many motifs in common, such as a king coveting and then marrying his brother's wife, and the promise to forsake one's kingdom for a horse or for a dance. It is also the case that *King Lear* was mentioned several times as Pacino's next possible project during the preparatory work for *Salome*.

The basis for the story is to be found in the *New Testament* (Mark 6:17–29 and Matthew 14:3–11). Salome (played by Jessica Chastain), the step-daughter of King Herod (Pacino), falls in love with the prophet John the Baptist (played by Kevin Anderson), whom the King has imprisoned because of his ever more critical sermons (against Herod's Kingdom, his politics and his decadent *mores*), and because of his growing popular renown. Herod's wife Herodias, Salome's mother (played by Roxanne Hart), would like to see the preacher executed because she considers him a dangerous activist, but the superstitious Herod refuses. Salome's beauty is extraordinary and each and every man, from the ordinary soldier to the King himself, cannot stop staring at her; the captain of the guards even commits suicide out of jealousy. After a banquet, Herod begs his stepdaughter to dance, to which she eventually agrees once the King promises to give her in return everything she may ask for. After a highly sensuous 'dance of the seven veils', Salome requests the head of John the Baptist in order to wreak her revenge on the prophet who, totally dedicated to his spiritual and political mission, is the only man still impervious to her charms. Dismayed, Herod keeps his promise and orders the beheading of the prophet. When the head is delivered to her, Salome goes into a delirium of passion - before Herod, horrified, demands that she too be executed.

Prior to Wilde's play, the story of Salome had been a source of inspiration for many artists, painters (like Gustave Moreau) and writers (Gustave Flaubert with *Hérodias* in 1877 and Stéphane Mallarmé with *Hérodiade* in 1887). Wilde's play, however, was banned when it was first published, and was presented only in private performances in the first years of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century before being performed publicly from the 1930s onwards (culminating in Steven Berkoff's famous production in 1988, which Pacino mentions in the film). Wilde's text also inspired Richard Strauss's 1904 opera *Salome*, later performances of which range from Peter Hall's memorable 1992 production at London's Royal Opera House with Maria Ewing to Olivier Py's 2017 production at Strasbourg's *Opéra National du Rhin* - both of which involved full-frontal nudity.

Cinema was also quick to take up the subject and there are many more or less faithful adaptations entitled *Salome*, from the Hollywood versions directed by Charles Bryant, starring Alla Nazimova (1923) and by William Dieterle, with Rita Hayworth (1953), to Carmelo Bene's baroque interpretation starring Donyale Luna (Italy, 1972); in Spain in 2002, Carlos Saura even offered a flamenco version starring Aida Gómez. Other films quote in passing the famous scene of Salome's dance, as when it

constitutes a spectacle within the film that is watched by the characters at the beginning of Tod Browning's *The Show* (USA, 1927). *Salome* even pervades a recent film like Stéphanie Di Giusto's *La Danseuse* (Fr/Belg/Czech, 2016), in which Loïe Fuller (played by Soko) - a pioneer of modern dance (and also theatrical lighting) - appears as an admirer of Wilde's *Salome*, a text that she has been repeatedly reading and enacting since her childhood; at one point in the film, the character is even framed in front of a painting of Salome holding the Baptist's head.

"I'm doing a play. I'm doing a movie of the play. And I'm doing a documentary, all at the same time" Pacino explained to his producers at the beginning of the actor's project around Oscar Wilde's one-act play *Salome* (1891) - published just after his famous novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* - initially published in French for Sarah Bernhardt before being translated into English.<sup>1</sup> The film involves three different elements. The first is a stage reading of the play, directed by Estelle Parsons at the Wadsworth Theatre in Los Angeles in April and May 2006. In this case the spectacle, qualified as *avant-garde* by Pacino, was minimal, without any sets or costumes, focusing instead only on the verbal performance - and was slammed by American critics, who were particularly scathing and unreceptive towards the originality of the approach.

The project also involved the filming of the play as it was performed behind closed doors over five days in May 2006. These modern dress performances, with Pacino wearing spectacles in lieu of a crown, ended up in a 80-minute film released in 2014. The third and final element is a 95-minute hybrid film, initially entitled *Salomaybe?*, then re-named *Wilde Salome*, that blends, as with *Looking for Richard*, documentary footage (of backstage activities during the development of the piece, or retracing Wilde's life as Pacino visits the places where the author lived, as he had previously done for Shakespeare), fiction (the re-enactment of scenes in costume in the desert with other actors, and from the Victorian era, with Pacino playing Wilde), and extracts of the play being filmed. This article focusses on this third project - which, like the other two, was initiated in 2006 but was unveiled at the Venice Film Festival as late as 2011.<sup>2</sup>

For the stage reading and the filmed performance, Pacino called upon little-known actors. Kevin Anderson (as the prophet John the Baptist, called 'Jokanaan' in Wilde's play) and Roxanne Hart (Herodias) had worked mainly for the stage and on television. Playing Herod, Pacino follows in the footsteps of great British actors who, from Charles Laughton to Steven Berkoff, have embodied the lustful and incestuous king, in love with a step-daughter who also happens to be his niece (Pacino playing Richard III already evoked a similar lineage including, amongst others, Laurence Olivier). *Salome* is played by the young Jessica Chastain, who was still unknown at the time and had appeared only on television. In spite of her lack of film experience, Chastain proves to be a true "actress as

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<sup>1</sup> Oscar Wilde, *Salomé*, English and French dual-language edition with preface, notes, critical dossier, chronology and bibliography by Pascal Aquien, Paris: GF Flammarion, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> The unusually lengthy production of the film and its equally unconventional distribution led to some confusion. For example, the DVD edition that has been commercially available since 2014 is composed of two discs, the filmed play *Salome* on disc 1 (presented as 'The Film') et and *Wilde Salome* on disc 2 (presented as 'The Documentary'), as though the documentary were a mere bonus to the play. The two films are in fact full works in their own right, however, even if the second uses excerpts from the first.

*auteur*"<sup>3</sup>, making suggestions for the building up her character in a way similar to Margot (Bette Davis) in *All About Eve* (Mankiewicz, USA, 1950).

Chastain conveys the insanity of her character with an intensity that recalls Stanislavsky's method acting and led Pacino to believe that she would be nominated for an Academy Award. In particular she supported the idea that her dance should end up in total nudity so as to both shock and arouse the viewer. Whereas the vapid Anderson may appear the weak point of the casting, lacking the necessary charisma to embody the man who leads Salome to damn herself, Chastain shines on screen. Through her inspired acting and her nude dancing, she brings an undeniable psychological and erotic intensity to the film; she endows her character with sensuality and animality, showing the young virgin as physically attracted to the Baptist, his voice, his body, the whiteness of his skin, the blackness of his hair, the redness of his mouth (which she will finally be able to kiss only after his beheading), and eventually losing her mind because of his disdain for her, as he rebuffs this "*daughter of Babylon, daughter of Sodom*".

### **The Actor as *Auteur***

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Pacino has always been intensely involved in his acting projects. He is known for bringing subjects to film-makers, entreating Brian De Palma to make *Scarface* after considering Sidney Lumet, who had already directed him twice (*Serpico*, It/USA, 1973, and *Dog Day Afternoon*, USA, 1975). He is known to work with directors on the elaboration of every detail of his characters (as testify the quibbles he had with Coppola about both the motivation and the hairstyle of Michael Corleone in *The Godfather, Part III*). He even took part in the revised editing of a film that was near to his heart some twenty years after its shooting: Hugh Hudson's *Revolution* (UK/Norway, 1985) was re-cut with the addition of a voice-over for its Director's Cut in 2009. Critics did not waver in attributing the authorship of *Scarface* to the actor turned *auteur*: "*Pacino's film rather than De Palma's*", proclaimed one.<sup>4</sup>

As I have suggested elsewhere, Pacino has managed to invent something of a film genre around his idiosyncratic *persona*: tragic Shakespearean characters, God-like figures, malevolent father figures, and so on.<sup>5</sup> Contrary to the conception of the actor as a puppet controlled by autocratic filmmakers, Pacino's films indeed express a true 'vision', as he himself asserts when using the title *An Actor's Vision* for the DVD box set that comprises *Looking for Richard*, *Chinese Coffee* and *The Local Stigmatic* (a medium-length film shot by stage director David Wheeler in 1990, adapted from a play by Heathcote Williams, produced by Pacino, and in which he plays). Pacino can thus be seen as the complete author

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<sup>3</sup> In the sense given by Patrick McGilligan in *James Cagney, the Actor as Auteur* [1975], San Diego: A.S. Barnes & Company, Inc., 1982.

<sup>4</sup> Jean-Luc Douin, '*Scarface – César Borgia à Miami*', *Télérama*, 7 March 1984.

<sup>5</sup> See Christophe Damour, *Al Pacino, le dernier tragédien*, Paris: Scope, 2009. On these points, see also Damour, '*De 'l'acteur-instrument' à la 'politique des acteurs'*. *Quelques pistes de réflexion sur les conceptions de l'acteur comme auteur dans le cinéma américain des années 1950*', in Christophe Gauthier, Dimitri Vezyroglou (eds.), *L'Auteur de cinéma. Histoire, généalogie, archéologie*, Paris: AFRHC, 2013, pp. 281-290.

of *Wilde Salome*: the screenwriter, director, star and even in a sense the subject of the film, while also overseeing the editing and acting as co-producer.

During the rehearsals for the stage reading of *Salome*, Pacino can even be seen contradicting the instructions of the stage director Estelle Parsons, although he is supposed to intervene only as an actor. As a compulsive creator (he shot dozens of hours of rushes over several years, only to keep a few minutes of them), he jealously maintains control of the entire artistic process. This even extended to financial matters insofar as he blocked the distribution of the film for nearly five years – even longer than for *Looking for Richard*, started in 1993 and released in 1996 - before finalising a commercial version of 90 minutes' duration. He did this because he did not feel ready, and then thought it was not a good time (Pacino playing in one third-rate movie after the other and collecting bad reviews which could be detrimental to the film) until financial pressures finally forced him to release a version that, for him, still remains incomplete. All in all, the film went through dozens of provisional versions, some of which ran longer than three hours. From 2006 to 2011, Pacino continuously modified the edit to find the right balance between the extracts from the filmed play and the documentary sequences.

Practising what could be termed a true form of 'research cinema', he was searching for the right tone and rhythm (more humour, as his producer suggested, or more depth?), and, above all, the right subject (is it more a documentary about Wilde, or about Pacino himself?). Pacino experienced what characterises the work of any researcher: on the one hand, a passion for his object of research and, on the other hand, the difficulty of concluding a work in progress. Pacino thus confessed to Lawrence ('Larry') Grobel, his close friend and official biographer, who conducts several interviews in the film and published the journal he kept during the shooting, that while he felt that he was a strong and accomplished actor, he felt very fragile as an artist - hence his nervousness (the different, provisional versions) and also his reluctance to finalise the work. According to Grobel, the subject of the film was the failure of its director to actually direct it; the film could not be completed since it deals with a quest, an obstinate quest, which accounts for the final scene in the desert where a bewildered Pacino is shown at the head of a crew standing together and ready to work, but finding himself at a complete loss.<sup>6</sup>

*"We are just going to keep making this movie, expanding it. And that's what it's about. It's about an obsession; it's about striving to get somewhere. It's never about the final product. It's about the search. You can never quit."* As he also explains: *"I made a mistake showing it to you. Someone said to me that I should never show a work in this state to anyone. And he's right. I showed you something half complete. [...] It's very delicate stuff. Artists are very frightened people. They're not robust. As an actor, I am, but not as an artist. It was too soon to show it. It's not ready to be seen, not even by me. It's like reading marginal notes to a poem."*<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See Lawrence Grobel, *Al Pacino: In conversation with Lawrence Grobel – The Authorized Biography*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006, and Grobel, *"I Want you in My Movie!": My Acting Debut and Other Misadventures Filming Al Pacino's 'Wilde Salome'*, CreateSpace Publishing, 2014.

<sup>7</sup> Pacino in Grobel, *I Want you in My Movie!*, pp. 253, 76.

If Pacino equates the film-maker with the poet or the painter, it should come as no surprise that painting is given prominence in *Wilde Salome*. Pacino visits art galleries (for instance the National Gallery of Ireland, since Pacino believes that Wilde drew inspiration from paintings such as Guercino's *Saint John the Baptist Visited in Prison by Salome* (1625), in front of which Pacino poses), and his cinematographer, Benoît Delhomme, shows him pictures to help define the visual world and art direction of the film (in particular Gustave Moreau's *The Apparition/L'Apparition*, that appears in the film and was painted in 1876, the same year as his *Salome /Salome dansant devant Hérode*). Pacino does not hesitate to compare himself to Picasso, to Dali (whom he was to embody in an Andrew Niccol film that he finally gave up since, in his opinion, his character in *Wilde Salome* was "already Dali"), and to Pollock: "I don't know what my vision is yet. It reminds me of the way Jackson Pollock painted – trying to put different images together hoping that they connect in some way and give off a feeling. Film is the paint on my canvas."<sup>8</sup>

Pacino claims that his film fully belongs to the domain of art cinema and is not intended for the mainstream. He laments the fact that, paradoxically, he became famous as an actor thanks to mainstream commercial productions while his interest and motivation were in *avant-garde* theatre, "Strindberg in the basement, the Living Theatre."<sup>9</sup> For Pacino, a film is a work of art, and this claim is played out in *Wilde Salome* when at one point while visiting a gallery he jokingly mimics a scene from *Scarface* with an admirer, the proximity between the film and the paintings seeming to place them on a par with each other. Pacino's ambition as an *artist* (he never calls himself a 'film-maker') is to propose his own personal vision, his own interpretation of the myth of Salome among the many versions that preceded his.

### **Self-Portrait: The Story of an Obsession**

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"This is the story of an obsession", reads the epigraph that opens *Wilde Salome* (with the word "obsession" highlighted in red lettering). Obsession is indeed the central subject of the film: the obsession of the male characters with Salome's body, of Salome with John the Baptist, of John the Baptist with his divine calling. But also the obsession of Pacino with Oscar Wilde, the true prime mover of the project as Pacino seeks to understand through this film why he feels so close to the Irish writer, as if in a fused relationship, "like half of each other". Pacino expresses great admiration for the author and his words. He also discovers and is fascinated by some of Wilde's other works, like *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, the long poem about a convict sentenced to death that Wilde composed following his own release from jail – after his homosexuality saw him sentenced to a term of two years' hard labour (1895-7) during which he wrote *De profundis*, excerpts from which are read by Pacino in the film. His preoccupation with Wilde also involves visits to the places associated with the writer (Dublin, where he was born; New York and London, where he resided; Paris where he died).

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<sup>8</sup> Pacino in Grobel, *I Want you in My Movie!*, pp. 121 and 111.

<sup>9</sup> Pacino in Grobel, *I Want you in My Movie!*, p. 229.

Pacino interviews various Wilde experts and people who have been significantly influenced by the author – such as his descendants, gallery directors, scholars, and celebrities as disparate as Gore Vidal and Bono. For the film is also about the throes of creation: “*It’s a movie about inspiration*”, Pacino declares to his producer. Pacino seems to be possessed when he directs the actors (whispering the lines along with them whilst behind the monitor), when he places his camera, gives directions and sometimes orders to his crew - in turn elated, annoyed and dispirited. As an actors’ director, he is seen to direct with passion (notably for the scene of the young captain of the guard’s suicide). At once a documentary about Wilde, about the staging of a play and the shooting of a film, *Wilde Salome* is also a documentary about the actor and film-maker Pacino himself. Being in complete control of his project, Pacino is fully aware of this dimension, as when he films himself looking at rushes on a monitor; these shots foreground Pacino the film-maker observing the work of Pacino the actor, in a compelling narcissistic *mise-en-abîme* of his dual star *persona*.

*Wilde Salome* proves even more radical than *Looking for Richard*, which had already elaborated on Pacino’s status as a tragedian (and was also a reminder of how much *Scarface* owes to Shakespeare’s *Richard III*). With *Wilde Salome*, Pacino proposes a self-reflexive examination of his acting career, a critical assessment of his star *persona*, and a reflection on fame. If *Wilde Salome* pays tribute to Wilde’s genius, it also shows that, even in Britain, the Hollywood star is much more famous than the author of *The Importance of Being Earnest*: in front of Wilde’s house in London Pacino signs an autograph, the former inhabitant of the building remaining clearly unknown to the fan, whilst in Ireland a student mimics shooting a machine gun in clear reference to the final scene in *Scarface*. His aim is also to acknowledge economic considerations that were missing from *Looking for Richard*.

Filming behind the scenes of the singular creation such as a film – all the more so in that in this case it blends cinema and theatre – *Wilde Salome* also raises fundamental ontological questions to do with the similarities and differences between directing for the stage and for the screen, and concerning the broader relationships between art and industry. “*Everything is money!*” complains Pacino in one of his Brechtian asides - which are sometimes spiteful, sometimes mischievous. The actor exposes the conflictual relationships he has with his two producers - Robert Fox, the producer of the play, and Barry Navidi, the producer of the film - who oblige him to reduce the shooting schedule from five days to four: “*The producers, fuck’em! How can they be so filmically ignorant?;*” rants the star, who seems to liken the role of actors to that of prostitutes when he warns “*You got me, my face, you didn’t get my soul*”. He also believes that the ticket prices for the stage reading are too high and that the show’s promotion has cashed in on his name, trading on a claimed comeback by the star (“*Pacino is back*”), even though the actor has never stopped working either in cinema or on the stage.

The film also offers an intimate portrait of the actor: he is filmed in Los Angeles with his children (the twins Anton and Olivia, who arrive with their father at the theatre for the rehearsals) and during an awards reception at Trinity College Dublin. As with Truffaut in *La Chambre verte* (Fr, 1978), in which the director, playing the lead character, pays tribute to his late friends and mentors by setting up a shrine, *Wilde Salome* gives Pacino the opportunity to gather together personalities (in this case all alive and kicking) who have played a significant part in his personal and professional world: his friend and biographer Larry Grobel, who was to play a leading role in the documentary part of the film but footage of whom was largely cut; Estelle Parsons, a distinguished member of the Actors Studio, who

directed the stage reading and had already appeared in *Looking for Richard*; Barry Navidi, the producer of the film, who had already produced *The Merchant of Venice* (USA/It/Lux/UK, 2004), in which Pacino had been directed by Michael Radford; the French cinematographer Benoît Delhomme, who had also worked on *The Merchant of Venice* (and with whom Pacino was to work again on Dito Montiel's *The Son of No One* (USA, 2011)). There is also a brief interview with the playwright Tony Kushner, whose play *Angels in America* was adapted into a TV mini-series by Mike Nichols in 2003, with Pacino in a leading role.

As for the links that he establishes between Wilde and the play, Pacino blurs the frontiers between what happens on the set and behind the scenes. His character's (Herod's) rage when he hears Salome's outrageous request is cross-edited with the fury of his other 'character' (Pacino the filmmaker) while ranting at the producers. More generally, Pacino imposes his stamp through the idiosyncratic play-acting that can be seen in all his films, both major (*Serpico*) and minor (*88 Minutes*). The film thus displays a body language that is the actor's hallmark: a propensity to ham it up, with his arms spread out; a tendency to hide his eyes with his right hand to punctuate the dramatic climaxes; to press his index on his brow and then on his lips to convey some intense reflection; and to raise his hands to his temples in moments of rage, with only half of his face lit so as to convey the dramatic quality of the sequence (or with his eyes shut, to signify introspection).

Once again Pacino personifies a demiurge when he is filmed checking the image on the monitor, just like the other characters he played in front of such devices: from the undercover cop in Michael Mann's *Heat* (USA, 1995), to the TV producer in Mann's *The Insider* (USA, 1999), the producer-creator in Andrew Niccol's *S1mOne* (USA, 2002), and the spy in Roger Donaldson's *The Recruit* (USA, 2003). *Salome* furnishes Pacino with another regal role, with the actor adopting a majestic pose sitting on a throne, as in *Scarface* or the *Godfather* saga. He is also shown slumped in an armchair when he embodies Wilde after he has just learned that he will be sentenced to jail (which in turn recalls the fallen and slouching Pacino in *Scarface* and Mike Newell's *Donnie Brasco* (USA, 1997)). Just before feeling faint, Herod even teeters like Michael Corleone in *The Godfather, Part III*. Other characteristic motifs recur throughout the film, like the mobile phone to which Pacino is hooked up (as in *88 Minutes*), or the dialogues he has with his producer, filmed in over-the-shoulder shots while they are in the front seats of a parked car, which recalls the type of framing and editing of which the actor seems to be particularly fond (for example, the conversations with Russell Crowe in *The Insider*, and with Ryan O'Neal in Daniel Algrant's *People I Know* (USA/Germ, 2003), systematically adopt this type of *mise-en-scène*).

The film also tackles somewhat transgressive themes, like the bold sexuality of Salome (conveyed through the metaphor of the moon, whose paleness and fickleness characterise Salome, and which, to Herod, appears nude and sensual), or homosexuality, illegal in Wilde's day. For Pacino, Wilde put a part of himself into every character in *Salome*: either through the transformation of an individual, with Salome discovering her sexuality just as Wilde asserted a lifestyle (homosexuality, progressive political ideas) deemed too scandalous for the polite society of the day or, in the case of John the Baptist, through the grim anticipation of the experience of imprisonment. Likewise, Herod's bisexuality evokes Wilde's own sexual ambivalence - Wilde was married but had several male lovers - and so do some of the characters interpreted by Pacino, including Sonny in *Dog Day Afternoon* to the cop in Friedkin's



*Cruising* (USA, 1980) and Roy Cohn in *Angels in America* who falls in love with a younger man (like Wilde with Bosie); not to mention the perhaps queer dimension of *Scarface*, namely the ambiguous emotional bond between Tony and Manny.

In this respect, Pacino's eccentric interpretation of Herod did not go unnoticed by critics: "*Herod as a character is a figure balanced on the knife edge of Camp. [...] Mr. Pacino interprets the character in an entirely uncharacteristic fashion. [...] he does give Herod a fey, pansexually flirtatious side that one doesn't normally associate with Mr. Pacino, who, in most performances, whether quiet or manic, is almost always masculine in a conventionally unambiguous way.*"<sup>10</sup> As in *Looking for Richard*, in *Wilde Salome* Pacino draws a self-portrait as much as depicting the great Oscar Wilde; the amalgamation of the two culminates with Pacino playing the part of Wilde in a short scene in which the playwright learns about his indictment for sodomy and gross indecency and decides to confront a bigoted society rather than to live a life on the run.

### Pacino's Look

If *Wilde Salome* is so directly in line with Pacino's work on both visual and thematic levels, it is also because *Salome's* central motif is closely linked to his star *persona*. Talk of an 'actor's vision' can have two meanings: in general terms, the artistic conception of a work of art, but also, in a more literal sense, in relation to human eyesight. And sight has always been a most central motif in the iconography associated with Pacino. "[...] *I will look at thee through the muslin veils, I will look at thee, Narraboth, it may be I will smile at thee. Look at me, Narraboth, look at me!*", commands the Princess of Judea so she that she can bewitch him into letting her meet John the Baptist; the prophet, for his part, will not have her stare at him ("*Who is this woman who is looking at me? I will not have her look at me*")<sup>11</sup>; the young Syrian dies because he dares look at Salome, and is driven to suicide out of jealousy, whereas John the Baptist dies because he refuses to look at her ("*I will not look at thee*")<sup>12</sup>; Herod is blamed for eyeing his step-daughter too much.<sup>13</sup>

Salome's final speech of deranged passion, addressed to the severed head of John the Baptist, is itself preoccupied with the business of looking: "*But wherefore dost thou not look at me, lokanaan? Thine eyes that were so terrible, so full of rage and scorn, are shut now. Wherefore are they shut? Open thine eyes! Lift up thine eyelids, lokanaan! Wherefore dost thou not look at me? Art thou afraid of me, lokanaan, that thou wilt not look at me? [...] Thou didst put upon thine eyes the covering of him who would see his God. Well, thou hast seen thy God, lokanaan, but me, me, thou didst never see. If thou hadst seen me thou hadst loved me. I saw thee, and I loved thee.*"<sup>14</sup> *Salome* thus contains all aspects of the desirous gaze, from the injunction to look to its interdiction. This motif was already part of the history of the play's adaptation into cinema with the close-up vignette of Alla Nazimova's enthralling

<sup>10</sup> Glenn Kenny, 'Review: Al Pacino's Journey With Wilde's 'Salome'', *New York Times*, 29 March 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/29/movies/wilde-salome-review-al-pacino.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Wilde, *Salomé*, p. 70.

<sup>12</sup> Wilde, *Salomé*, p. 76.

<sup>13</sup> Wilde, *Salomé*, p. 88.

<sup>14</sup> Wilde, *Salomé*, pp. 160-2.

gaze in Bryant's *Salome*. It thus seems only appropriate that Pacino's eyes should be the focus of the poster outside the Wadsworth Theatre in Los Angeles, in turn recalling the famous hand-drawn poster of *Dog Day Afternoon*, which shows only the upper part of the actor's face.

*Wilde Salome* is then a film about the scopic drive, about the obsession of looking and the desire it provokes. This theme relates not only to the actor's career in cinema but also, and more broadly, to the history of the cinema itself, since the new medium built on the fascination with bodies in motion - and most specifically on *dancing* bodies (for example, the enthralling serpentine dances of Loïe Fuller, whom Edison filmed as early as 1894). Pacino stages a remarkable mirror effect when he films himself looking at Chastain through the monitor: the film-maker's gaze, captivated by the actress's performance, mirrors Herod's fascination with Salome's body. As Parsons recalls in voice-over early on, one must not forget that Pacino is quite familiar with the part of Herod. He had already played *Salome* twice on Broadway under the direction of Estelle Parsons (1992 and 2003). And it is no accident that the two Salome-like stories in Pacino's film career (Pacino's characters playing spectators who desire a woman's nude body) are told just before (Garry Marshall's *Frankie and Johnny*, USA, 1991) and just after (De Palma's *Carlito's Way*, USA, 1993) he played Herod at the Circle in the Square Theatre in New York (March to July 1992). In *Frankie and Johnny*, Johnny (Pacino), like Herod, begs Frankie (Michelle Pfeiffer) to allow him to look at her naked body, which he describes with analytical, quasi-naturalistic, precision: "*Her eyes, her breast, her stomach ...*", and which is hardly concealed by a diaphanous, veil-like dressing gown.

In *Carlito's Way*, Penelope Ann Miller plays a dancer falling prey to men's lustful gazes, and recreates Salome's famous scene when practising on the barre, wiggling on the dance floor of a nightclub, or in a strip club. When Carlito (Pacino) looks at the dancer he is thus reminiscent of the young Captain whose suicide Herod regrets thus: "*I am sorry he has slain himself. I am very sorry. For he was fair to look upon. He was even very fair. He had very languorous eyes. I remember that I saw that he looked languorously at Salome. Truly, I thought he looked too much at her.*"<sup>15</sup> The page of Herodias had indeed repeatedly warned the young Syrian against the dangers of the look: "*You are always looking at her. You look at her too much. It is dangerous to look at people in such fashion. Something terrible may happen.*"; "*You must not look at her. You look too much at her.*"; "*Do not look at her. I pray you not to look at her.*"<sup>16</sup>

Even more strikingly, Carlito evokes Herod, also obsessed by Salome and who cannot stop watching her dancing. When Pacino ogles the dancer through the half-open door of his apartment as she stands in front of a mirror, her white skin looks as pale as that of Wilde's Salome; the besotted young Syrian compares it to "*the shadow of a white rose in a mirror of silver*".<sup>17</sup> The nude performances of Michelle Pfeiffer (off-screen) and Penelope Ann Miller, along with that of Maria Ewing at the Royal Opera House the same year (1992), thus herald Jessica Chastain's dance in *Wilde Salome* while corroborating the genealogy of Salome's transgressive nudity, focussing on the princess's bare bosom, that runs throughout art history, from the paintings of Léon Herbo and Pierre Bonnaud to the drawings

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<sup>15</sup> Wilde, *Salomé*, p. 98.

<sup>16</sup> Wilde, *Salomé*, pp. 46, 50, 60.

<sup>17</sup> Wilde, *Salomé*, p. 50.

by Aubrey Beardsley which illustrated Wilde's original work. This transgression marks the climactic finale of the dance of the seven veils, the figurative potency of which was well understood by Pacino and Chastain.

The metaphor of the mirror, and the tragic fate awaiting those who have looked too much, are themes expounded upon by Herod at the end of the play: "*It's true, I have looked at thee and ceased not this night. Thy beauty has troubled me. Thy beauty has grievously troubled me, and I have looked at thee overmuch. Nay, but I will look at thee no more. One should not look at anything. Neither at things, nor at people should one look. Only in mirrors is it well to look, for mirrors do but show us masks.*"<sup>18</sup> It seems that Pacino remained in a creative frenzy whatever his activity, and that the character of Herod was a persistent influence on his other roles in theatre and film. It is no accident either that the film for which the actor received an Academy Award (Martin Brest's *Scent of a Woman*, USA, 1992) is a film almost entirely about the gaze. It may deal with the look of a blind man, but Pacino plays him with his eyes wide open. It is not only in *Wilde Salome* that Pacino will use the motif of a character staring from a distance at the object of his desire to epitomise that which remains inaccessible: in *Chinese Coffee*, for example, Pacino's character, standing in the street, looks up dolefully at the window of the apartment of the woman who has left him.

### Method or Madness?

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*Wilde Salome* was certainly an uncommonly drawn-out production, taking more than five years to complete, and involving an approach by Pacino that wavers constantly between control and improvisation. The actor-turned-director worked without any screenplay or written dialogue, without any fixed schedule, but according to the flow of his inspiration and the vagaries of the shooting, including chance encounters or events. In so doing, Pacino seems to offer a radical endorsement of Jean Renoir's famous suggestion that one should let oneself "*be carried through life like a cork on water*".<sup>19</sup> This approach, which characterises much cinematic modernism, has been described as "*a capacity to let all events, whether major or minor, personal or historical, landscapes, encounters, the vagaries of life and personal feelings become the raw material of his films and turn the creative process into some impure operation.*"<sup>20</sup>

The film's documentary aspects, for example, intermingle footage of live performance but also scenes that look improvised but were actually rehearsed at the last minute, and the material was not necessarily shot in chronological order (the journey to Europe, which is supposed to be preparatory to the play in the storyline, was actually filmed afterwards, in November 2006). Scenes are re-enacted several times and Pacino tries something new each time, over-acting with impatience, as Larry Grobel testifies in his journal. Editing was also a very difficult process involving a succession of editors – amongst them Pat Buba - the editor on *Heat*, *Looking for Richard* and *Chinese Coffee* – who was the

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<sup>18</sup> Wilde, *Salomé*, pp. 48-150.

<sup>19</sup> Jean Renoir, *Pierre-Auguste Renoir, mon père*, Paris: Gallimard, 1981, 44. *My translation.*

<sup>20</sup> Alain Bergala, *Monika de Ingmar Bergman*, Crisnée: Yellow Now, 2005, 8-9. *My translation.*

first to work out a consistent narrative from the many hours of rushes. "*Nobody directs the way I do*"<sup>21</sup>, a boastful Pacino told Grobel after filming the desert sequence in a single day with a dozen extras and a camel, without any script, proceeding from one scene to the next purely from memory.

In fact the star carried out this "*insane*" project on the basis of performance techniques inspired by the Method school of acting, based on improvisation and introspection. The film makes profuse reference to the famous studio in which Pacino was trained by Lee Strasberg at the end of the 1960s and to which he has remained faithful (he is one of the studio's co-presidents). As though to remind us of the importance of this institution, *Wilde Salome* opened on the premises of the Actors Studio, in Manhattan, with a conversation between Pacino and Estelle Parsons, the director of the stage play; a former Artistic Director of the Studio, as well as a director and actress, she received an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress for her role in Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (USA, 1967).

Pacino is invariably open to suggestions: he hangs on to ideas proposed by members of his crew and even makes the audience participate when he regularly organises test screenings and collects their impressions to improve the final narrative structure. He allows room for collective creation in a way that recalls the collaborative attitude towards actors professed by Elia Kazan, one of the founders of the Actors Studio.<sup>22</sup> As a filmmaker, Pacino is a director of actors who does not intervene much, at times congenial and curt, providing little guidance (and sometimes even counter-directions, to foster 'natural' acting). To help actors identify with their parts, in the wake of Method Actors like Rod Steiger and Paul Newman, who worked on affective memory and searched for inner motives to justify the actions of their characters, Pacino organises a ceremonial dinner which he films so that the actors can have "*the feeling of the banquet*". Pacino may also be recalling Coppola did for *The Godfather* in 1971 when he set up a collective read-through with the entire cast (Marlon Brando, James Caan, Diane Keaton, Robert Duvall and of course Pacino) in order to foster family-like bonds and endow fiction, during the shooting, with spontaneity of action.

In *Wilde Salome*, Pacino perhaps exaggerates the need for authenticity when he tries to retrieve the flavour of the places involved in the plot, whether Wilde's house in Ireland, or ancient Galilee (re-created in the Mojave Desert). This commitment to naturalism, inherited from the Method, however, does not suit contemporary cultural tastes and trends. Pacino has often been disparaged for his New York accent when interpreting Shakespeare or playing an historical character (reviewing Hugh Hudson's *Revolution* a French critic spoke of "*a venial joke that telescopes his Italian-Bronx accent with 18<sup>th</sup>-century Anglo-American*"<sup>23</sup>). Likewise, his attempt to reconstitute the biblical world in the Californian desert (as George Stevens did in 1965 for *The Greatest Story Ever Told*), wearing a Bedouin costume, borders on the ridiculous. The legendary professional dedication of the Method actor is even derided when one of the actors in the play, although he has a very minor part, reveals his copy of the script to be entirely covered with notes - rather like Edward Norton's character in Iñárritu's *Birdman* (USA, 2014), a fastidious, egocentric actor nicknamed "*Mr. Method*".

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<sup>21</sup> Pacino in Grobel, *I Want you in My Movie!*, p. 125.

<sup>22</sup> See Elia Kazan, *A Life*, Boston: Da Capo Press, 1997, p. 143.

<sup>23</sup> Gérard Lefort, '*Revolution, contre-révolution*', *Libération*, 17/2/1986. *My translation*.

Pacino pursued his self-analysis in a feature film that appeared to be a companion piece to *Wilde Salome*. Adam Sandler's *Jack and Jill* (USA, 2011) may not have been directed by Pacino, but it is very much 'a Pacino film', as Michel Cieutat notes: "*Pacino [...] indulges in a rather surprising self-parody: in this film, he systematically debunks his reputation as a serious actor, specializing in Shakespearean drama and refusing to play in advertisements [...] his world renown for his roles of Italian-American gangsters, from the 'Godfather' saga to 'Scarface', or his idiosyncratic ranting fits.*"<sup>24</sup> One could also mention his nostalgia for the Bronx, the unacknowledged affiliation with Brando, his unhappiness at being the recipient of only a single Academy Award, and the cameo by one of his favourite partners, Johnny Depp, with whom he played in *Donnie Brasco*.

In the meta-discursive *Jack and Jill*, Pacino seems to be recreating the eccentric and mystical character he plays in *Wilde Salome*: a superstar whose professional life is winding down, reflecting critically on a prestigious career; an egocentric character talking to himself or to the camera, or even to the statue of Oscar Wilde in Dublin. A recent monograph on Pacino is structured around ten notable characters from his career in film - among them 'Michael Corleone', 'Frank Serpico', and 'Tony Montana', but it ends up with 'Al Pacino' himself.<sup>25</sup> After *Looking for Richard*, which offered a remarkable analysis of Al Pacino's *persona* and performance style, *Wilde Salome* is a logical choice in Pacino's self-reflexive study of his own career (as an actor and more generally as an artist). *Wilde Salome* is indeed a personal and experimental film directed by one of the major stars of American cinema in the last half-century. Through a study of the film's figurative potency and iconographic continuity, this article has sought to offer an account of how the actor-turned-director pursues a self-reflexive analysis of his acting career while being fully aware of the myth he has become.

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<sup>24</sup> Michel Cieutat, 'Jack and Jill', *Positif*, no. 613, March 2012, p. 44. *My translation*.

<sup>25</sup> Karina Longworth, *Al Pacino: Anatomy of an Actor*, London: Phaidon Press, 2013.