

## Dance Lessons

Cris Whetton

*In early 1998 Finnish Channel 1 TV screened the films of A Dance to the Music of Time as eight one-hour episodes. This review by was first published in the Finnish newspaper Aamulehti in 1998 and is reproduced here with the author's kind permission.*

Over the twenty-four years from 1951 to 1975 Anthony Powell published twelve novels which form the sequence known as *A Dance to the Music of Time*, the collective title being taken from Poussin's painting of the same name which hangs in the Wallace Collection in London. Spanning the fifty years from 1921 to 1971, with a brief flashback to 1914, the overall theme is the shifting patterns of human relationships - the Dance - over Time. Many critics have compared Powell's sequence to Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*; this is misleading. The main similarity between the two works lies only in the vast number of characters. A fairer comparison would be between the twelve novels (but not the TV adaptation) and the eleven episodes of Edgar Reisz's film *Heimat*, which covers the same period, has as many characters and relationships, and employs similar narrative tricks. One sign of a novelist's success in creating characters is when readers begin to use those characters names as generic descriptions of friends and acquaintances. Anyone who has read Tove Jansson's *Muumi* books will recognise real-life Hemulit, Viljonkat and Pikku Myyt. So too, readers - and viewers - of *Dance* will find a Widmerpool, a Quiggin and a Pamela Flitton amongst their circle.

Ever since the sequence was completed there has been talk of filming it - usually followed closely by suggestions that the task was impossible - and there have been at least three failed attempts to do so. The current adaptation works, but it is not the books. Faced with the problem of reducing fifty years into eight hours of screen time, the director has thrown away characters by the handful, merged others into hybrids, distorted Time and Space, and

brought the narrator, Nicholas Jenkins, prominently into the foreground. By doing this, the story now focuses on the comic-villain Kenneth Widmerpool. First seen as a fat, clumsy schoolboy, Widmerpool, by sheer force of character, becomes a powerful man, first in business, then in the Army during the War, and finally in politics. But Widmerpool's comic exterior hides odd sexual tastes; he marries Pamela Flitton, a frigid nymphomaniac - if such can be imagined - whom he likes to watch being made love to by other men. Eventually, she destroys his political career, committing suicide in the process, after which Widmerpool becomes involved in a sixties cult, meeting his own fatal end in its own odd practices.

Around this story, the characters dance in and out. Jenkins, the son of an Army officer (but far from wealthy, his place at Eton would be due to a scholarship) moves via Oxford University into the literary and artistic world of London. Sadly, the film loses the sense of moving between different levels of society that is part of the books' charm. The War brings Jenkins misery, then contentment as an officer in military liaison. Postwar, Jenkins moves on to be a novelist of some importance, living in the country and happily married to his aristocratic wife. Among the many threads in this rich tapestry are Jenkins' school-friends, Templar and Stringham; the first becoming a successful stockbroker, the second descending into alcoholism; both are sent to their deaths by Widmerpool during the War. Also weaving their way through Time are many almost-real-life characters. Moreland, modelled on Powell's real-life friend the composer Constant Lambert, leads Jenkins through the seamier side of London. The mad, Communist-leaning Lord Erridge is said to be based on George Orwell, author of *1984* and *Animal Farm*.

This adaptation has brought forth some fine performances: Simon Russell Beale is near perfect as Widmerpool, as is Miranda Richardson as

Pamela Flitton. Mostly, time and place echo the books faithfully though some of the cars, notably those of Jenkins and the young Widmerpool, are far too smart for their owners. Also, the rapid pace with which the film moves through Time means that characters have to be constantly introducing themselves in a way which becomes rather irritating.

Nevertheless, the screen version works, but works because it does not work: it leaves the viewer wanting more. And for that, the only thing to do is to read the books.

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