

Here is Kino Ken's review of Sophie Fiennes' film version of *T. S. Eliot's Four Quartets* recently released on dvd by Kino Lorber. That LVCA dvd donation will be a November, 2024 entry into the Hugh Stoupe Library of the Heritage Methodist Church in Ligonier, Pennsylvania.

13 of a possible 20 points ***1/2 points = very good film

United Kingdom 2022 color 87 minutes live action dramatic recitation
West End Films / Lone Star Productions / The Northampton Theatres Trust
Limited / Lonely Dragon Limited / T. S. Eliot Foundation / Theatre Royal Bath
Productions Limited Producers: Ralph Fiennes, Sophie Fiennes, Shani Hinton,
Martin Rosebaum

Key: * indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance

Points:

- 2 Film Direction: Sophie Fiennes
Stage Direction: Ralph Fiennes and Eva Sampson
 - 1 Editing: Sophie Fiennes
 - 1 Photography "Burnt Norton": Mike Eley
"East Coker" and "Little Gidding": Nick Gordon Smith
"The Dry Salvages": Andrew Douglas
 - 0 Lighting Design: Tim Lutkin Lighting: Richard Saunders, Andy Taylor
 - 2 Text: Thomas Stearns Eliot Reciter: Ralph Fiennes
Script Supervision: Eva Sampson
 - 1 Music: Peter Gregson ("Inside")
 - 1 Production Design: Hildegard Bechtler
Costume Design: Hildegard Bechtler
Makeup: Lisa Mustafa
 - 2 Sound
Sound Design: Philippe Ciompi* and Christopher Shutt*
Sound Recording: Oliver Watson*
 - 2 Acting: Ralph Fiennes*
 - 1 Creativity
- 13 total points

Cast: Ralph Fiennes*

Background Acknowledgments: Wikipedia for information gleaned from its article about T. S. Eliot; excerpts from George Orwell's 1942 review of the first three poems in Eliot's *Four Quartets* published as "Points of View, T. S. Eliot" in *Poetry* 2, no. 7 (October-November 1942), pages 56-59 at <https://tseliot.com/editorials/reception-four-quartets>; www.davidgorman.com (T.S.Eliot:FourQuartets-notes); and T. S. Eliot reading his own *Four Quartets* in 1947 at YouTube (55 minutes).

***T. S. Eliot's Four Quartets* is neither a visual poem nor a narrative fiction. The production under review is rather a filmed stage recitation of pre-existing poetry. Whether intended to promote Thomas Eliot's poetry or Ralph Fiennes' acting career is an open question. Both are certainly advanced by it. Purists beware. The current presentation does not include complete original texts of Eliot's four poems. Some cuts have been made. These, according to director Sophie Fiennes, resulted either from her brother's inability to decipher what the poet meant by certain lines or an aversion to what seemed to him religious overkill. Anyone wishing to hear the complete work is advised to visit YouTube's video of a 1947 reading by the poet himself. This is recommended also because it belies Sophie's claim Eliot raced through his oral recitation on the recording.**

How do you maintain viewer absorption over eighty plus minutes of solo poetry recital? Well, lighting contrasts can be utilized, along with a spicing of choreography and inserted framing video footage of locations mentioned in the text. Even with these embellishments, success or failure hinges on the solo actor's stage presence and emotive ability.

To his considerable credit, Ralph Fiennes manages to overcome limitations of stage space and a mystifyingly complicated amalgam of paradox, deliberate antiquarianism, and geographical globetrotting. This intentional knot of disparate threads constantly threatens to leave auditors dumbfounded. The remedy? Stage lighting that changes colors to match moods suggested by the poetry, introduction of an invisible – yet audible – interacting visitor from the past (Dante, it would seem), repeated phrasings in both straightforward and inverted forms, even unexpected reversion to primal chanting.

Of key value is making perfection, insuring each syllable and accent gets communicated distinctively. Philippe Ciampi and Christopher Shutt fully preserved every intonation and apportioning caesura of silence.

Below is a short glossary to assist auditors in extracting meaning from some of Eliot's more esoteric lexical treasures. Keep in mind, a poet often chooses vocabulary on the basis of sound rather than sense.

"Burnt Norton" glosses: eructation = belching appetency = craving
torpid = dull, sluggish, dormant tumid = swollen, bombastic, bulging
Erhebung = elevation without motion

figlia del tuo figlio = daughter (Mary) of your son (Jesus)

metalled = made of broken stones and / or cinders

"In my end is my beginning" = motto of Mary, Queen of Scots

"East Coker" glosses: commodiois = commodious, spacious, roomy
eche = each coniunction = conjunction necessarye = necessary
whiche = which betokeneth = signifies concorde = concord
periphrastic = use of many words where one will do lotos = lotus
hebetude = blunt, dull, lethargic, obtuse grimpen = vast bog in Dartmoor
Almanach de Gotha = 1763 directory of European royalty

l'entre deux guerres = between two wars (World War I and World War II)

"The Dry Salvages" (salvages rhymes with assuages):
groaner = a whistling buoy ailanthus = tree of heaven with pointed leaflets,
fine-grained wood and clusters of small green stinking flowers
rote = sound of surf beating on shore halcyon = tranquil
Angelus = Annunciation prayer ineffable = inexpressible
haruspicate = predicting future from animal entrails
scry = crystal ball gazing for fortune telling sortilege = sorcery; divining by lots
barbituric acids = painkillers chthonic powers = underworld powers

"Little Gidding": sempiternal = everlasting voluptuary = sensual
eviscerate soil = nourishment-deprived soil metal leaves = tin foil
drouth = drought valediction = farewell epitaph = memorial tribute
suspire = breathe the horn = Gabriel's trumpet blown to announce the
Dies Irae (Day of Wrath or Judgment Day)
Sin is Behovely = sin is necessary (See Dame Julian of Norwich's *Revelation of Divine Love*, Thirteenth Revelation.)

Each of the four poems represent a different element of the physical universe. "Burnt Norton" is imbued with autumnal air. "East Coker" drops readers into swampy earth. It's back to water with relentless assault on rocks in "The Dry Salvages." "Little Gidding" is filled with fire, stressing both its destroying and refining qualities.

Significantly, the final poem of the quartet, "Little Gidding," was written during World War II. That resulted in imagery reflective of the London Blitz.

As dramatized by Ralph Fiennes, the quartet's full musical potency is revealed. For it was listening to late string quartets of Ludwig Beethoven that inspired Eliot to create a verbal counterpart. The rhythm of the words and intervening pauses were intended to form a sort of vocal sonata. This they do quite effectively here. Eliot was not, though, yielding to any operatic ambition, preferring a more subdued and contemplative tone. That ambience is captured extraordinarily well by the Fiennes siblings.

A bothersome flaw occurs in the final section of the dvd, where a flash obliterates stage, actor and background momentarily. Otherwise, lighting is judiciously filtered and tinted to match prevailing ambience suggested by Fiennes' monologues.

One irksome editing choice is the prolonged silence matching gradual fadeout concluding the show. A brief adieu would have served the material better.

Only mature adults will be able to even begin penetrating Eliot's dense thickets of metaphysical symbolism. Children and youths will not find either entertainment or instruction in screening this.

T. S. Eliot's Four Quartets is an admirable stab at furnishing a showcase for the Anglo-American's final extended poetic outpouring. It's recommended to adventurous adult audiences seeking intellectual and spiritual challenge.

The bonus audio commentary by Sophie Fiennes offers a multitude of helpful auxiliary information about Eliot's life and inspirations, in addition to insights about editing decisions and how these four poems impacted the lives of herself and her brother. An intriguing trailer is also provided on this dvd by Kino Lorber.