



“...there they found
Gold florins, newly minted, fine and round,
...Thenceforth it was no longer Death they sought,
Each of them was so happy at the sight”

The tale

In the town of Rochester the local community are launching a search for a missing teenager. Arty, Colin and Baz are three unemployed wastrels who decide to try and cash in on the search, but their greed brings about their grim downfall.

Credits

Writer Tony Grounds
Director Andy De Emmony
Arty Jonny Lee Miller
Colin William Beck
Baz Ben Bennett

“I found it very liberating to tell a story that wasn’t based in our ‘real’ world. Back to storytelling not social observation. Set over one long day’s journey into night, it starts with charm but as we peel away the layers it becomes a very dark tale.” Andy De Emmony, director of *The Pardoner’s Tale*



interview

Tony Grounds is the writer of *The Pardoner’s Tale*

“Chaucer’s story is really about three drunken revellers who get their comeuppance because of greed. I’ve had to make my version a lot nastier,” says Tony Grounds. “You can’t just kill off people on TV these days for being greedy – our threshold is a lot higher. I needed to make the central characters very nasty pieces of work.”

Grounds’ version of *The Pardoner’s Tale* starts off in a light-hearted vein – this was a deliberate ploy to lure viewers into the heart of darkness. “To begin with you’d think that Arty, Baz and Colin are just scammers. They’re ripping off tourists, stealing from people, but they’re not that bad. They almost fall into the category of loveable rogues. If audiences can sympathise with the characters in *Trainspotting* then they’re certainly not going to dislike this lot. But as time goes by they become more and more disturbing. The charismatic Arty, particularly, emerges as a nasty piece of work. He’s one of those evil leaders, the sort who demands respect by being extremely nasty.

“He’s extremely manipulative, yet charming, playing on the weaknesses of his friends to control them. Colin and Baz are

bumbling, comic fools – they know exactly where they stand in the pecking order and they’ll pretty much do as they’re told.”

So how did Grounds distil a tale of abduction, rape and murder from Chaucer’s relatively innocent tale of three greedy fools and a pot of gold? “I struggled through Chaucer with the help of Coles Notes, and it became clear that at its heart it’s a simple moral tale of avarice and punishment. I know I’ve gone a lot further than that, because I’m writing for a modern television audience. I’m not coming at this from an academic viewpoint, I’ve never read any Chaucer before, but I know what audiences want in terms of drama.

“I took the basic strand of three men who find a pot of gold and, through greed, end up killing each other to get their hands on

it. But around that I wove a much nastier story about their abuse of a young girl called Amy. It’s a way of bringing them face to face with death. In Chaucer, death appears in the form of an old man who may or may not be a ghost. In my version, something very similar happens. I’ve tried to make it as Chaucerian as possible, while giving audiences something that stands alone as TV drama whatever its origins.”

The Pardoner’s Tale was filmed in Rochester, one of the stops on Chaucer’s journey to Canterbury. “The people at Rochester Cathedral were very excited about the attention,” explains Grounds. “The town’s perfect for this story. People imagine that Rochester is very prosperous, with the cathedral and the castle, but in fact beyond the heritage stuff there are a lot of people struggling to survive on the periphery.”



interview

Jonny Lee Miller plays Arty in *The Pardoner's Tale*

“It came as a shock to me to discover what a nasty piece of work Arty was,” says Jonny Lee Miller. “I started off thinking that he was just a cheeky scamp, a guy who’s involved in a lot of scams – but as the piece goes on he just gets stranger and darker. By the time I’d read to the end, I was really disturbed. I had to read it over a couple more times to make sure I’d understood it, and each time he seemed nastier.”

It was this sly descent into darkness that appealed to Miller, who’s been picking and choosing his roles carefully in recent years. “Anything I do these days has to be well written,” he says. “I don’t care what sort of thing it is – film or TV, period drama or action thriller – as long as it’s a good script.

“What appealed to me about *The Pardoner’s Tale* was the sense of menace. You never see the nasty deeds. It’s a feeling of unease rather than real gore, and that seems all the more disturbing to me. A great deal of that will come across visually. It’s a tough script to read, but once you start visualising it there are all sorts of clues as to what’s really going on. We drop in clues about what a bad guy Arty is, and there are all sorts of hints about the girl’s

character, about what she really is and what she’s doing to the boys.”

Arty’s self-absorption, and his lust for power, seem to Miller to stem directly from profound mental disturbance. “He’s a very strange character, hard to pin down. He’s undeniably forceful and clearly dangerous, but he’s also one of those rather pathetic people who just bounce around from day to day – he doesn’t have very much going on in his life. Arty creates all his problems and paranoias.

“There’s the whole question of his relationship with his parents. He’s decided that they’re casting him out of the family home, but in fact we see that they’re actually quite nice people and any rejection is entirely in Arty’s head. Unfortunately, he’s

intelligent as well as mad and so he can lead others less clever than he is astray. Intelligent and mad – that’s a very dangerous combination.”

The most demanding scene in *The Pardoner’s Tale* was the opening, in which Arty stands in front of Rochester Cathedral declaiming lines from *Richard II* while his cronies pass among the crowd picking pockets. “We had to do it over and over again to get all the angles right, and after several hours of that I was losing my voice. It was a real performance, not just for the crew but also for anyone who happened to be passing by. Apparently, one of the passers-by turned to her friend and said ‘That’s not Chaucer, that’s Shakespeare! Oh dear, they’ve got it wrong.’”

The Pardoner’s Tale came along straight after Miller had finished playing the lead role in *Byron*, BBC Two’s dramatisation of the poet’s life. “I was a bit dubious about going straight into another TV thing, but I was hooked straight away on reading Tony’s script. In a way, it’s quite similar to *Byron*, even though the period and the setting are very far apart. They both have a grainy feel. *Byron* was a very charming man, with a great sense of humour, but he was also very single-minded and selfish. It’s another of those characters that seem lovely on the surface, but as soon as you start digging around you find that he’s not quite as nice as he seems.”

Miller was stuck in *Byron* mode for weeks after the main filming finished. “I knew there were going to be some re-shoots so I had to keep my hair long and stay out of the sun so that I remained pale enough. Then I was straight into *The Pardoner’s Tale*, which was mercifully short – only three weeks for an hour-long film.

“As soon as it was over I was desperate to get away. I love to travel anyway, but after a job like that I really needed to go somewhere new and just clear my head. So I took off on my motorbike, a Ducati 748, and rode down through the Pyrenees to Valencia and then over to the Balearics. I met up with a few people when I was down there, but mostly I was on my own, just me and my bike. That’s a great thing for me – sometimes I just have to disappear.”

Miller is currently auditioning for a few jobs and has a Hollywood thriller, *Mindhunters*, ready for release. “Other than that there’s nothing. I have no great desire to go back to Hollywood. I lived out there for two years when I was married [to Angelina Jolie], but I moved back to London six years ago and I have no intention of going back to America. This is home and this is where I intend to stay.”

