SURVIVING PICASSO (1996) film review

John A. Walker (copyright 2009)

In Nazi-occupied Paris in 1943, Françoise Gilot (b. 1921), a young beautiful aspiring painter from an upper middle class French family, met the Spanish painter Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), the most famous artist of the twentieth-century. Despite the large difference in their ages – 40 years - and the fact that Gilot knew Picasso was a notorious womaniser (he regarded women as either goddesses or doormats), they started an affair that lasted a decade and had two children (Claude and Paloma). Eventually, in late 1953, Gilot left Picasso and some years later she wrote, with the art critic Carlton Lake, a frank memoir of the affair entitled *Life with Picasso* (1964). (1) Three times Picasso resorted to law in attempts to suppress it because he was upset by the exposure of his private life. According to one of Picasso's biographers, the book – which proved to be a bestseller - unfairly portrayed him as 'a small man, ill-tempered, unkind, self-indulgent and essentially weak'. (2) However, it was also a valuable record because it described his art and ideas in some detail.

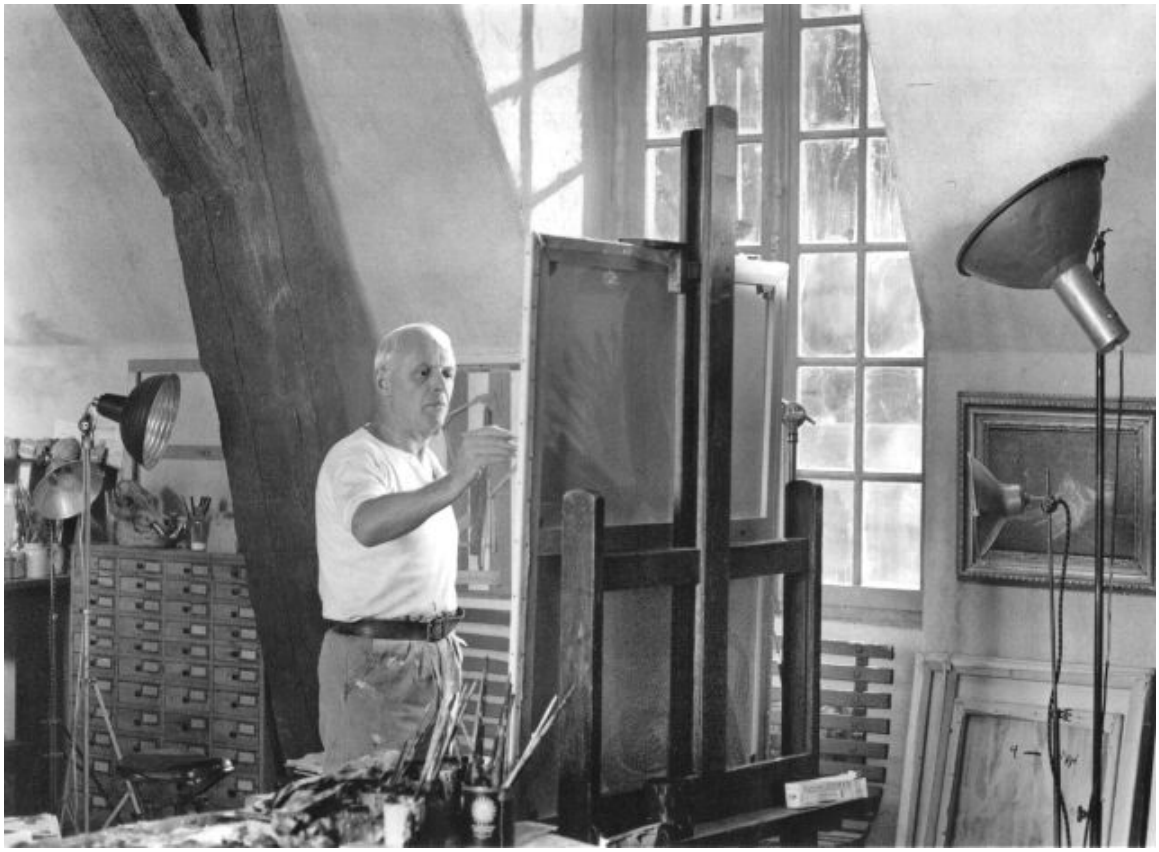
***Surviving Picasso* is a Technicolor film which tells the story of the relationship from Gilot's point of view. It contains some voice-overs from her character as if the film was a documentary. However, for copyright reasons the film's screenplay, written by Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, was not based directly on the Gilot and Lake book but one written by Arianna Stassinopoulos Huffington entitled *Picasso: Creator and Destroyer* (1988). (3) (Gilot at first gave the film her approval but later**

changed her mind.) During her research, Huffington interviewed many people who had known Picasso including Gilot who provided additional reminiscences to those in the 1964 memoir. Huffington's book was intended to shatter the romantic legend of Picasso by showing that he was a sadist who 'regularly abused one mistress for sexual thrills, beat up another until she was unconscious, and enjoyed holding a lighted cigarette to the cheek of a third' (that is, Gilot). In the film, Picasso is not depicted as that violent but we do see Gilot strike him across the face for leaving her alone for three weeks.

***Surviving Picasso* was produced by Merchant Ivory Productions/Wolper Productions at a cost of around $17 million and distributed by Warner Bros. Merchant/Ivory, that is, the producer Ismail Merchant and the director James Ivory, plus the screenwriter Jhabvala, is a creative collaboration that began in the 1960s. The trio are noted for their high quality, period costume dramas often adapted from classic novels. They normally cast gifted actors and employ the same team of technical staff. Their intelligent, serious, well-crafted films have won awards and been highly praised but also dubbed, by British director Alan Parker, 'the Laura Ashley style of filmmaking'.**

Ivory was born in Berkeley, California in 1928 and has an interest in the visual arts that dates back to his youth when he majored in Architecture and the Fine Arts at the University of Oregon. At that time – 1946-51 – he recalls, even in Oregon, 'Picasso was king'. Picasso as a man, artist and legend had also fascinated David L. Wolper, the American co-producer, for many years. Indeed, Wolper collects sculptures by the artist.

Sir Anthony Hopkins, an accomplished and versatile stage and screen actor who was born in Wales in 1937 but who is now an American citizen played Picasso. He is best known, of course, for his role as the serial killer Hannibal 'The Cannibal' Lecter. Hopkins enjoyed sketching as a child and his first job after leaving college was for the Arts Council as a stage manager but otherwise he evinces little interest in art. Although Hopkins is not Spanish, once equipped with a dark tan, close-shaven haircut and dark contact lenses, he looked like Picasso in his sixties and gave a spirited performance as the charming but egotistical sacred monster.



Still from Surviving Picasso. Hopkins as Picasso in his studio. Image may be subject to copyright.

Natascha McElhone (aka Natasha Taylor), a British actress born in London in 1971

and trained at the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art, made her screen debut in the role of Gilot. The part called for someone who was attractive, fresh and self-possessed. McElhone has a striking face with a prominent bone structure that would have surely appealed to the sculptor in Picasso. Other British actors played minor roles: Bob Peck (Gilot's tyrannical and brutal businessman father), Joan Plowright (Gilot's loving grandmother), and Joss Ackland (the French painter Henri Matisse).



Still from Surviving Picasso. Natascha McElhone as Gilot in Matisse's studio. Image may be subject to copyright.

In 1946, Picasso persuades Gilot to live with him. She then discovers how complicated his private life is, the extent to which he is still involved with his first wife, mistresses and offspring. Picasso compels Gilot to meet his embittered ex-lover Dora Maar (Julianne Moore) to prove their affair is over, but he still visits another

mistress Marie-Thérèse Walter (Susannah Harker) and their child Maya regularly (Walter eventually committed suicide) and his Russian-born wife Olga (Jane Lapotaire), now deranged, pesters them. We even witness, in flashback sequences, how Picasso first saw Olga Koklova dancing with Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes* and, after their marriage, the bourgeois lifestyle they lived for a time. In another flashback sequence, we see Picasso in 1937 painting *Guernica* in the presence of Dora and Marie-Thérèse. When the latter tells Picasso he must chose between them, he says he likes them both and they must fight it out whereupon they engage in a physical struggle. The irony, of course, is that Picasso encourages a fight while he is painting a picture indicting human aggression.

Gilot thinks she is strong enough to cope with Picasso's domineering, manipulative and selfish behaviour but eventually becomes worn down and when she realises that Picasso has found a new lover - Jacqueline Roque (Diane Venora) - she finds the strength to leave him. The narrative, however, does not end on a sour note because Picasso and Gilot agree to remain friends, and she admits how much she has gained and learned from living with him. In the final scenes, Gilot rides a horse around an arena to open the first bullfight held in Vallauris. (Picasso arranged this honour and saw himself as the symbol of the bull and Gilot as the symbol of the horse ritually confronting one another.) Sitting alongside the artist in the grandstand was his latest mistress Jacqueline Roque (who was to become his second wife).

Picasso was a man of contradictions. For instance, he could be very generous but, despite his wealth, Picasso was sometimes stingy with money. Gilot claims he does not give her any for herself and the two children, and so she needs to sell her

paintings to survive. His long-term assistant Jaime Sabartés (Peter Eyre) also complains about Picasso's meanness and we witness Picasso callously sacking a chauffer who has served him faithfully for 25 years.

When Gilot informs Picasso she is leaving him, he cruelly remarks that as a painter she has only the facility of a schoolgirl and that his dealer will never give her another exhibition. However, he also blubbers like a child and pleads with her to stay. In fact, as a website devoted to her reveals, the real Gilot did manage to establish a career for herself as a painter and book illustrator, and she found a husband.

Scenes in which about twenty people impatient to see Picasso are keep waiting while the artist has breakfast in bed reveals the artist's fame, wealth and power, and the pressure of the demands made upon him. Among the crowd are two dealers, the German Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler and the American Samuel Kootz, who are competing to acquire the artist's latest works. Picasso is shown taking pleasure in playing them off against one another in order to squeeze higher prices from them. Poor artists may well relish this episode because it depicts an artist treating dealers imperiously.

In other scenes, we see Picasso painting in his studio while explaining the mysteries of the creative process to Gilot. He compares himself to God and claims they both create a range of new disparate things and hence neither has a single style; he also admits they have both made mistakes. Many of Picasso's views on art are well known and so his commentary sounds plausible if a little forced. Picasso's politics – his membership of the Communist Party – receives short shrift. We

observe him on a visit to Poland being wined and dined, but also criticised for his art and petty bourgeois individualism by a Party functionary. His visit to England in 1950 to attend a Peace conference in Sheffield would have been worth including.

One of the film's pleasures is Luciana Arrighi's production design. Set mostly in Paris, the cafés, streets, cluttered studios and costumes look remarkably authentic. Shooting also took place in the South of France and in Pinewood Studios, West London. Picasso's heirs, via Succession Picasso in Paris, control reproduction rights to his art. They refused the producers permission to film genuine Picassos and tried to prevent the film being made; consequently, the producers had to film in France surreptitiously and to employ a professional American artist Vernon Witham (b. 1925, Eugene, Oregon) to create half-finished look-alikes and simulations of Picasso's paintings. (4) (Witham had attended the University of Oregon where he had befriended Ivory.) Rowan Joffee, James Gemmill and Michel Imbert contributed additional paintings while Bruno Pasquier-Desvignes supplied sculptures, The Potter Pelou ceramics and Marilyn Reynolds and Franklin Tartaglione provided drawings. As Ivory rightly pointed out, it was absurd for the heirs to complain afterwards about the presence of 'poor fakes' in the film when they had stopped him filming originals. In Ivory's view, the fakes were not that bad either. In the cases of Braque and Matisse their respective estates gave permissions and so original paintings and collages by them were filmed and so were the stained glass windows Matisse had designed for the Chapel of the Rosary at Vence. Picasso and Gilot tour the Chapel and then visit Matisse's studio in Nice, which prompts conversations about art and religion, and the differences between the aesthetics of

Matisse and Picasso, and their contrasting attitudes to women. (The real Gilot was to become a friend of Matisse and some of her paintings are indebted to his style.) The banter between the two artists well illustrates their friendship and rivalry.

Most film reviewers praised Hopkins's vigorous performance even though some thought him 'too English' but they found McElhone's inadequate. The film itself divided the critics but most judged it a mediocre and routine Merchant/Ivory production. 'A curiously pointless trawl through the great painter's love life' was one verdict.

Although this film's heroine was an artist, her work hardly featured and the biopic would not have been made had she not surrendered herself to a great male artist. Nevertheless, the story of Gilot's struggle to retain her identity and to regain her independence will appeal to anyone with feminist sympathies and anyone interested in the dynamics of intimate relationships between famous powerful men and the women they attract and seek to dominate.

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1 **F. Gilot & C. Lake, *Life with Picasso*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).**

2 **Patrick O'Brian, *Pablo Ruiz Picasso: A Biography*, (London: William Collins & Sons, 1976), p. 383.**

3 **Arianna Stassinopoulos Huffington, *Picasso: Creator and Destroyer* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1988).**

4 An account of the difficulties involved in filming in France and with Picasso's heirs is given in Quentin Falk, *Anthony Hopkins: The Biography*, (London: Virgin Books, 2004), pp. 211-16.

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