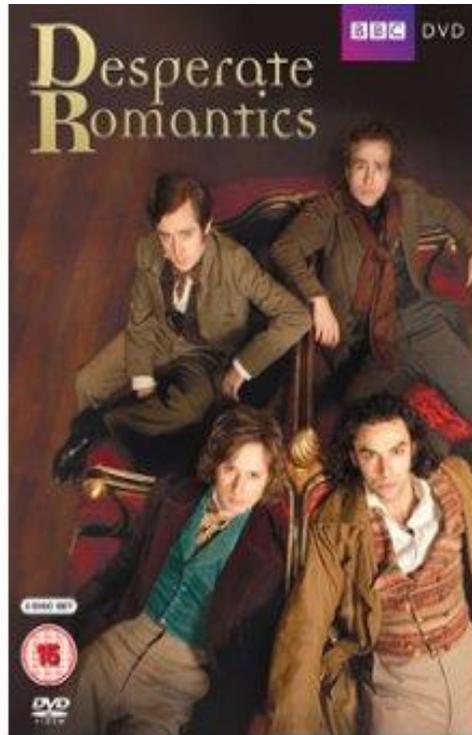


## Desperate Romantics



### Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill

Produced by Ben Evans, Franny Moyle, Hilary Salmon and Angie Daniell (line producer). Directed by Paul Gay & Diarmuid Lawrence. Series created by Peter Bowker & Franny Moyle. Written by Peter Bowker. Based on the book *Desperate Romantics: The Private Lives of the Pre-Raphaelites* by Franny Moyle. Cinematography by Alan Almond & Kieran McGuigan. Production Design by Melanie Allen. Editing by David Head & Paul Knight. Music by Daniel Pemberton. Art Direction by Paul Ghiradani. A BBC Production. Original television release July 2009. DVD version release 2010. Rated MA for strong sex scenes and nudity. Length: 368 minutes in six episodes; This DVD version also contains a behind the scenes featurette and an interview with executive producer and writer Fanny Moyle.

Pictures are from the Public Domain

## Cast

Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Aidan Turner

Fred Waters: Sam Crane

Holman Hunt: Rafe Spall

John Everett Millais: Samuel Barnett

Lizzie Siddal: Amy Manson

Effie Gray: Zoë Tapper

John Ruskin: Tom Hollander

Annie Miller: Jenny Jacques

Jane Burden: Natalie Thomas

Mr Siddal: Ian Puleston-Davies

Mrs Siddal: Polly Kemp

Mr Stone of the Royal Academy: Phil Davis

Charles Dickens: Mark Heap

Fanny Cornforth: Rebecca Davies

William Morris: Dyfrig Morris

Edward Burne-Jones: Peter Sandys-Clarke

Ruskin's mother: Georgie Glenn

Other characters appear in one or two episodes

## Review

How much a viewer will like or dislike this series depends on if they want to know more about the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood or if they want to be entertained with a well-made and original story. For entertainment value this works as a fine show and is a well-crafted, generally well-acted series. The sets, editing, costumes, photography, the sense of era, the pacing, the skilful interweaving of the love stories with the need to develop careers and the interplay between characters - all these aspects are very well done. The role of women in the Pre-Raphaelite movement has been undervalued in many books, but gets a better treatment here. The sensuality evident in so many of their works emerges in the depiction of their lives. Name-dropping and hagiography are mercifully absent. The Pre-Raphaelites are treated as energetic, self-confident and idealistic, in other words as youth challenging stodgy tradition; exactly how they come across in memoirs and their writings. All this is very fine.

What cannot be so fine is that some of the paintings that appear look like incorrect replicas of famous Pre-Raphaelite pictures. Even worse, the ideas that inspired the brotherhood are not articulated very well. Vague inchoate talk of “truth to nature” and revitalising English art goes around the circle of artists and supporters, but apart from a one or two second shot of a sentimental religious painting with dopey cherubs, the audience does not know what artistic styles they are rebelling against or how their artistic tactics offer an alternative. The brightness of their colours, their extraordinary attention to detail and their mixture of realism and myth were all very different to what their contemporaries did. In this series (except for Hunt’s religious ideas) their inspirations seem to be almost solely beautiful women. This was not so. Their interest in the Medieval, in the worlds of history, myth, magic and folklore, in recreating the sensuality of nature in culture are barely mentioned. With 368 minutes of film in the series, surely five (which in cinematic terms is a long time to talk) could have been spent clarifying their ideas.

The series spends a great deal of its time on Rossetti’s spouting inchoate rebellion and denouncing the world or individuals in it. Some of his sex scenes are overacted. Screen time would have been better spent on developing other important characters who are not depicted.

The trouble really starts if viewers have even a basic knowledge about the Pre-Raphaelites. Those with extensive knowledge will either wince or puzzled, say

‘Who is this meant to be?’ or ‘It did not happen like that!’ They will say that over more things, more times than be accommodated in a review. The errors, misrepresentations, omissions, composite characters and outright fiction deserve an extensive essay and only a few examples can be given here.

*Composites:* Fred Walters did not exist. In the DVD interview Franny Moyle states that he seems something of a composite of two members of the brotherhood who do not exist in this series, the group’s chronicler William Rossetti (Dante’s brother) and the journalist and art critic Frederick George Stephens. An associate, Walter Deverell and the artist Ford Madox Brown are also mentioned as part of the composite. They lived very differently to how Fred the series present’s Fred’s life.

*Omissions:* The original brotherhood had seven members. Apart from Stephenson and Michael Rossetti there were the painter and sketcher James Collinson and the sculptor Thomas Woolner, who soon left for Australia. Collinson resigned after claims that Millais’s painting ‘Christ in the House of His Parents’ was blasphemous. A long scene has Dicken’s giving a harsh and scornful written opinion of this picture as he stands before the painting. Perhaps an addition to that scene could have been where Collinson resigns. That possibility could have emphasised that some people were timid and that the brotherhood’s art was indeed revolutionary for its time – and it could have supplied more detail on how it was revolutionary.

Of course films have to condense and present composites; they cannot easily present multiple characters or go off on tangents and present “what ifs” or “according to this version.” Even so, too much has been lost. Swinburne, Ford Maddox Brown, Arthur Hughes and Frederick Duncan Sandys had much to do with the early brotherhood, often in ways that were important to their development. Often they were directly involved in situations that are depicted here – without even a hint that they existed. Hughes and Swinburne were regularly involved in the painting of the mural shown in the series. Swinburne and Brown were with Rossetti the night he found Lizzie Siddal dead. Brown worked with Rossetti on his art.

Just going by the depictions in this series viewers would never know that there were several Pre-Raphaelite poets. They would also be led to think that even the artistic movement was limited to three men with Morris and Burne Jones as hangers on who did not do much. Each of these two men produced more Pre-Raphaelite art than any of the seven founders. They also kept that style and the

founding ideas alive for decades after Rossetti and Millais had given up expounding the Pre-Raphaelite ideas. The three founders are shown to have some commercial success, but by focusing almost solely on the three initial figures, the way Pre-Raphaelite art successfully spread across England in the 1850s and lasted into the 1920s remains unknown to watchers of the series.

There was much more to the Pre-Raphaelites than we can see here.

*Factual Errors, Misrepresentations and Controversies:*

Annie Miller is depicted as a prostitute and a blackmailer, both have been disputed.

Hunt and Rossetti are depicted have great fun ridiculing Millais's picture 'Bubbles.' It was not painted until 1885, about thirty years or more after the period the film depicts.

Lizzie Siddal's father appears in several scenes from her wedding onwards until after her death two years later. He died about a year before the wedding.

Lizzie Siddal is shown as falsely claiming to be pregnant. She gave birth to a stillborn child months before her death.

The scene where Lizzie posed for Ophelia by lying motionless in a bathtub and thereby nearly dying happened, but this happened differently to what the filmmakers present. *Desperate Romantics* does not mention that she was tubercular, does not specify what nearly killed her and depicts all the candles as still burning when she was found unconscious. Actually the lamps had gone out which was why the water went cold and caused the health problem. Her father did not demand money in compensation, but demanded that Rossetti pay the doctor's bill.

Lizzie is shown as a suicide who left a note. In reality the note was rumoured to exist but was never proven as being real. Her addiction to laudanum, Ruskin's curtailment of his artistic mentoring and Rossetti's unfaithfulness and emotional abuse are depicted as the causes. Her stillborn child and her tuberculosis were major factors in wrecking her health and causing depression, but are not even mentioned. Attempts to aid her recovery from both with a seaside holiday are neither depicted or mentioned. In reality she may have died from an accidental overdose of laudanum, as the coroner stated.



*Lizzie modelling for Ophelia is accurately depicted in these stills.*

One of the last scenes shows Rossetti in their studio, painting a portrait of Lizzie, posing for him one last time – in her coffin. The portrait was of a woman experiencing a moment of religious fervour. As a portrayal of heartless artistic egocentricity this scene stuns: as history it falsifies. The portrait was painted in Europe, about a year after Lizzie's death.

In the last episode the exhumation of Lizzie's body seems to be soon after her death. In reality it was in 1869, seven years later and Rossetti was not present. Although the latter scenes where Lizzie appears with Rossetti her final illness are set over fourteen years after the first scenes, and the last scenes are over twenty years after their story starts, nobody ages, odd.



*The four central characters who formed the brotherhood in 1848. Left to right: Millais, Walters, (a composite) Rossetti and Hunt*

The series gives the impression Rossetti must be an orphan, an exile or somehow a man without a family. In reality his sister Christina was a Pre-Raphaelite poet engaged to James Collinson and his younger brother Michael was the group's chronicler, taking on much of the role given to the fictitious Fred Walters. Rossetti's father was an exiled Italian radical, who did much to encourage D.G. Rossetti's ideas and cultural tastes. Therefore he indirectly influenced the ideas and attitudes of the brotherhood, yet only Dante Gabriel Rossetti makes it into the series.

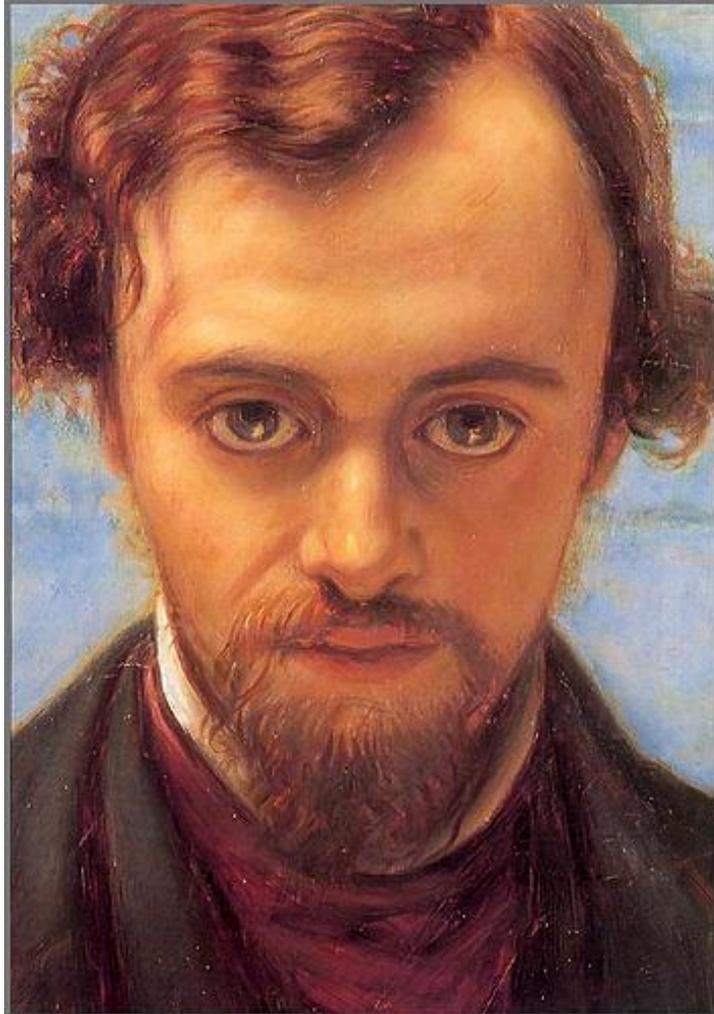
D.G. Rossetti's representation is of a perpetually virile, loud, sedulous, manipulating egocentric. He can be charming when trying to get his own way or when he gets it; petulant to abusive when he does not. More than hints of arrested development and megalomania emerge in his angry outbursts and plans for how art should be. When it comes to fulfilling his sexual desires or getting money or fame he shows less ethics than a sexually frustrated, or very hungry tomcat. Going by photographs, sketches and accounts, the reality must have been different. In history Rossetti emerges as a reclusive, unfocused, somewhat paranoid and hypersensitive personality with high levels of guilt and low levels of energy. Even if this was a later development outside the time frame of *Desperate Romantics* it would have been better to have presented this development. Without it an erroneous idea of Rossetti's life takes hold.

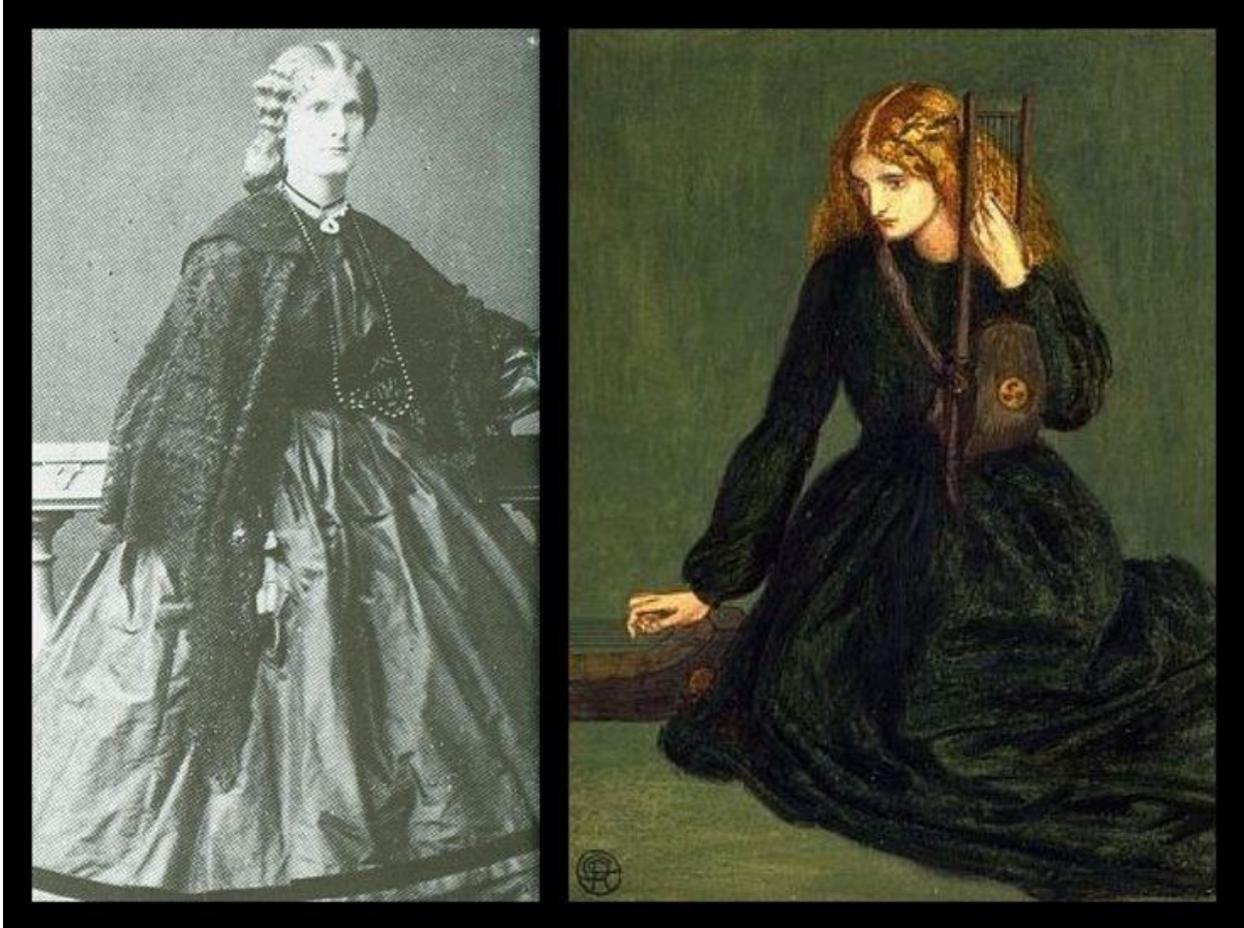
The reasons for the failure of Ruskin's marriage remain uncertain and controversial. *Desperate Romantics* goes with one version and omits Ruskin's claims that his in laws encouraged the marriage for financial reasons and that he found this alienating. Ruskin is shown deliberately encouraging a romance between his wife and Millais, but what evidence exists for this viewpoint? In reality the romance between Effie Ruskin and Millais blossomed while they were on holiday in Scotland with Ruskin and other family members and friends, not in Ruskin's London townhouse. Almost endless Scottish rain forced them together in a small cramped house, while Ruskin was away, not Ruskin's wiles.

### *John Ruskin and Rossetti*



*Dante Gabriel Rossetti as depicted by Holman Hunt in the 1850s. This suggests a very different individual to the energetic even frenetic extrovert in the series*





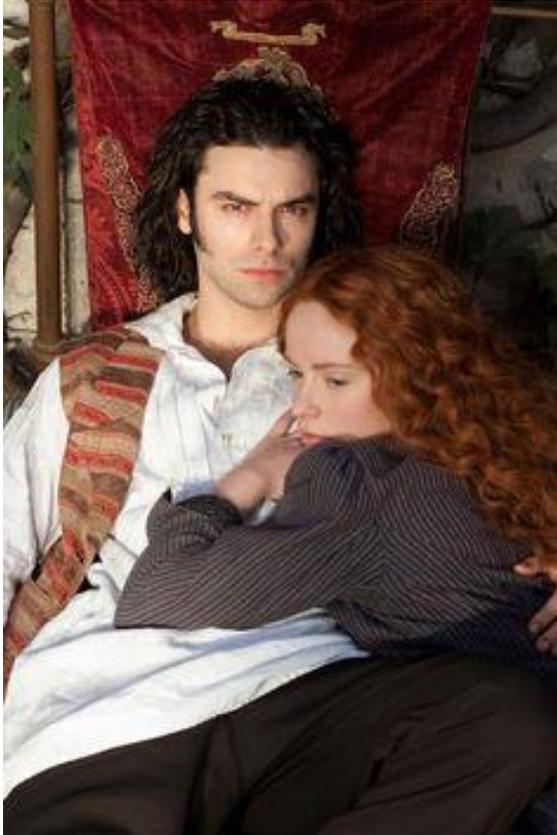
*Annie Miller as depicted by Rossetti and in a contemporary photograph. She does not look like the vulgarian of the series in either. The still below shows the skillful use of lighting and sets in the series*



*The four couples the series revolves around: Effie Gray and John Ruskin*



*Effie and John Everett Millais*



*Rossetti and Lizzie Siddal*



*Holman Hunt and Annie Miller*

*Successes:*

As the still below shows *Desperate Romantics* gets much right, especially with difficult and complex sections. Holman Hunt was a complex man divided against himself, especially in youth. Rebellious, obsessive and energetic, he was simultaneously drawn to the opposing worlds of sensuality and religion. Paintings such as ‘The Hireling Shepherd,’ ‘The Awakening Conscience,’ and ‘The Scapegoat’ reflected morality in their themes and sensuality in their presentation. Others such as ‘The Lady of Shalott’ just present sensuality – when Hunt finished painting it nearing eighty. The series does present this contradictory character in a complex and believable way.

Amy Manson’s portrayal of Lizzie Siddal works so effectively that viewers can easily forget how good her acting is. Her character goes from being a milliner’s assistant to artist’s model to artist. Rossetti uses all of his charm to seduce her and Ruskin uses his charm and wealth to make her his artistic protégé. She fails to heed warnings about both men. This seems not so much because she is naïve, but because she desperately wants to better herself, to develop her talents and wants to be a success in the artistic world. Manson vividly but without affectation portrays her gradual descent from happiness as an emerging artist into drugs and vexed despair as her career, health and marriage simultaneously falter.

Amongst the other actors who do well in difficult scenes are Zoë Tapper as Effie Ruskin and Tom Hollander as John Ruskin. Today Ruskin seems almost a forgotten figure outside of those who study architecture, nineteenth century radical politics or British fiction of the time or its art. In the nineteenth century he was a towering figure, dominating much of English culture. His stature was level with that of Dickens, Carlyle, Wordsworth and Tennyson. As *Desperate Romantics* correctly shows, his support or criticism could make or break an artist. As Zoë Tapper also shows, in the privacy of their bedroom the intellectual giant was pathetic as a man. The scenes which show their sexual problems could have easily been either prurient or euphemistic, but are retrained and dealt with maturely and with a realism that accurately conveys how nineteenth century people in a loveless marriage and with those personal problems might react.

The different fates of the four artists shows the effects time can give. Lizzie dies from self-destruction. Hunt buries himself in religion. Millais becomes a worldly success at the cost of his ideals and for Rossetti, loneliness and a hunger for the impossible devour his life.

There are many worthwhile aspects in this series, but it can at best be treated only as an introduction to those who want to know the reality of the Pre-Raphaelites. In the accompanying documentary the film makers make it clear that they did not want to *Desperate Romantics* to be a documentary. They used known facts, composites and their own fictions to make an entertainment. They succeeded in that and that remains the best way to view *Desperate Romantics*.

\*



*Opposites attract: Lizzie and Rossetti*



