

Albert Nobbs

This could be called a “chamber film,” adapting the word from chamber music, which implies intimate music played in a salon setting and often melding several solo instruments into a seamless harmony. The modest but very touching “Albert Nobbs” definitely qualifies as a chamber film, with its intimacy of setting, its gentle tone, and its bevy of actors serving as the concordant instruments in a Victorian dance of stilled passions.

Albert Nobbs (Glenn Close) is a middle-aged woman living a life-long lie: she works as a male waiter in the restaurant of the turn-of-the-century Morrison Hotel in Dublin, a life she has chosen because it suits her and constitutes civilized behavior. Her/his (that’s the last time I’ll use that locution in the review) motivation is suggested only once and obliquely. It appears she was the victim of sexual abuse as a young woman and retreated thereafter into a protected, sexless condition. She has always lived alone, done her job without fault, strived not to stand out, and to cover up her true identity.

Albert does have a dream, however. She desires to be her own boss and has hoarded her salary over 30 years to put money down on a “nice” tobacco shop. Hers has been, of necessity, a life of routines carefully crafted—until she encounters two very different women. One is the lovely hotel maid, Helen Dawes (Mia Wasikowska), who Albert feels needs rescuing after being treated badly by her lover, a handsome bouncer named Joe Mackin (Aaron Johnson). Another is the burly Mr. Page (Janet McTeer), who is contracted to paint the hotel, and spends a night, of necessity, in Albert’s spartan bed. It is Page who later reveals to Nobbs that she, too, is a woman passing as a man. Moreover, she has found a mate to live with her, another woman who accepts her as “male.”

These encounters lead Albert to dream more broadly, to, perhaps, find—as Page has done—a companion who shares one’s hope for a “decent” life. Nobbs senses that she needs domesticity, the warmth of a hearth with another. To that end, she asks the impressionable Helen to go on walks as a pleasant, non-threatening alternative to her physical entanglements with Joe, who desperately wants to leave Ireland. The relationship with Helen warms, enough for Albert to show her the site of her dreamed-of shop and even to talk of marriage.

However, the tender prospects for Albert Nobbs come up against the reality of Helen’s unwanted pregnancy, the latter’s discord with Joe, and a physical confrontation that strains frail Albert to the breaking point.

The film is a one-woman band, with Glenn Close’s fingerprints on every frame. She played the character, created in a short story by Irish writer George Moore, in a theater production in the 1980’s and then worked for years to get this film made. She produced the film, cast herself as the lead, co-wrote the screenplay (along with John Banville and Gabriella Prekop), and even wrote the lyrics to the poignant closing song accompanying the end credits! While it was not reported, she probably swept the set and catered lunch.

As the diffident Albert, the otherwise charismatic Close loses herself in the role (and the make-up) just as Nobbs lost herself in her male identity. She plays a cowed, super-

cautious character, but she finds ways to bring Albert both a wiry alertness and trussed-up dignity. It is the kind of transformative role that awards' committees love, and the American Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences has already nominated her for an Oscar.

Close is well seconded by the rest of her cast. Anglophiles will recognize Irish actors Brendan Gleeson and Brenda Fricker and the English Pauline Collins as respectively, the gruff Dr. Holloran, the tart cook Polly, and the smarmy hotel manager Mrs. Baker, all worthy featured roles. I would especially single out the wonderful Janet McTeer, a strong, dominating presence as Page. My guess is that many filmgoers who don't know McTeer (and her penetrating eyes) will not be aware of her as a woman until she stunningly reveals herself to Albert. Mia Wasikowska ("The Kids Are All Right." "Jane Eyre") handles the role of Helen with both spunk and grace, a sweet young thing who knows her mind if not her own future.

This chamber drama works like an extended O. Henry story, told with admirable restraint, its hermetic hotel world limned with care, and its upstairs/downstairs personnel portrayed with acuity. It may seem too precious for some and too languid to others, but "Albert Nobbs," ably directed by Rodrigo Garcia ("Mother and Child"), should reward those who persevere with a character to remember.

(The film is rated "R" and runs 113 minutes)

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