

EMMA.

Jane Austen has proved in the last 25 years to be a boon to filmmakers, who have produced sundry versions of all her novels. One of her droller works is “Emma,” from 1815, about the vagaries of misconstrued romance in Regency England. It has seen a number of film and TV versions, the most surprising being the comic adaptation “Clueless” (1995), set in Beverly Hills, the most starry being the 1996 film starring Gwyneth Paltrow, as well as an ambitious 2009 British mini-series. Now comes a fresh take, the first feature by a music video maker, Autumn de Wilde.

Many filmgoers will know the basics of the novel (and the film, which is oddly titled “EMMA.”). Austen introduces Emma Woodhouse (Anya-Taylor Joy) to us as “handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and a happy disposition.” Her story takes place in the fictional village of Highbury and revolves around the genteel relationships of several families in the region. Well-born, Emma is also smug and spoiled and feels she has the right to meddle in people’s lives, particularly in finding appropriate matches for a local eligible woman—the low-born Harriet Smith (Mia Goth). But in her scheming, Emma greatly overestimates her own matchmaking abilities while being oblivious to a neighborhood suitor, Mr. George Knightly (Johnny Flynn) right before her eyes. So how does this account of this decorous comedy of manners come off?

Perhaps surprisingly from a crafter of videos, Ms. De Wilde’s take is strikingly traditional and fully in period. Locations (gorgeous Yorkshire), costuming and hair (lavish), high-toned dialogue (much straight from the novel), and period music (a mix of Mozart, church tunes, and traditional airs)—all combine to present a world that Austen herself might recognize. Since this is a relatively “comic” Austen novel, the opening tone of the picture is flighty and twee, but it develops a more poignant mood as the miscues of Emma come to affect people’s lives.

Typical of the Austen novel, a parade of assorted characters spins before our eyes, and several of them stand out in this film version. Among others, the dependable Bill Nighy does a nice turn as Mr. Woodhouse, Emma’s father and resident curmudgeon, forever feeling drafts. Josh O’Connor, as the unctuous curate Mr. Elton, is perfectly oily as he fails to win Emma’s affections. Miranda Hart (remembered as Chummy from “Call the Midwife”) is a lovely Miss Bates, an earnest but gauche woman who receives disdain from the haughty Emma.

Mia Goth as the pining Harriet is mainly pitiful at first, so desperate is she an acolyte of the accomplished Emma. Later, she matures as a richer character, achingly searching for a love match. Goth’s late dialogues with Joy are a pivot point of the drama. Sturdy, direct Johnny Flynn may seem too contemporary for the part; his quizzical look and unkempt mop of hair suggest a rock singer (turns out he does front an English folk band!), but he acquits himself well as a reluctant but thoughtful suitor.

Young Anya-Taylor Joy is on new cinematic ground here. She made a strong impression as the lead in the 17th C. Goth drama “The Witch” (2015) and has since appeared in two horror thrillers. Her Emma is far removed from those roles, and she shows she can handle period rom-com quite capably. Her look—porcelain skin and marble eyes—certainly gibes with the character, and she handles moods both shallow and spirited with poise and care. For now, she will do nicely as the latest EMMA.

(The film opened February 28, is rated "PG," and runs 122 mins.)

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