

## Far from the Madding Crowd

“Far from the Madding Crowd,” published in 1874, was Thomas Hardy’s first fully successful novel and remains one of his most consistently read works. The novel has been adapted into a feature film twice (50 years apart) as well as a TV drama in the 1990’s. The splashy—if overlong—1967 big-screen version will be remembered by some for its starry cast of Julie Christie and her three studs, Alan Bates, Peter Finch and Terence Stamp. This latest version comes with a tight re-working of the novel (by David Nicholls), a handsome display of the English countryside (away from that “madding crowd” of Oliver Goldsmith’s), and stately, somewhat impassive direction by Thomas Vinterberg.

The story outline will be familiar to many and will not be much elaborated here. Independent and headstrong Bathsheba Everdene (Carey Mulligan) inherits a sheep farm in Dorset around 1870 on the southwest coast of England and, against local custom, takes on the management of the farm herself. More than eligible, she attracts three very different suitors: Gabriel Oak (Matthias Schoenaerts), a sheep farmer who comes to work for her and becomes indispensable, Sgt. Frank Troy (Tom Sturridge), a dashing but reckless soldier at the local garrison, and William Boldwood (Michael Sheen), a prosperous and mature bachelor farmer who is Bathsheba’s neighbor.

Early on, Gabriel proposes to Bathsheba but is rejected yet stays on with her as a loyal employee. She is then pined for by the farm owner Boldwood, and finally swept off her feet by the audacious Sgt. Troy. An impetuous marriage to the irresponsible Troy follows, but it quickly collapses amidst scandal and apparent suicide after which both Boldwood and Gabriel continue to vie for her affections until the turnabout ending.

This ample Victorian novel must of needs be condensed considerably to fit into a two-hour film. Screenwriter David Nicholls is a logical man for the job, having written classic adaptations before, including a version of “Great Expectations” (2012) as well as a TV mini-series of Hardy’s own “Tess of the D’Urbervilles” (2008). He retains most of the telling dramatic incidents of the film (often with Oak saving Bathsheba’s livelihood) and keeps the pace efficient but simply doesn’t have time to develop the characters fully—especially the feckless Troy.

Carrie Mulligan’s Bathsheba must, of course, carry the load for this picture, and she bears up well. Her look and demeanor, which combines youthfulness and earnestness, is right for a character who must exhibit both hearty spunk and mature feistiness. She seems like the vision of an independent, slightly vain, yet spirited woman that Hardy wanted to create. When she says early on to poor Gabriel “I don’t want to have someone tame me,” you believe it.

Her triumvirate of suitors is variably effective. Young Sturridge has the thinnest role in this version and, thus, lacks dimension and believability. You can’t believe he is the trigger for tough Bathsheba’s first passion. Belgian actor Matthias Schoenaerts is adequate as the dogged, near-saintly Gabriel, as stolid as the farm animals he handles with ease. Perhaps too stolid. Michael Sheen fares best as Boldwood, the subtlest courtier of the batch, a lonely, mournful man who recognizes that the full-blooded Bathsheba could fully enliven his empty manse. Sheen agonizes beautifully in his urgent

but clumsy appeals to her and makes you feel his pangs, especially at one trembling exchange over whether Bathsheba might marry him for practical reasons rather than for love.

One encomium the director and his cinematographer Charlotte Bruus Christensen do deserve is their framing “Far from the Madding Crowd” in exquisite Dorset/Dorchester locations, the very hills and seashores of which Hardy wrote about so often. That landscape, and numerous scenes of the hard field work Bathsheba and her farmers undertake, gives an authenticity to the picture that takes it beyond mere “Masterpiece Theater” prettiness.

*(The film runs 119 min. and is rated “PG-13.”)*

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