

Genius

Individual creators creating—that most interior of acts—has always been difficult, if not impossible, to treat in the cinema, which best exhibits a tactile reality in a world of movement, not the inner workings of the mind. Years and years of biopics about famous writers, composers, scientists, and artists prove this again and again. A recent example: “The Man Who Knew Infinity,” wherein the film can only mimic a gifted mathematician’s wrestling with his visions. With the new film “Genius,” we are in this realm again with a story of a most flamboyant writer, Thomas Wolfe, whose baroque prose flowed from him like water from a faucet. We see the novelist, knit-browed, writing furiously, but it’s an image that is a parody of the creative act.

“Genius,” however—written by John Logan and directed by Michael Grandage—does have a different angle on the writing life: the story is as much about an editor, the renowned Maxwell Perkins, as it is about Wolfe, and the filmmakers have the luxury of showing the creative process as a plausible *action* between two protagonists, a recipe for drama.

In the person of Perkins, famous in the 1920’s as the editor of both F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway at Scribner’s publishing house, we have the redoubtable Colin Firth, a cool Englishman playing an equable American intellectual who finds a massive sheaf of papers on his desk titled “O Lost” and, sloughing into it, finds sparks of merit. That reading extends to his train commute, on his walk home, and even into the dinner table, where Perkins forgets to take his omnipresent fedora off.

He calls in the author, the 29-year-old Thomas Wolfe (Jude Law), a fount of energy and verbosity, full of himself and his work. Wolfe is fueled not only by his own outsized ego, but also by his older lover, Aline Bernstein (Nicole Kidman), a rebellious painter who has pushed him to publish. Perkins agrees to tame his wild novel-in-the-making, and the two struggle and argue and produce “Look Homeward, Angel,” Wolfe’s autobiographical debut.

Wolfe’s next opus is delivered in boxes by handcart, but Perkins is able to fashion it into the author’s bestseller, “Of Time and the River.” Ultimately, Bernstein comes to worry about Perkins’ hold over Wolfe which she sees as distancing him from his creativity—and from her. Perkins, of serene temperament, is tested by Wolfe’s demands and grandiosity, and the two head for a literary divorce.

My original comments on creativity on film may stand, but “Genius” succeeds at least in suggesting how another creative act—*editing*—is done. There is one fine sequence where the camera cuts between Perkins stolid face and the page of Wolfe’s manuscript where we see the latter’s florid language briskly chopped by the editor’s red pencil as the sound track intones the words sliced. Wolfe is aghast at the cutting yet finally accepts that his winnowed passage reads better. This is inventive filmmaking because it involves real action over interior musings.

The screenwriter, American Logan, is an experienced hand, having written scripts for major blockbusters (“Gladiator,” “Skyfall”) as well as for more nuanced films (“Hugo”), and he has even assayed the struggle of the artist before in his award-winning “Red,” a two-character play in which a noted artist (Mark Rothko) matches wits with a

neophyte painter. Director Michael Grandage is a noted British stage director who makes his film debut here. His touch with actors is variably proven in "Genius."

Among those actors, Dominic West, as Hemingway, looks strikingly like Ol' Papa, but his appearance is a mere cameo. Guy Pearce does a bit more as the disaffected but sympathetic Fitzgerald, a poignant figure on the skids with lessons for the kid on the rise. The wonderful Laura Linney, as Perkins wife, Louise, doesn't get much to do. Kidman is a one-note harridan as Bernstein, but she is passionate. Jude Law is a big question mark as Wolfe. While one understands that Wolfe was known as a force of nature, Law shows that force with a flailing, over-the-top performance featuring a syrupy Southern accent. Too much.

Still, it may be that Law's performance may just appear exaggerated in contrast to the equilibrium of Firth's measured impersonation of Perkins. His is a nicely balanced take on the confident editor, the calm center for his outsized writers. Even as he appears placid, however, somehow Firth's Max, in small gestures and assured language, emits his own kind of passion, one committed to recognizing and nurturing literary greatness.

Puzzling Note: For a film about one of the most American of writers, the principal cast of "Genius" is made up almost completely of British and Australian actors (Linney being the exception) and was entirely filmed in England...
(The film is rated PG-13 and runs 104 minutes)

(June 2016)