

Guinevere

Guinevere is the sharp directorial debut of Audrey Wells, a Hollywood screenwriter who wrote *The Truth About Cats and Dogs* and *George of the Jungle*. Neither of those comedic efforts prepare one for the far subtler nuances of *Guinevere*.

Connie Fitzpatrick (Stephen Rea), is a warmed-over radical who collects impressionable young women, not as mere conquests, but “because he has so much to teach them.” His latest charge is Harper Sloane (Sarah Polley), an unsure young woman just short of 21 who is intimidated by her household of high powered lawyers. The two meet at Harper’s older sister’s nuptials, where Connie is the wedding photographer. Intrigued by this apparently worldly, older man--an *artiste* to boot--Harper secretly moves in with Connie to “experience Life.” This is potentially cliché material which the smart script, and especially the two lead actors, mine for a much richer lode.

While enamored of the attentions she is finally getting for herself, Harper also comes to realize Connie’s weaknesses. He is, for example, a serial mentor, and calls *all* his “girls” *Guinevere* because he sees himself as a King Arthur whose fair queen (Harper) must eventually leave him for a younger Lancelot. Though Connie has true passion for his charges, he drinks too much, and he’s not as smart or as prominent as he thinks he is. His life’s falling apart somewhat--and so is his bridgework.

Connie’s real comeuppance comes in a terrific scene when Harper’s stern, controlling mother (Jean Smart) discovers their hideaway and confronts Connie with some stinging home truths about his pathetic preying on young women. This verbal assault is far more withering than a dozen dynamite blasts in as many action pictures. Harper must, as all the *Guineveres* do, leave him to grow.

Stephen Rea, a Belfast native who first came to international prominence with *The Crying Game*, is a fine Connie, an old Beat Generation follower who never got the word from Kerouac or Ginsberg to move on. He may use young women, but he feels for them in his way. The rumpled face and Irish lilt also make him attractive enough to appeal to the guileless Harper.

As Harper, Sarah Polley may have found a breakthrough role. In *The Sweet Hereafter* (1997) she was a standout as, again, a young girl smitten by an older man. In the recent *Go*, she was a sullen, shrugging teen caught in a drug game. In *Guinevere*, she perfectly traces the arc of Harper as diffident virgin, blossoming comrade, then hard-headed woman who is ready to take on what’s left of her life. Her lines are true, her body language is great, but her best equipment is a pair of dark blue eyes which seem to take up the top half of her face; they tell us everything about her. A mere 20, Sarah Polley will be worth watching in years to come.

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