

The Hours

A literary work of sophistication and subtlety, "The Hours" presented the stories of three women at a crossroads, living in three different epochs and in three varied settings. The novel, winner of the 1999 Pulitzer prize, was written by Michael Cunningham and now has been brought to the screen by English director Stephen Daldry (*Billy Elliott*) and English playwright David Hare (author of "Plenty" and "Via Dolorosa" among numerous other plays) in a moving, polished adaptation (*opens January 10th*).

The first story treats writer Virginia Woolf (Nicole Kidman), shown quietly committing suicide in 1941 in a Sussex stream as the film opens. That sequence is just a postlude, however, to the episode the film features: that of the disturbed writer beginning her breakthrough novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*, in 1923, all the while fighting her mental illness and testing her long-suffering husband Leonard (Stephen Dillane). As quick as a movie cut, however, we are plunged into the contemporary Manhattan of Clarissa Vaughan (Meryl Streep), an editor who tends to her own live-in partner Sally (Allison Janney), her daughter Julia (Claire Danes), and, most poignantly, to her friend and one-time lover Richard (Ed Harris) a poet dying of AIDS. She is the modern equivalent of her namesake, Clarissa Dalloway, dutifully organizing a party for Richard (who calls her "Mrs. Dalloway"). Then cut just as quickly to Laura Brown (Julianne Moore), a post-war Los Angeles housewife who outwardly seems to have a seamless suburban life with her husband (John C. Reilly) and young boy, but who strains under a vague, unfocused dread which is pushing her away from her family. To complete the Woolfian circle, Laura is currently reading, intently, *Mrs. Dalloway*...

The above barebones description of the plot elements will, I hope, help potential viewers of *The Hours* who have not read the novel. Those coming fresh to the film might, I feel, face some confusion about the three interlinked stories--which are presented without prelude--and could use a bit of help in sorting out the narrative patterns. Once the characters are introduced, however, the film makes each story clear through careful shots of the three actresses and distinctive period details surrounding them. The test, then, is to see where these three lives are going and how and when they will meet up. If all the above description of the narrative strands sounds like heavy going, I can assure that finding the thread through that maze is worth the effort and watching three actresses at the peak of their powers is worth your admission ticket.

Streep's Clarissa is a model of extraordinary naturalistic acting, a presence so real that, if you don't already know this woman, you know someone much like her: the one who calmly takes on the responsibility for others, who always appears in impeccable control, yet who quietly struggles with her own sense of purpose in life. Her scenes with Ed Harris (also superb as the cadaverous poet) are wonderfully freighted with their romantic past, their shared history, and their testy, if loving present. And their last meeting is a shocker.

Julianne Moore as Laura has, quite coincidentally, become the best actress for roles in the immediate post-war era, with this portrayal of a 1949 hausfrau to go along with her stunning performance as a 1950's homemaker in the recently released *Far From Heaven*. Here again, as in the earlier film, she embodies the prim, perky helpmate and mommy who finds herself shaken by sexual urges and an impending

menace which she does not fully comprehend. Here, unlike the previous film, the menace is internal--her own depression--rather than an outside force. It is not a role which allows much development--we see Laura troubled to begin with in her tranquil world--but her struggle with her own demons, worked out in a posh hotel room--is riveting still.

Nicole Kidman as Virginia Woolf has the potential to be the most touching, playing the super-sensitive artist achingly aware of her mental disease, but the actress has the least to do and her part seems to be the most thinly written. Her mood is almost unrelievedly somber, in part to contrast with her lively, "normal" sister Vanessa (Miranda Richardson), and she also has to contend with "performing" one of the least rewarding tasks in movies: the artist bringing to birth a new work. Finally, the lustrous Kidman is decked out with the kind of big schnozz the writer actually sported, making her almost unrecognizable in the role.

The Hours was the working title of Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, a novel which counted down the hours of her life as they would count down the hours to her fabled party. Writer Cunningham neatly appropriated the title for his own creation in homage to the English writer, and Daldry and Hare--and their fine cast--have honored both writers with this intricate and moving motion picture.

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