

The House of the Spirits

The House of the Spirits is based on Isabel Allende's first—and very successful—novel situated in an unnamed South American country (standing in for her native Chile). Aiming at fable or allegory or parable, the film sadly misses all those marks, its stellar cast stuck with a listless script that never really ignites.

Going in, writer-director Bille August faced real challenges in matching the sweeping narrative of Allende's novel and its periodic wisps of magic realism--neither task an easy one for the often literal world of movies. In converting the original Spanish into a final English-language script, much was lost besides the inevitable trimmings of plot and character. What is meant to sound profound or telling in prose comes out simply weak or mundane in the script, and the elements of fantasy are merely tossed off or lost. It may also be that this competent Danish director (maker of the fine *The Best of Intentions* from a script by Ingmar Bergman) lacks cultural empathy with this material.

The cast is a stunning one, but their sterling presence cannot overcome the shaky text. Jeremy Irons, as the family patriarch Trueba, delivers many of his lines with marbles in his gums, and Meryl Streep, as Clara, the pure soul, is given mainly to spacey platitudes. Winona Ryder's Blanca seems miscast as a budding "Latin" revolutionary and callow as the picture's narrator. Only Glenn Close is really watchable--not because her lines are better (they aren't)--but because her Ferula, Trueba's thwarted sister, somehow produces a spinster simultaneously fearful and fearsome.

I cannot recommend *The House of the Spirits* to avid fans of the novel. Its best audience might be folks who have no knowledge whatever of Allende's work and little awareness of South America; they might get into it as elevated soap opera lit up by its stars and placed in romantic settings (filmed in a handsome-looking Portugal). One hoped for so much more, however.

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