

## A Little Chaos

Alan Rickman has had a notable film career for the last 25 years, ever since he played the Euro-snide villain in the original “Die Hard” (1989). In that span, he has directed one film, “The Winter Guest,” starring Emma Thompson, in 1997. “A Little Chaos” is his second directorial effort, a careful and delicate period piece.

The date is 1682 and the place is the France of Louis XIV. The King (Rickman) desires new landscaping at Versailles and hires landscaper André Le Notre (Matthias Schoenaerts) for the job. He, in turn, hires as a contractor the creative but nonconformist gardener Sabine de Berra (Kate Winslet), a working widow who looks to upend standard garden traditions, to create an outdoor theater-fountain on the grounds. After some difficulties, she retains a competent crew headed by Duras (Steven Waddington) and earns the respect of the King’s brother Duc Phillippe d’Orleans (Stanley Tucci). She also begins to fall for Andre.

Andre is estranged from his haughty wife, Madame Françoise (Helen McCrory) who resents Sabine and conspires to ruin her by using hirelings to completely flood her project while it’s under construction. The project is resuscitated however, and a chance meeting of Sabine and the King at a garden supply site bonds the monarch and the commoner together. Her relationship with the King further solidifies, her troubled past is overcome, Françoise is finally unmasked, and Sabine and André find love as her project reaches completion.

This is historical fiction written by one Allison Deegan, with few pretensions to actual events (de Berra is completely made up). The question is whether it works or not as film, which it does in a conventional yet competent way, one cogently built but with few surprises. Rickman may not have flash as a director, but he knows how to work with his fellow actors. You must, too, quickly get past the fact that you are in 17<sup>th</sup> C. France peopled by a cast of mostly Brits with tidy English accents.

Overall, the cast does a creditable job. Matthias Schoenaerts, just seen as the redoubtable Gabriel Oak in “Far from the Madding Crowd,” smolders nicely as Le Notre and shows more range and a more appropriate accent (the actor is, in fact, Belgian) than he did in the earlier film. Helen McCrory overacts as the Madame you love to hate with her supercilious manner and overweening wardrobe. A series of featured roles, with actors like Tucci, Waddington, and Jennifer Ehle are handled adroitly.

Rickman himself is self-deprecating in playing the King as a minor—and appropriately distant—figure. He is wholly imperious when he needs to be but also shows a human dimension when necessary. In an interview, the actor found parallels with his task and the King’s: “The only way I could do it was because in a way, he’s like a director, Louis, so you kind of keep the same expression on your face...like a huge all-encompassing eye that sees everything.”

Kate Winslet, meanwhile, shines brightly as the sincere Sabine. This is a character who is both independent and a pioneer, yet Rickman imposes no facile “contemporary” sheen on the role. Winslet operates with the right amount of deference in a royal setting; while she still “knows her place,” she is willing to forge a new one. Her intelligent visage and her searching eyes combine with a physical spirit (getting her

hands in the dirt) that embodies her strong character. Hers is the kind of performance that Katherine Hepburn specialized in during the early 1940's.

Winslet and Rickman especially glow in the meet-cute garden scene, a triumph of delicate fencing and the blending of sensibilities that outshines many another passage of this sumptuous movie. This duet forms the sweet center of "A Little Chaos."

*(The film is rated "R" and runs 117 min.)*

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