

Mr. Turner

Yet another British film graced by an admirable English actor comes our way this holiday season (2014) with “Mr. Turner,” a partial biography of the singular British painter James M.W. Turner, one of the greatest landscape and marine painters in history. The new film, covering Turner’s life from about 1829 until his death at 76 in 1851, is the work of the noted director Mike Leigh, and it is a winner. “Mr. Turner” finds Mike Leigh exercising an entirely new tone with an entirely new cinematic eye. Known for 30 years for his gritty, offbeat, unscripted slices of contemporary British life, Leigh only once before went into historical territory with his lively and very entertaining investigation into the careers of Gilbert and Sullivan in “Topsy Turvy” (1999). Here he takes on another British icon and invests it with a wondrous look, evoking both Turner’s historical period and his radiant paintings.

Leigh, who as usual wrote his own screenplay, opens with Turner’s story when he is 54 and already long established as a major artist regularly exhibiting at the Royal Academy. We see him living with his venerable father William (Paul Jesson), who mixes his colors, and his put-upon maid Hannah Danby (Dorothy Atkinson), but ready to break his routine by traveling to Margate, a seaside town in East Kent, the better to study the sea.

While there, he adopts an assumed name and finds lodgings with the sprightly widow Mrs. Sophia Booth (Marion Bailey) and finds new visions from the location. The rhythm of the picture shows Turner toggling steadily between his London studio and Margate, his painting turning more and more abstract after his father dies, while he finds a comfortable relationship with Ms. Booth.

The narrative, nicely modulated, takes its time, periodically showing a silhouetted Turner against divine English landscapes, provoking generously a sense of other great painters of his century. These reveries are counterbalanced by bursts of Turnerian activity, ranging from an off-hand sexual encounter with the maid to the Great Man improving his own still-wet painting by smudging it as it hangs in a gallery. The guy was unstoppable: he had himself tied to a ship’s mast to better study the inside of a snowstorm.

Timothy Spall, a splendid character actor who has appeared in dozens of English films and TV series, has had a long association with Mike Leigh, having appeared in four previous pictures for the director (including “Life Is Sweet” and “Secrets and Lies”). Still, he is probably best known as one of the ongoing characters in the Harry Potter series.

Here, as Turner, he presents a peculiar persona, looking like an upstanding gopher given to grunts and raw asides rather than coherent talk (To note: Turner’s guttural delivery will probably give some viewers difficulty in understanding his dialogue). For Leigh, Turner’s genius is in his craft, his eye and his touch, not in any aristocratic bearing or intellectual mien. You might wonder how this kind of rude gnome could be such a master, but other somewhat slovenly figures—like Beethoven—prove the point. Whatever Turner’s real physical nature (no recorded images of him exist), Spall has Leigh’s version down pat. This is a marvelous performance.

(Rated “R”, the film runs 150 minutes.)

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