

## Notes on a Scandal

Judi Dench, now 72, is one of England's most honored actresses, with a lifetime of major classical roles in the most important theatrical companies behind her, and she was made a "Dame" almost two decades ago. While she has made movies since she was in her thirties, her real prominence in international film dates from the mid-1990's when she appeared for the first time as "M" in a James Bond film (1995) and also began a series of prominent appearances in prestige films (*Mrs. Brown*, *Shakespeare in Love*, *Chocolat*, *Iris*, etc.). Now, at the end of 2006, Ms. Dench delivers a cinematic one-two punch, starring in the revived Bond series (in a new version of *Casino Royale*) and playing the lead in the new film intelligently directed by Richard Eyre, *Notes on a Scandal*, which offers her one of her very best film roles.

As prissy history teacher Barbara Covett (the name hints at what's to come), Dench rules her unruly students in a working class district of London with her steely gaze. She also coldly observes the new ceramics teacher Sheba Hart (Cate Blanchett) and is dismissive of her lack of professionalism while being intrigued by her persona. Sheba is married with children yet still begins an ungainly affair with one of her 15-year old charges, Stephen (the very convincing Andrew Simpson). Barbara learns of the affair and informs Sheba, but she promises not to reveal the indiscretion while holding her private information over the younger woman. We learn of her wicked intentions since she consigns them openly to her diary, which Dench reveals in trenchant overvoices.

Barbara becomes as predatory as a spider, weaving a web of little deceptions that bring Sheba more and more into her power. While the plot outline may suggest a steamy old Bette Davis flick, this new film, with a sleek script by Patrick Marber (from a novel by Zoë Heller) and a musical undercurrent by Phillip Glass, constitutes a brilliant effort from director Eyre, full of effective scenes and dramatic, yet believable, surprise.

The film also presents a sophisticated dance for the two superb leads. Blanchett is all nervous tension and fluttering desire, a woman unable to sense how she is being manipulated. It is a performance of aching vulnerability. Dame Judi more than matches her colleague's rashness with an obsessive determination to get what she wants. The apparent certainty in her unyielding face masks a welter of conflicting emotions and yearnings. *Notes on a Scandal* offers a tour-de-force of acting. Watch for both of these ladies to earn acting kudos in the upcoming award season.

(*The film is rated "R" for mature themes and sexuality.*)

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