

On Chesil Beach

Few contemporary British writers are as lauded as Ian McEwan, author of more than a dozen accomplished novels in the last 25 years. He has won a string of major prizes and has had several of his novels converted to the screen, including “The Comfort of Strangers” and “Atonement,” among others. One of his more distinctive works, “On Chesil Beach,” a novella from 2007, has now become a feature film.

The film’s location is a real—and most picturesque—piece of coastal landscape situated at the very tip of Dorset in southern England. The word “chesil” comes from an old English expression meaning “gravel,” or “stony,” the latter the principal feature of the extensive beach itself. That stony appellation could just as well describe the rocky marriage we witness in “On Chesil Beach.”

The time period—1962—is carefully chosen to straddle the end of the post-war recovery (and a more correct, reserved British milieu) and presage the coming of the “Swinging Britain” of new music, new fashions, and a kind of youth quake. Two newlyweds, Florence Ponting and Edward Mayhew, personify this interim period, the first representing a proper, respectable life, and the second depicting a more boisterous, searching one.

Florence (Saoirse Ronan) comes from a well-off Oxford family of formal style and means. Her father Geoffrey (Samuel West) is a domineering and wealthy businessman and her mother Violet (Emily Watson) a stern taskmaster and believer in rules. Florence is prim in manner, diction, and dress and harbors a love of a most formal kind of music, the string quartet. Edward’s family is working class, with a reticent father Lionel (Adrian Scarborough) and a vulnerable mother Marjorie (Anne-Marie Duff) who has suffered brain damage. Edward (Billy Howle) is rough around the edges, scruffy in manner and wardrobe, but bright, with a recent degree in history, and is a lover of the emerging rock-and-roll phenomenon.

Their honeymoon experience is the framing device for “On Chesil Beach.” Over the film’s arc, we see them settling into their room in a mediocre seaside hotel, plainly nervous and tentative about themselves and the night to come. They order dinner in but barely eat and are clumsy in conversation. Their move to the marriage bed is hesitant, awkward, and ends in an incident which drives Florence, disgusted, out to the beach, where Edward later finds her, troubled and chastened. The hotel and beach scenes are punctuated throughout with flashbacks to each one’s backstories, their meeting at a ban-the-bomb event, their growing infatuation, their lives within their respective families, and their personal passions and dreams. Such sequences sample both the genuine affection they have for each other and those elements that separate them.

Young Saoirse Ronan is on a role with a string of splendid performances, including this one. As the prim Florence, she exudes confidence as a musician while being poignantly squeamish about what marriage entails. It’s a tough balance to pull off, but she does. Her co-star Howle likewise balances a portrait of an eager young bloke who struggles to be a gentleman but doesn’t quite know how to pull it off. The two of them dancing on the edge of a sexual cliff is both tantalizing and heartbreaking to watch.

“On Chesil Beach” was directed by Dominic Cooke, an English stage director, who had the veteran US cinematographer Sean Bobbitt (“12 Years a Slave”) at his side.

McEwan himself was the screenwriter. They craft a handsome and touching picture, one which deftly guides a splendid cast, captures wonderfully the flavor of the period, and displays the magnificent strip of Chesil Beach itself from all angles. The filmmakers also realize the filmic equivalent of the couple's sexual dilemma by selectively using telling close ups—of hands and feet and limbs-- that effectively signal both the passion and the stress of their matrimonial encounter. Such parts make the whole the more affecting.

(This film is rated "R" and runs 110 minutes.)

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