

## The Party

Versatile British writer-director Sally Potter has made only eight feature films over 35 years; films that have received radically varied critical assessments. Her gender-bending “Orlando” (1992) was seen as a creative breakthrough, while the period piece “The Man Who Cried” (2000) generally bombed. Her film “Rage” (2009) was a stinker by all accounts, while “Ginger and Rosa” (2012) showed she could handle young actors. It’s been five years since “Ginger and Rosa,” and Potter has now come up with “The Party,” a dark comedy done as a tight one-acter with a kicker ending

The set-up is simple: present day, neat London townhouse, stellar Anglo-American cast as seven friends getting together. Vibrant, politically liberal Janet (Kristin Scott Thomas) is hosting a gathering in her home to celebrate her recent naming as a shadow cabinet minister, though her academic husband, Bill (Timothy Spall), seems stuck to his chair, almost moribund. Janet’s best friend, April (Patricia Clarkson), then arrives with her on/off German boyfriend, Gottfried (Bruno Ganz). A lesbian couple, American academic Martha (Cherry Jones) and her (very pregnant) English partner Jinny (Emily Mortimer), show up with some testy issues between them (Jinny’s carrying triplets). Finally Tom (Cillian Murphy), a haunted, jittery investment banker, arrives without his mysterious wife, who for some reason cannot make the soiree. Champagne is served, but a jaunty atmosphere is undercut by hidden behaviors: Janet is taking clandestine calls from her supposed lover, Tom has a gun and is shooting up coke in the bathroom, April is finally swearing off Gottfried, etc.

Then an out-of-the-blue announcement by the ailing Bill provokes a series of revelations and recriminations, charges and counter-charges that gradually unravel all the attendees at the party, and a night that began with sophisticated chatter gradually veers out of control.

“The Party” is a sardonic chamber piece, with echoes of both a smart Noel Coward play--with its brittle exchanges--and an ominous Harold Pinter work--but with fewer ellipses and more dialogue. You know, going in, that this party is not realistic—the patter is too calculated—and you sense that its bubbly opening portends collective disaster. Watching that slow-motion disaster unfold is precisely the point.

Scott-Thomas is initially enchanting as the perfect hostess who eventually slides into wide-eyed panic. Spall’s arc is the opposite, from infirm lump to emotional arousal. The Jones-Mortimer conversation is tart and touching, and Ganz is mildly amusing even if his life-coach shtick is overdrawn. Murphy’s Tom seems too over-the-top, but he is on drugs after all, while Clarkson is the film’s skeptical center, an acerbic realist who has sworn off political commitment and who gets most of the laugh lines.

Potter was most economical in directing “The Party:” a week’s rehearsal and two weeks shooting fulltime in the house/set. She herself has said that the film was “conceived as a ‘bare-bones’ film turning confinement of place...into a virtue. In a black and white cinematic world without elaborate special effects or multiple changes of location, apparently simple elements have to do the work of storytelling. Everything is exposed. There is nowhere to hide when working with the primary ingredients of story, character, light and dark, voices, and music. The camera peers into the shadows and stares unflinchingly at the faces of these characters in their moment of crisis...”

All I can say is that I hope Potter and her cast had a great time on set—perhaps

boosted by real champagne in their glasses.  
(*The film is rated "R" and runs a brisk 71 minutes.*)

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