

Quartet

It's rare enough for a commercial movie to focus on "old people"—since the core of the American movie-going audience is still 14-to-24 year-old males (with their occasional dates). Still, with Oscar-nominating season among us, one film, "Amour," is receiving some attention, though it is an art film (in French) made by an Austrian/German, with several nominations, including Best Film. It stars—shockingly—two 80-year-olds, and while the film is poignant, it is also immeasurably sad and will hardly draw steady crowds. Another new film, "Quartet," stars actors almost as old but in a much sunnier and blithe mood and with direct appeal to the "Masterpiece Theater" crowd.

"Quartet," not to be confused, by the way, with the recent "A Late Quartet" about a string ensemble, is likewise musically themed as it focuses on a stately English home, Beecham House, for retired opera singers and other professional musicians (Beecham being a famed English conductor). Yet this story of seniors is not so much concentrated on age's frailties and disabilities (though they provide some fodder for jokes) but on the home's denizens' unassailable love of music and their continued enthusiasm for it.

The core of the plot, written by veteran screenwriter Ronald Harwood and based on his 1999 play, concerns the arrival of a once-renowned opera diva Jean Horton (Maggie Smith) and whether she will deign to join a trio of other veteran vocalists to perform in the home's annual gala concert in honor of Giuseppe Verdi's birthday, most specifically, to join them in the quartet from Verdi's "Rigoletto," one of opera's greatest ensemble pieces. The others are Jean's one-time husband and tenor Reginald "Reggie" Paget (Tom Courtenay), the ribald and randy baritone Wilfred "Wilf" Bond (Billy Connolly) and the semi-ditzy mezzo-soprano Cecily "Cissy" Robson (Pauline Collins).

Though revered in the house, Horton remains apart and superior to the others there, evidently frustrated that her once privileged life has come down to a rented room, however handsome, and also concerned about how she will appear—"I don't know what my fans will think," she grumbles. This particular musical soiree, directed by the fustian Cedric Livingston (Michael Gambon), has an extra importance, because the retirement home is destined to be closed for lack of funds, and it is hoped that tickets to this special reunion event can save the place. Horton's presence and the quartet's appearance are deemed important to that end.

"Quartet" is surprisingly directed, with a sure and gentle hand, by Dustin Hoffman, only this great actor's second directorial effort (after an unbilled project in the late 1970's). Patently good with fellow actors, he gets idiosyncratic, pleasurable performances from his principals, all of them past 70 (as is Hoffman himself).

Courtenay's natural decency and tact, Connolly's humbled satyriasis (expressed leaning on a cane), and Collins' innocent naiveté—all are nicely displayed. It is particularly rewarding to see again the great Tom Courtenay—a distinguished actor for more than 50 years—get a part apt for his gentle, thoughtful character, one who has made, he says, "the transition from opera singer to old fart with aplomb." His Reggie shines in a fine scene where he defends, ever so gingerly, the value of opera to a group of skeptical high school students more attuned to rap.

Maggie Smith, now imprinted for so many as the acerbic Dowager Countess in “Downton Abbey,” easily handles the role of Jean Horton, being appropriately haughty yet still appreciative of other figures in her musical world. That musical world, by the way, is one of the pleasures of this picture, with many of the secondary characters in the film actually being classical music pros of a certain age. They must have had a ball given this new exposure.

It should be noted that, in handling opera within the film, Hoffman does not have his veteran actors pretend to sing on camera with dubbed voices, though one genuine opera queen, Gwyneth Jones (also in her seventies), actually delivers a Puccini aria. The final scene shows the actors affably reunited on stage then cuts to a long shot of Beecham House itself as the divine quartet from “Rigoletto” finally rings out, radiantly (from a classic London recording conducted by Richard Bonyngue). A fitting finale in both respects.

(The film is rated PG-13 and runs 98 min.)

(February 2013)