

A Quiet Passion

Terence Davies, a writer/director of sober taste and refinement (“The Deep Blue Sea,” “The House of Mirth”) who takes literature seriously, examines the sheltered, mysterious, yet vibrant life of Emily Dickinson in “A Quiet Passion,” trying to bridge the gap between the uneventful domestic life of the woman who became a recluse and the inward fervor of the poet. He chooses a highly stylized manner to tell his chronicle of the Amherst maid, and his effort results in hits and misses.

The staging of “A Quiet Passion” seems perfectly appropriate (the film did exteriors in Amherst and interiors in Belgium). It is sedate and often striking: most scenes show a fixed camera view of a Victorian interior framed by doorways wherein the protagonists deliver their ever-articulate lines, usually with a minimum of invisible cuts. Occasionally, these stagings are intermingled with a leisurely 360-degree pan.

Such straight-on filming can prove wonderful, such as a tour-de-force time lapse of the Dickinson family as each individual morphs into their characters 20 years later. But that fixed stare can also make Emily’s periodic torments (from symptom’s of Bright’s disease) excruciating to watch. Whether Cynthia Nixon’s writhing in these scenes, as the fevered Emily, shows good acting or just gratuitous voyeurism is up to the viewer to decide.

Davies makes another decision on staging which is problematic. As Emily’s woes increase, with the loss of family members and the progression of her diseases, the film becomes as reclusive as the poet, where she decides to confine herself to her bedroom and wear only a white shift. While this actually happened, the director decides to likewise limit his vision, restricting most scenes to Dickinson in her room or calling down the stairs to visitors. Depending on the viewer, it makes for either a poignant, or claustrophobic, concept.

In his screenplay, Davies again aims for stylization, with dialogue that is both—sometimes in the same lines—pithy and arch. All of the Dickinson family principals, played by Nixon, Jennifer Ehle and Duncan Duff, as her sister Lavinia (“Vinnie”) and brother Austin, and Keith Carradine, as her austere father Edward, seem participants in a strange kind of Oscar Wilde play, but this time written as a somber drama: a life lived in aphorisms. Only Ehle, as Emily’s ever-sympathetic sister Vinnie seems a fully rounded character.

Nixon has the tough job of portraying an outwardly contrary, imperious, and naïve scold whose genius was in her writing. Appropriately, Davies has littered his script with numerous lines from Dickinson’s poems in over voice, and they add resonance to every scene they accompany. Luckily for Davies, his real protagonist provided him with her best words for last, the poem “Because I Could Not Stop for Death,” which perfectly closes the picture with Emily’s burial.

(The film is rated “PG-13” and runs 126 minutes.)

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