

## The Remains of the Day

The filmmaking team of Ismail Merchant (producer), James Ivory (director), and Ruth Praver Jhabvala (screenwriter) have worked together for 30 years and have spent the last half of that time adapting serious literature for the screen, much of it breathing the rarefied air of Henry James and E.M. Forster. The contemporary British novel "The Remains of the Day," written by Japanese-British author Kazuo Ishiguro, was material tailor-made for their sensibilities and style. This tale of a totally committed--but emotionally bereft--butler of an English manor house has been made into the typically handsome and measured Merchant-Ivory opus, marked especially by a monumental performance from Anthony Hopkins.

Filmgoers may be reminded of "Masterpiece Theater": there are similarities to the impeccable, oh-so-British, dramas-of-manners in the TV series. Yet *The Remains of the Day* transcends the tight, closet-like television format into profounder and denser territory. Suffice it to say that if you dislike "Masterpiece Theater," you are likely to find this movie tedious and thin; if you admire the PBS series, you will probably revel in it.

The film begins with a framing story, where the elderly butler Stevens (Hopkins), now serving a retired U.S. congressman (Christopher Reeves) at lavish Darlington Hall, drives to west England to look up the Hall's one-time housekeeper, Sally Fenton (Emma Thompson), whom he hasn't seen in 20 years. Having trouble finding decent staff, Stevens hopes she--alienated from her husband--will join him back at the manse. Flash back two decades to Darlington Hall, where Stevens impeccably serves his Germanophile master, Lord Darlington (James Fox) between the two world wars. The Lord is a well-meaning but politically naive internationalist who wants to bring the British and Germans together to avoid future European wars. Stevens makes two key hirings, that of his own father (Peter Vaughn) as his "underbutler" and of Miss Fenton as housekeeper. Intimations of tense politics and impending war percolate through the Hall but affect Stevens not one jot; he sticks to his job as that of a "gentleman's gentlemen," supremely content to be "where order and tradition still prevail."

Miss Fenton, the conscience of the house, eventually sees loneliness looming and leaves Darlington Hall to marry another servant, Mr. Benn (Tim Piggot-Smith). In the wake of WWII, the Lord is castigated as an appeaser, but Stevens serves him loyally till his ignominious end. The tale is closed when Stevens and Fenton meet again, chat and reminisce, but she feels she must stay where she is (with an expectant daughter), and Stevens must return alone to the Hall to live out his meager life with another master.

Ishiguro's splendid novel amazingly captured a privileged world of the 1930's he never could have known and won him Britain's most important literary award (the Booker Prize). The novel is written in a tightly guarded first-person, continually evoking a tension between the super-controlled Stevens and the world of human beings and events he so tentatively describes. The reader aches for him to betray emotion at some point, but--with his commitment to service and reserve--he never does. The film medium's realism places the butler in a larger visual context where we can see and feel the textures of what goes on around him. We thus observe Stevens directly and can

measure what a thwarted being he is.

The movie (expertly adapted by Jhabvala) thus chronicles repression and what can (or, better cannot) come of it. Stevens is so repressed that he cannot attend to his father's dying because of "his duties;" he cannot begin to deliver a "facts of life" lecture to the Lord's godson (the film's big comic moment); he cannot admit of Fenton's burgeoning interest in his person. The counterpoise to this repression is the theme of unstinting service, of fealty to kind and class which is almost incomprehensible in this country at this point in our century. This sense of service, the film suggests, can also slide into subservience, into "just following orders" and never questioning the Master.

But the film need not be viewed as laboring for philosophical or sociological significance. At its core it is a study of the butler's character and Mr. Hopkins' extraordinary personification of Stevens. Mr. Hopkins has played the low-keyed (*84 Charing Cross Road*) and the over-reserved (*Howard's End*) before, but here his surface is stretched so tightly that the tiniest tick produces reverberations. The tautness rarely lets up; there are no sweaty outbreaks or screams into night pillows for him. The single time his voice is raised is in a mild oath when he drops a fine wine bottle.

With little to outwardly express, Mr. Hopkins' visage must betray the only emotion he shows. This happens when, upon learning of Fenton's impending marriage, his mouth and cheeks crumple to deliver a dry, crushed smile of congratulations. It happens especially in one of the film's finest moments, when Sally, in Stevens' room in near dark, tries to pry away a novel from the butler's clutching grasp. Mr. Hopkins' light grey-blue eyes here, lit from below, display a welter of emotions: the uncomprehending pain and anguish of a trapped animal.

Emma Thompson, who played off Hopkins so splendidly in *Howard's End*, is very fine here also. Sympathetic yet periodically feisty as a "most able housekeeper," she is likewise genuinely touching and convincing as the older, married Mrs. Benn. James Fox, who has, ever since *Passage to India*, pulled off a fine series of character parts, does another good turn as Darlington, the upright yet slowly sinking aristocrat. The Merchant-Ivory team gets its usual fine performances from its supporting players such as Peter Vaughn, Tim Piggot-Smith, Michael Lonsdale (as a French aristocrat), and young Hugh Grant (co-star of Merchant-Ivory's *Maurice*).

Shot in Devon and Avon, *The Remains of the Day* is bathed in hushed neutral tones, with numerous shots in a near black-and-white echoing a butler's uniform. Color is used effectively, though, as in a stunning silhouette of Fenton and Stevens against a tingling blue stairwell. Ivory and his crew also come up with a wonderful montage presaging a big conference dinner, all ringing call bells, hurried food preparations, and urgent silverware selection. It makes for a choreography of service. Countering the emotional dryness of the characters is the fine score by Richard Robbins, which substitutes for unstated emotions by lush, late romantic music reminiscent of Smetana and Dvorak.

(*The Remains of the Day*, while intended for adult audiences, is as chaste as other recent Merchant-Ivory efforts.)

(November 1993)