

Washington Square

Henry James' prose, so dense-packed, so rife with qualifications and inner speculations, doesn't lend itself neatly to the grainy reality of film, but that doesn't stop filmmakers from attempting to make movies from his intricate clashes of culture and class. Merchant-Ivory, masters of other period material, tapped James some years ago--with *The Europeans* (1979) and *The Bostonians* (1984)--with some success.

Recently, in the wake of the Jane Austen film explosion, James has been raided again for screenplays featuring bonnets and carriages. *A Portrait of a Lady* appeared last year, and *The Wings of a Dove* is due out later this year. The most current effort to put James on celluloid is *Washington Square*.

Like the other movies cited above, this James novel turns on the personality of a key female character, in this case Catherine (Jennifer Jason Leigh), the ugly duckling daughter of rich doctor and curmudgeon Arthur Sloper (Albert Finney) who possesses fine digs in 1880's New York. Resentful of his doting daughter, whose birth occasioned his wife's death, Dr. Sloper is wary when smooth Maurice Townsend (Ben Chaplin), of decent manners but no means, takes an interest in Catherine. She, delighted to receive such attentions, swoons for her swain, while daddy is convinced he is only after his loot. Stirring the pot is Aunt Lavinia (Maggie Smith), Sloper's maiden sister, who does what she can to promote the young man's suit.

In order to cut off his daughter from Townsend's blandishments, Sloper takes Catherine on a lengthy European tour to test both his intent and her infatuation. Upon returning, Sloper makes it clear he will cut Catherine out of his will if she marries Maurice, and she presses her intended to choose her for herself. This he cannot do, for his love is, indeed, wholly bound up with his hope for her fortune. Catherine thus refuses him, and, even after her father's death, remains a virtuous spinster, captured for the rest of her days in the cocoon of her Washington Square townhouse.

James' novel is a study of contemporary personalities pressured by the volatile mix of love and finances--Jane Austen updated, in a way. In filming such complex material, the acting has to be flawless to make it work. Finney is fine as the cynical doctor who has seen too much of life to believe in romance. Ben Chapin (*The Truth About Cats and Dogs*) pulls off the balancing act of making you believe he really cares for Alice--as well as for her money! Maggie Smith does a nice reprise of the fluttery busybody she played in *A Room With A View*. Sadly, there is a crucial casting flaw: the role of Catherine Sloper.

For this reviewer, Leigh's presence, all pouty look and vocal drone, may suffice for some contemporary roles but simply doesn't fit this period piece. As the young naif, she is too clumsy by half; as the sober spinster, she is burdened with acting tics. The film, written by Carol Doyle, offers a respectable condensation of the novel and its look, overseen by director Agnieszka Holland, is often rich and evocative (a section of old Baltimore stands in for Washington Square), but these and other worthy points cannot wholly overcome the weakness at the core, an off-kilter Catherine.

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