

Young Adam

Young Adam is a slice of raw Scottish life served up by director David Mackenzie (who wrote the screenplay based on a novel by cult writer Alexander Trocchi) and stars three of Great Britain's finest actors in a film that gets them literally and figuratively down and dirty. It is one of those rare commercial films which carries a NC-17 rating.

Failed writer Joe Taylor (Ewan McGregor) has signed on with a dingy barge that plies loads between Glasgow and Edinburgh in the 1950's. He lives in tight quarters on the barge with its severe owner, Ella Gault (Tilda Swinton), her mulish husband Les (Peter Mullan), and their young son. The film opens with Joe discovering the body of a dead young woman, a woman he knows but whose connection he does not want revealed. As the routines of their common life pass, Joe, a ready sensualist, begins an almost casual affair with Ella, all too eager to test new flesh different from her crusty hubby. Les learns readily of the affair taking place under his nose but dully accepts it; he leaves, aware that the barge is Ella's.

Meanwhile we learn, in flashbacks, of Joe's stormy relationship with the girl Cathie (Emily Mortimer), whose death--which Joe witnessed--is classed as a murder. When a suspect is charged and put on trial for the murder, Joe, able to prove the man's innocence, follows the trial assiduously but cannot bring himself to tell the truth about the case...

Young Adam might be called an "amorality tale." No heroes here, no tender moments, no compassionate acts; not even the sexual passages--there are several--are truly passionate. The film earns its NC-17 rating not through porn-like acts--the couplings are unerotic, even pedestrian--but through its determinedly "adult" themes, humans behaving blindly if not exactly badly.

So what's redeeming here? Responsible, believable work by the principals, all of them excellent. Fans of McGregor, used to his quizzical, open-faced charm in a number of American movies, will see here a troubled, fumbling soul, an all-too-believable young man adrift. Swinton, an amazingly versatile actress known for her off-beat beauty and quirky style, gets as plebeian as she even has and pulls off the role of a damaged prole. Mackenzie gets across the feel of the barge life, too, the sense of damp, pitted docks and the grit of black barge cargoes. *Young Adam* may not be much fun, but it sure feels real. (As indicated above, the film is rated "NC-17.")

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