

## The Beguiled

Among Clint Eastwood's earlier films is a kind of outlier, a Civil War suspense drama that had Clint, as a Union soldier, at the mercy of several genteel ladies of the South. "The Beguiled" of 1971 was not a hit but its Southern Gothic elements have been revived by a very different director, Sofia Coppola, who has maintained the story but reviewed it with a feminist eye

A wounded Union soldier, Cpl. John McBurney (Colin Farrell) is reluctantly taken in for rehabilitation by the females of the Farnsworth Seminary for Woman in the heart of Dixie Virginia. The aim is to mend him then send him on his way and not draw attention from Confederate forces.

The finishing school for girls, run by the matriarch Martha Farnsworth (Nicole Kidman), could hardly be a greater contrast for the rough-hewn Irishman McBurney who, though he's on his best behavior with the group (two are teachers and five are students of varying ages) to earn their trust, he becomes interested in a young teacher, Edwina (Kirsten Dunst) and a dewy teen-ager Alicia (Elle Fanning). As he recuperates, McBurney gains some acceptance, and his good looks and the ladies' sexual isolation creates strong sexual undercurrents.

While Martha keeps a cool distance, Edwina, anxious to escape the school into a wider world, sees John as a possible out, while Alicia, looking for life experience, flirts away. Eventually, a confrontation leads to injury for McBurney and he is permanently disfigured, placing him into a rage, which the Farnsworth Seminary must assuage.

The Southern Gothic elements of this tale were hard-bitten and raw in the Eastwood film; in Coppola's version, they are more subtly and moodily managed, probably to advantage. The tension between the soldier and his bevy of ever-present caregivers is made more striking by the combination of shadowy interiors, God-fearin' language, and the languid pace of the film. Its moodiness is enhanced by a gentle, yet insinuating score and the constant use of shots of the school's dreamlike exteriors, with visions of a classic plantation house rimmed with moss-laden trees (the film was shot in rural Louisiana). Coppola has made a conscious decision to bathe this grim tale in soft focus and sweet sounds, the better to underline its hidden violence. Her tactic works.

Kidman is enthralling as the prissy matron seething beneath her high collars. Dunst, as the most desirous of McBurney, is both poignant and searching, a woman primed for disappointment. Fanning is an apprentice tart and tease, testing her sexual limits on the cool Yankee. Colin Farrell, of the dark eyes and the Irish lilt, is more acted upon than acting but does enough to merit the women's attentions.

There is enough to be beguiled about in this new account of "The Beguiled."  
(*The film is rated "R" and runs 94 mins.*)

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