

Benediction

Written and directed by acclaimed filmmaker Terence Davies, "Benediction" explores the complex and turbulent life of renowned WWI poet Siegfried Sassoon (played by the convincing Jack Lowden), a soldier who survived the horrors of war. He was decorated for his bravery but was also an outspoken critic of the British government's continuation of the war. His career was a long one (he died in 1967), engaged in literary pursuits and earlier involved with the London demimonde of creative gay life. when he returned from service.

His most memorable poetry was inspired by his ghastly experiences on the Western Front, and he became one of the best-known war poets of the era. After having seen his own men and others of his age slaughtered in the trenches of France, he wrote his company commander with a blunt critique of the war effort as a waste. That critique led to his being consigned to a psychiatric clinic in Edinburgh after the war where he met another future war poet, Wilfred Owen (Matthew Tennyson), who ultimately returned to action and died in 1918.

Comfortable as a member of the aristocracy as well as a stalwart of London's literary and stage scene, Sassoon spent the Twenties and Thirties in affairs with several men in that demimonde, always producing poetry but branching out into essays and religious contemplations, all the while struggling to come to terms with his homosexuality. This interim segment, flush with Twenties clichés and swishy love objects—including the snarky songwriter Ivor Novello, played by Jeremy Irvine—is too long and repetitive and weakens the picture. Eventually tiring of the gay scene, Sassoon meets and then marries Hester Gatty (Kate Phillips), with whom he lived into his 80's.

Davies, a fine creator of only a few films, among them "The House of Mirth" and "The Deep Blue Sea" usually based on serious literary works, here displays his usual tasteful style with fixed takes and muted background music. It is a leisurely style that might be seen as boring, but which, for others (like this reviewer), can seem full of unspoken portent. He can also, because of his normal restraint, turn commonplace scenes into surges of emotion.

The best exemplar of the latter ends the film. Fast-forwarding into the 1960's, we find Sassoon (now a curmudgeon played by Peter Capaldi) walking home and sitting down for a rest on a park bench. The aging poet then slowly morphs into the young soldier in military dress looking straight at the camera. As a poignant movement from a Ralph Vaughan Williams symphony begins softly on the sound track, the young Sassoon begins to weep. Then, as the theme wells up, his agonized face slides back to almost normal, only for him to weep again. Go to black.

"Benediction" also features another, earlier ending that is just as affecting. It is the reading of a poem though, curiously, not one of Sassoon's. There is a static shot of an ailing Wilfred Owen, sitting in a wheel chair back at the Edinburgh clinic, staring straight ahead. The over-voice narrator reads one of Owens' most famous war poems, "Disabled," giving final voice to the waste of war that never left Sassoon's consciousness.

(The film, running 137 minutes, will open in the DC area in theaters in early June and is rated "PG-13,)

(June 2022)