

Brideshead Revisited

For many American fans of Brit-Lit, few film/television adaptations match the luster of the 1981 PBS series “Brideshead Revisited,” based on a fine novel of manners by Evelyn Waugh. Spread over 11 leisurely episodes, with a lush score, and using the splendid Castle Howard as its centerpiece, the series, produced by England’s Granada TV, captivated the PBS audience and made worldwide stars out of Jeremy Irons (as Charles Ryder) and Anthony Andrews (as Sebastian Flyte). More than a quarter century on, it is indelibly remembered by many.

Which might make it tricky if one wanted to challenge all those existing good vibes and do a remake of “Brideshead” as a regular movie. Director Julian Jarrold and screenwriters Andrew Davies and Jeremy Brock had to convert Waugh’s partly caustic, partly poignant novel into a two-hour-plus entertainment and set it up for comparison with the legendary John Mortimer, who wrote the TV version. The film that results is a very high-toned romantic drama both spiced by plenty of intelligent performances and deepened by some serious talk of religion.

The story is told in flashbacks from the viewpoint of Charles Ryder (Matthew Goode). We see him as a British officer during World War II, whose company is bivouacked at a grand English manor house. The manor is Brideshead Castle, a site which gives Charles a rush of memories, beginning with the 1920’s, when two young men met at Oxford. Charles is a lad from Paddington with no family or money but with an artistic bent, and he is befriended by Sebastian Flyte (Ben Whishaw), a lively wastrel from a family of Catholic peers of the realm in Protestant England. They meet cute: Sebastian vomits through the window of his quarters, but, to make amends, Sebastian invites Charles to the family castle, where he is captured by the place and by the life of its denizens.

Though the two have an idyllic summer—handled in a handsome montage in and around the castle—complications follow when Charles meets and falls for Sebastian’s sister, the redoubtable Julia (Hayley Atwell). Then the head of the family, the imperious Lady Marchmain (Emma Thompson), rejects Charles, an atheist, as a suitor for her daughter, though she eventually also looks to Charles to protect Sebastian, an alcoholic, from himself. The two friends eventually part, and Charles marries and becomes a fashionable artist. Yet his life ever intersects with the complex and aristocratic Flytes, whose commitment to their faith finally leaves him adrift.

People under 40 should have no preconceptions about this *Brideshead* version; at best, they can enjoy it as a skilled period piece which limns the striking characters and a sleek story line with religious overtones that Waugh invented. The film works nicely on both those levels. Unlike its garish trailer, the film is stately and measured, its story spun out entirely from Charles’ point of view. It is also luxurious—and should be—emphasizing that which is exquisite in the English countryside and at Oxford, exotic in Marrakech, and luxurious in ever-ripe Venice, where a key plot element occurs. Standing in once again for Brideshead Castle, and acting as a striking and looming character itself, is the majestic Castle Howard. Evidently, the filmmakers could find no better stand-in for the Castle.

The condensing of Waugh's novel inevitably eliminates or compresses sections, so, in this version, relatively short shrift is given to the awkward relationship of Charles to his disaffected father (Patrick Malahide) or to Charles' development as an artist or to his marriage. Other sequences are altered or embroidered from the novel, such as a lengthy Venice Carnivale sequence which triggers sexual jealousy from Sebastian but which figures nowhere in the book. In fact, the sequence seems to be in the picture to highlight the homosexual angle which was never explicit in the book. Still, Davies and Brock handle certain set pieces, like a frosty formal dinner at Brideshead and a tense birthday ball, entirely in the spirit of the tale.

Like the original Granada TV broadcast, the film boasts a cast that is strong down the line and expertly handled by director Jarrold (whose last film was the attractive *Becoming Jane*). The veterans of the cast are memorable. Michael Gambon, as the free-thinking Lord Marchmain, does fine rakish bluster, and he is nicely matched by Greta Scacchi as the touching yet worldly-wise Cara, his Italian lover. Emma Thompson has now moved smoothly into mature roles with this imposing portrayal of Lady Marchmain. She plays the doyenne of her eccentric family as a woman of icy control driven by an unrelenting Catholicism, yet she also makes this difficult granddame an understandably anxious materfamilias.

The younger cast members are first-rate, young Ben Whishaw and Hayley Atwell carrying off, respectively, qualities of insouciance and crippling resentment as Sebastian, and a sense of verve and perversity as Julia. Sebastian's dissipation is made palpable in Whishaw's pained eyes and gaunt body; Atwell's Julia sports a lively bob while exhibiting a sexy willfulness. Charles Ryder's variable attraction and repulsion to both of them is made plausible, understandable.

Which leaves Charles himself, played by young Matthew Goode (just 30), most recently seen in very different roles in Woody Allen's *Match Point* (where he played an English bon vivant) and last year's *The Lookout* (where he embodied an American small-time crook). His face, form, or voice is rarely out of the frame; it is truly his story, and he plays it nimbly throughout with tinctures of irony, superciliousness, and passion. Goode shows effectively the steeliness of the social climber as well as the openheartedness of the enthusiast, and is, overall, our sensitive, sympathetic guide to a world he will never really be part of and whose demise we cannot help lamenting.

For those who cannot **stand** the prospect of anything competing with their hallowed memories of the earlier "Brideshead," please stay away from this movie. For others, interested in a variation on an intriguing theme, smart acting, and lush settings, come on down!

(*"Brideshead"* is rated "PG-13;" running time: 133 mins.).

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