

Downton Abbey

Anyone captured by the British television series “Downton Abbey” on PBS’s “Masterpiece Theater” does not need a *dramatis personae* to sort out the characters of the aristocratic Crawley family and its sundry servants that appear in the eponymous film. To many, they are as familiar as cousins and neighbors. In this film version, the series, which aired over six seasons, is updated to 1927, with a plot mechanism guaranteed to feature and reconcile every performer in the show.

A letter from the King (Simon Jones) and Queen (Geraldine James) arrives at the manse, announcing a visit of the monarchs to Downton Abbey, triggering a flurry of house activity and character arcs (a brilliant, wordless opening sequence depicts the intricate journey of the royal letter from palace to Downton’s door). That pre-visit bustle includes a downstairs comic subplot involving the officious royal staff that comes in aiming to take over the visit only to contend with and ultimately get their comeuppance from the clever Downton staffers.

Besides the regular panoply of characters, there are some new figures who enliven the mix, such as a melancholy Princess Mary (Kate Phillips), a shady major (Stephen Campbell Moore), a bristly cousin of Robert, Lady Bagshaw (Imelda Staunton), making threats about the family inheritance, and her sweet “servant” Lucy Smith (Tuppence Middleton).

What the movie does, in creator/writer Julian Fellowes smooth and pungent prose and director Michael Engler’s fastidious cutting, is wrap up all the myriad plot skeins in a series of elegant bows fit to grace the bodices of the aristocratic ladies at supper. For fans, it will prove highly satisfying.

The show averaged 10 million viewers an episode over the years, a highwater mark for a dramatic series on public television, and most of those viewers will come to see and relish this film. I’m not sure filmgoers who never followed “Downton Abbey” will get much of the drift, though they may be intrigued enough to assay the original series itself, not a bad outcome.

To retain the full flavor of the picture, you might just consider going to see it in your best antique evening gown or lustrous white tie...

(The film is rated “PG” and runs 122 minutes.)

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