

An Education

The Brits—and the ladies—are on a small roll.... Last month I wrote a laudatory review about a new English movie, “Bright Star,” a period piece about 1820’s England, the poet John Keats, and, especially, his love interest, Fanny Brawne. The actress playing Fanny, Abbie Cornish, was a 20-something achieving a breakthrough in her first starring role, and the film was directed by the New Zealand stalwart, Jane Campion. For my November review, I can just as highly recommend “An Education,” a period piece about 1960’s London and the coming of age of a young woman. The actress playing the lead is Carey Mulligan, a 20-something achieving a breakthrough in her first starring role. And the film was directed by a Danish distaff director, Lone Scherfig.

“An Education” begins in 1961, pointedly just before the outbreak of the Beatles, the British Invasion, and Swinging London. Williams plays Jenny, a precocious 16-year-old school girl living in dull Twickenham with her middling, unimaginative parents, who insist she get into Oxford. But she dreams of an escape from her circumstances, preferably with a sophisticated partner and involving overseas adventures with a French accent. The latter dream comes true, suddenly, from her involvement with David Goldman (Peter Sarsgaard), a soft-spoken charmer who does something in “real estate.” He is knowledgeable about music (she is a cellist), knows what to order and where to go, and he has swank friends, especially Danny and Helen (Dominic Cooper and Rosamund Pike). He even delights her churlish father (Alfred Molina).

Thrilled that David wants to spend time with her, Jenny accepts his plying her with the best restaurants, taking her on auction visits, visiting the track with the toffs, getting a wardrobe. Sweet with her, he even holds off the sex like a decent guy. Then she accepts his offer to accompany him to Paris—her greatest longing—to celebrate her birthday, to lose her virginity, and to awaken as a real woman. Questions about how David makes his money arise, however, and Jenny’s desire to become an adult all of the sudden runs into counter-arguments from her concerned teacher (Olivia Williams) and her stern headmistress (Emma Thompson). The eventual turn-around—the realization of who this charmer really is—completes her “education.”

The film’s delicate mix of low-key humor, sociological acumen, and youthful drama is wonderfully crafted by screenwriter Nick Hornby and handled with careful calculus by director Scherfig, working in new territory for her (see interview below). To pull it off, she has to have a lead who can pull off this coming of age story without falling into either cuteness or smarminess. Ms. Mulligan does the job, portraying a heroine brighter than her peers who flirts with the new and unknown only to slowly achieve—as an earlier Australian movie title has it—the “getting of wisdom.” Though she was 23 at the time of filming “An Education,” Mulligan personifies not only the smart teenager, but also the budding young woman of taste and judgment. She makes Jenny clever, but not smart ass; vulnerable but not supine; pensive but not dull. Fact is, she is charming throughout and, since she is in virtually every scene, she carries the picture on her prim shoulders. Watch out for Carey Mulligan.

She is seconded very nicely by the solid, gifted cast, but especially by Peter Sarsgaard. How this American actor from Illinois became involved in this very British picture I don't know, but perhaps it is because he is such a fine and versatile actor. In the last years, he has had all kinds of roles but has performed especially effectively in independent films, ("Breaking Glass," "The Dying Gaul," "Boys Don't Cry"), often combining an off-hand smoothness with just a touch of menace. Thus, he proves perfect for David, his plush voice coated with a (very consistent) soft English accent. He wins the audience over as he wins her. (Rated PG-13 for mature thematic material; runs 96 mins.)

An Interview with Lone Scherfig

Lone Scherfig is a 50-ish Danish woman who has been associated with a considerable variety of films in her own country, has had one international art house hit, "Italian for Beginners" (2001), and has done just one previous film in English. Still, she has come to helm this most English of stories, from Nick Hornby, "An Education." So how did she come to this project? The simplest of reasons: she and Hornby have the same agent. When that agent got the script, she passed it along to Scherfig and –voila! She jumped at the chance. "I had always liked his books and his tone," she volunteered.

Scherfig explained that the story idea came from a magazine article by British writer Lynn Barker, and it happened that Nick Hornby's wife had a film option on the article and was scouting for a scriptwriter when her own husband stepped up to do it. "This was the first time Hornby was not writing from his own work," said Scherfig, but adapting another's work.

She came to the project with one piece already attached: American actor Peter Sarsgaard was already signed on for the crucial role of David. Scherfig praised him as "a complex and generous actor who knows how to reveal just enough of his character." He has to be convincing as a charmer, she added, and not be "smarmy." She found him a man very much of the time period—early 1960's London.

There were serious auditions for the role of Jenny, but Scherfig wanted Carey Mulligan from the first—although she had to endure many callbacks. "We had to believe that she (Mulligan) was really 16, and our concern was that she might look too young (Mulligan was 22 at the time of filming)." She had to seem innocent, Scherfig added, "otherwise the theme wouldn't work." Once on board, Mulligan proved a treat in her first starring role. As for other British acting talents appearing in minor roles, people like Olivia Williams, Sally Hawkins, and Emma Thompson, they came on board because of who else was involved—and because of Hornby's script. "They were willing," she said, "to take on small but telling roles."

For this story, Scherfig explained that her preference was for the director "not to be visible—but to disappear. I didn't try to be over-inventive this time."

Part of what she was concerned about was being period accurate for 1961 London: "Each scrap of wallpaper had to be just right." Luckily, she found it was

a city where it was “easy to find locations for period shooting since so much of London doesn’t change.” Further, the film “is not only about a young woman coming of age, but of London coming of age,” just prior to when it became “swinging.”

When asked if she had had experiences similar to the girl in the film, she noted with a shy smile that, yes, she recalls bicycling around Europe as a teenager, and especially as a 17-year-old being in Paris (just like her protagonist), open to new experiences of all kinds and having been, even then, a student of Italian neo-realistic cinema. She added that she thought that “An Education” had much in common with French films of her student days. She had them in her head when she was filming –“it is so easy to love that cinema,” she concluded wistfully.