

The House of Mirth

Local moviegoers have a chance to check out an intriguing hybrid on Washington screens this month: a period piece based upon a classic American novel but made by an altogether British director and shot in other than U.S. settings. Such is the case with Terence Davies' *The House of Mirth*, a work which suggests once again--if we needed reminding, of the phrase of novelist L.P. Hartley that "the past is a foreign country; they do things differently there. "

The House of Mirth is based on the Edith Wharton novel of the same name, traces the slow demise of a most marriageable young woman, Lily Bart (Gillian Anderson), in New York society shortly after the turn of the last century. In telling her individual story, the film also underlines the implacable economic imperatives for young ladies in those days who aspired to be "in society;" if they had no pecuniary prospects open to them, they simply had to "marry well."

Lily, a smart 29-nine-year-old orphan who is a good catch in every sense but the monetary one, is principled--she won't take just any man--but also muddled--she knows nothing about money. For her, the men with money, like the financiers Gus Trenor (Dan Aykroyd) and Sim Rosedale (Anthony LaPaglia), do not match her taste or intellectual standards, while the bright lawyer Lawrence Seldon (Eric Stoltz), personally compatible as he may be, cannot possibly keep her in the style to which she has been accustomed, living with her wealthy crone of an aunt, Mrs. Peniston (Eleanor Bron). This dilemma is one which she senses she can somehow overcome with her native wit and charm.

Muddling, Lily gets inadvertently in serious debt to graspy Trenor, yet principled still, she refuses a convenient--and saving--offer of marriage from practical Rosedale. Her world slowly starts to come apart when an apparently close friend Bertha Dorset (Laura Linney) slyly turns on her and touches her with scandal involving Bertha's husband George (Terry Kinney). Then she is effectively disowned in her late aunt's will in favor of her cousin Grace Stepney (Jodhi May). Principled yet, she feels her modest inheritance must go to pay all her debts to Trenor; muddled still, she doesn't know what to do with herself outside society. Her final fall may be cosseted in corsets, but it is harrowing still.

The title of the novel (and film) gives the game away. "Mirth" in this instance is hardly merriment (of which there is precious little in this picture), but rather, in the line from dour Ecclesiastes: "The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth." Poor Lily, who cannot decide how to fashion her life, dwells in the latter.

Director Davies, whose previous films have dissected aspects of his own working-class English upbringing, has gone off in a striking new direction with this picture. To create the look of the period, he eschewed the States--not finding appropriate settings for turn-of-the-century New York--and shot everything in Glasgow and surroundings Scottish manses, which serve well as stand-ins. He has placed his principals in splendid (and stifling) dress and exquisite (and suffocating) interiors inspired by the paintings of John Singer Sargent and other late Victorian painters. In such circumstances, his players are likewise restrained--with mixed results. Sometimes that restraint can make for wonderful subtleties--as in Lily's and Lawrence's delicate romantic scenes, where the sheer anticipation of a demure kiss can make the act more

charged--or produce just leaden, inert exchanges.

Most of the players do a persuasive job. Stoltz's Seldon is rightly clever yet distant, a smoothy who finds it hard to let go of his emotions. Linney plays perfectly an insouciant bitch with dimples, while young Jodhi May is effective as a dewy-eyed deceiver, and the veteran Eleanor Bron is chilling as the acidic aunt. Anthony LaPaglia is adequate as the dull Rosedale, but Dan Aykroyd seems miscast as Trenor. Clumsy and blatant he is, as the character calls for, but he appears out of time and class, more like a shyster lawyer of the 1980's than a 1905 financial titan.

Gillian Anderson was, of course, a controversial choice to play Lily. Famous as a personality--if not as an actress--from the "X-Files" TV show, she has had only small parts in movies and has never been asked to "carry" a picture, to appear in almost every scene and to show a considerable range of expression. To this reviewer, she does a creditable job, moving Miss Bart from sprightly confidence through earnest befuddlement to grim acceptance of her fate. She delivers her lines with an insinuating hint of a lisp, she cocks her head fetchingly under enormous hats, she goes slowly opaque when bad news comes. It is a controlled and restrained performance, matching the mood of the entire project.

It is instructive to compare the restraint of Davies' *The House of Mirth* with another Wharton adaptation of recent vintage, Martin Scorsese's *The Age of Innocence* (1993). Both films have the look, the fabric, the epoch, the stifled passions down in their different ways, but where the American director is all swirling camera, lush color, and flowing music, Davies uses stricter set-ups within which his actors move, a more burnished palette, and only occasional music. His use of silences may, in fact, unnerve some viewers used to constant Hollywood background sound; the ticks of clocks can come to dominate a scene. If there is a ravishing moment on the soundtrack, it comes with his camera sweeping empty rooms of a mansion while an exquisite trio from Mozart's *Così fan tutte* fills one's ears...

If you have trouble getting into that "foreign country" that is our past, *The House of Mirth* could be a bore, but if you relish a visit there, even if an astringent one, this *House's* door is open to you.

(*"The House of Mirth" is rated "PG" and contains nothing objectionable.*)

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