

The Last Duel

With “The Last Duel,” Ridley Scott steps back into history, as he so memorably did with his Oscar-winning “Gladiator” from 2000. This time, his focus is again on a tale of betrayal and vengeance, but this period piece is set against the brutality of 14th century France rather than ancient Rome. The period is that of Normandy in the late 14th C. during the reign of Charles VI.

Based on actual historical events, “The Last Duel” begins and ends with France’s last sanctioned duel in 1386 between Jean de Carrouges (Matt Damon) and Jacques Le Gris (Adam Driver), two long-time friends and warrior knights of the king turned bitter rivals over the course of almost 20 years.

Carrouges is a ferocious knight, long engaged in fighting the rival English and also a stolid, unlettered man, with a gift for rampage but none for wit or guile or deceit. Le Gris is his opposite, a poor but clever man who has educated himself in numbers and letters and taken on libertine ways, thereby ingratiating himself to a high prince of the domain, Pierre d’Alencon (Ben Affleck), an advisor and right hand of the King. It is Jean, however, who wins the heart of the most desirable local ingenue, Marguerite (Jodie Comer).

However, Le Gris, lusty that he is, also has eyes for Marguerite and, with her husband away on a Scottish campaign, he breaks into Carrouges’ castle and viciously assaults her. When she becomes pregnant, suspicion is thrown on Jacques as the father. He denies a rape charge, but Marguerite refuses to stay silent and forcefully accuses him as her attacker, an act of bravery and defiance that puts her life in jeopardy. A trial by combat is then authorized by Charles VI (, a grueling duel to the death, shown in a grim, crashing sequence that opens and closes the picture (Scott gave a similar version of this brutality as the culminating fight of “Gladiator”).

At more than two-and-one-half hours, this “Duel” does grind on, perhaps because Scott wallows too long on medieval detail: pervasive mud, grim stone, and endless candle light, all bathed in a gray-blue cast and carrying a clattering soundtrack. It may make for a convincing 1380, but it doesn’t always keep the story moving. The film can’t help being somewhat repetitive either, since the story is set in three chapters, the first two covering similar events from first Jean’s perspective then Jacques.’

The three-way screenplay—by Nicole Holofcener (“Can You Ever Forgive Me?,” “Enough Said”), Affleck and Damon—may explain why the

movie is part macho mania (from Affleck and Damon?) and part a sort of primitive #MeToo movement in Old France (crafted, perhaps by Holofcener?). The latter's all-too-contemporary vessel is the young Comer, here comely for sure but also principled and a staunch seeker of the truth, unlike the tired and cynical women all around her.

(Now in theaters, the film is rated "R" and runs 2 hours, 32 minutes)

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