

Mrs. Harris Goes to Paris

Five years ago, the acclaimed British actress Leslie Manville played a memorable role as Cyril in Paul Thomas Anderson's drama "Phantom Thread (2017)," a film starring Daniel Day Lewis as a consummate dressmaker. Manville's Cyril was nominated for an Oscar as a chilly perfectionist, a detail queen who kept Lewis's business together. Thus we have the versatile Manville twice in the haute couture context of the 1950's, once as a rigorous administrator and the second as a commonplace woman desirous of a truly fancy gown.

It's 1957, and Mrs. Ada Harris (Manville), a non-descript cleaning woman and widow who lives in an unfashionable flat in London's Battersea district, falls in love with a Christian Dior gown in the apartment of one of her clients, the obnoxious Lady Dant (Anna Chancellor) who neglects to pay her wages. The dress ignites in her a desire to own such a treasure for herself—trouble is, it will cost 500 pounds! She resigns herself to raise the money to go personally to the House of Dior in Paris to order such a dress, counting her shillings to pay for the trip. The amount is daunting, until she has a trifecta of good luck in one day—surprise dog racing winnings, a cash reward for returning a lost ring, and the back pay from her husband's military salary.

She arrives in Paris knowing no one but still finds her way to the House of Dior where she is brushed off by the firm's condescending and chilly director, Ms. Colbert (Isabelle Huppert). Still, she, with offhand honesty and British wit, becomes adored by all the employees of the House because she has come to pay for her dress *in cash!* She also happens to be at the House when a lineup of new Dior frocks are being shown and falls hard for a red satin formal number.

Since the gown has to be made by hand over two weeks, she must find a place to stay in the city, which she does at the home of the sympathetic Mr. Fauvel (Lucas Bravo), a clever Dior staffer. She is also befriended by one of Dior young models, Natasha (Alba Baptista), who looks out for her and takes her on a glorious tourist drive around Paris. Soon she has inveigled herself into Parisian society with the help of a suave and amiable widower, the Marquise de Chassagne (Lambert Wilson), who introduces her to Parisian night life, both classy and bawdy. Getting fitted in the designer's workshop in a parade of dream gowns, she is living her dream. She even gets in on the stitching herself.

Mrs. Harris is thus able to return to London, where her dress, borrowed by one of her clients, is accidentally damaged by fire, though the story ends on a purely positive note.

Unabashedly sentimental and packed with whimsy, "Mrs. Harris" succeeds mainly because of Manville's down-to-earth, earnest performance. You root for her from the first minute. This film confection could be called the ultimate wish fulfillment fantasy, something we could all use in our turbulent times. (*The film, now in wide release, runs 115 mins. with a "PG" rating.*)

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