

Separate Lies

A fine start for the fall film season comes with *Separate Lies*, an English film that displays as firm a grasp of dialogue and character as any film this reviewer has seen this year. Written and directed by Julian Fellowes (who wrote *Gosford Park* in 2003), this examination of a contemporary marriage going awry is made the more effective by its admirable Brit restraint. Love that Brit restraint!

James Manning (Tom Wilkinson) is a successful solicitor in London's City with a smart house in town and a fine cottage in the country. Anne (Emily Watson) is his sweet, dutiful wife, somewhat cowed by his competency and confidence. Into their cozy life-at-the-manor comes the indolent Bill Bule (Rupert Everett), a slick ne'er-do-well who intrigues Anne. They slyly begin an affair, which Anne can defend only by saying "he's easy to be with." A motoring accident, caused by Anne while with Bill, seriously injures the husband of the Manning's housekeeper, Maggie (Linda Bassett), and the fellow eventually dies. The cover-up that the three principals concoct--to keep the truth from Maggie and to finesse the hit-and-run from the inquiries of a dogged inspector--creates the nexus of the drama.

This is the kind of work that the British can produce with such believability and scruples (though, in retrospect, the film it most reminded me of was the wonderful American film *In the Bedroom*, also starring Tom Wilkinson). James, horrified at what has happened, tries calmly to fix things as he always has. Bill, in his offhand, amoral way, just wants to be quits of the whole thing. Anne, who wants to confess her involvement right away, never gets a chance to with these two determined men in her midst. They all try to change the equation of their relationship but the results never add up as they get deeper and deeper into lies.

Fellowes beautifully contrasts the elegant life he shows with the evermore tangled psyches his actors reveal. One fine concrete example is shown when Anne, nervously confessing to James about her driving, fiercely cuts vegetables for a perfect salad plate only to crash it on the counter as her emotions overflow. Another example: the delicacy with which James and Anne, already estranged, meet and quietly catch up on each other in an exquisite Paris park. And, oh, that restraint again... Where American dramas of the same ilk would prep the audience for a major screaming scene or rev up the music to underscore a point, Fellowes makes his points with nuance and the calibrated direction of his cast.

That cast is smashing. Everett, though an insolent and angular presence, still intrigues and avoids being a facile villain. Watson, adopting the delicate pouting she displayed so effectively in *Breaking the Waves* (1996), is a softly stricken soul, looking for a way out. Wilkinson as James is the fulcrum of the movie, its moral center around which the dilemmas gyrate. He is, by turns, sincere and stuffy, a man seeing things slip away yet earnestly trying to keep them together. You sympathize with him, may even agonize with him, yet you understand that, yes, he could be a hard man to live with.

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