

The Children Act

Recently I reviewed a movie adaptation of "On Chesil Beach," a novella by prominent English writer Ian McEwan. McEwan has been cinematically busy, for this month another of his novels, "The Children Act," also appears on film with McEwan again the screenwriter. His script, along with the efforts of veteran director Richard Eyre, provides for one of the best roles actress Emma Thompson has had in years.

In contemporary London, Judge Fiona Maye (Thompson) is a stern but earnest justice in the city's family court, driven in a job which entails some of the knottier problems of the day, including a Solomonic judgment she makes at the beginning of the film about conjoined twins. The pressures on her have turned her marriage with university classics lecturer Jack (Stanley Tucci) sour, so sour that he openly announces that he wants to have an affair with one of his students.

Still, Maye carries on, confronted with a thorny case involving the Henry family. They, as Jehovah's Witnesses, object to a blood transfusion which doctors insist their teenage son Adam (Fionn Whitehead), suffering from leukemia, must have to save his life. The father (Ben Chaplin) insists that their religion forbids the transfer of fluids from another person, and Adam should be left in God's hands. Judge Maye must decide to grant the family's wishes or intervene to let the transfusion proceed. To help resolve this dilemma, she takes the unusual step of visiting the hospital to interview the boy, who forthrightly rejects the transfusion. Nevertheless, the judge, considering the "Children Act" of 1988 which states that "children's welfare should be the paramount concern of the courts," rules that Adam must undergo the procedure.

Here the film takes a troubling turnabout. Rejuvenated, almost reborn, by the transfusion, Adam contrives to look up, even stalk Maye, becoming infatuated with her, writing poems to her, and seeing her as a kind of savior in tune with his soul. Puzzled by, yet also touched by his attentions, Maye plays the adult and tries to bring the lad back down to earth, but when he shows up, rain-sodden, at a formal party she is attending outside London, something must be done.

The character of Jack Maye seems somewhat underwritten, but Tucci makes his distress with the marriage plausible and stays mostly stalwart in his concern for Fiona. Adam is most convincingly embodied by young Whitehead, who won plaudits last year as a young soldier in "Dunkirk." Playing at first bristling defiance, he later switches to earnest, fawning youth without breaking stride. His lively eyes and curled mouth remind this reviewer of the young Tom Courtenay some 55 years ago.

This is not the sweet, often comedic Emma Thompson we've seen before. Judge Maye is demanding with people, especially her downtrodden clerk Nigel (Jason Watkins), cynical about family life (she and Jack are childless), striving to achieve a kind of queenly serenity above the messy cases she faces. Thompson, balancing both knitted brows (in court) and sympathetic gestures (in hospital), captures this woman's balancing act brilliantly. For a person who above all wants to maintain control, she finds her defensive façade is cracking with the attentions of the swoony teenager as the movie moves to a disconcerting finale. This last adjective is an inadvertent pun, as the end of the picture has Judge Maye, stumbling, groping at a piano recital while playing the wistful Irish tune "Down by the Salley Gardens," the theme song of this touching film.

(The film is rated "R" for mature themes and runs 105 mins.).

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