

Career Girls

In Mike Leigh's latest slice of English life, *Career Girls*, two old college friends, Hannah (Katrin Cartlidge) and Annie (Lynda Steadman), meet in London for the first time in six years, spend a weekend together, share a set of strange coincidences, and part with uncertain promises to meet again. That is all that "happens," but it is enough for us to get to know these two young women rather well.

Mr. Leigh rounds out his two protagonists by contrasting the scenes of their current renewed relationship with flashbacks of the two as student roomies. The former scenes are naturalistic, though charged with the wariness of the two getting a reading on each other, while the flashback scenes are manic and messy, charged with an surreal quirkiness. It is a test of Misses Cartlidge and Steadman versatility and range--a test the demanding Mr. Leigh often makes on his actors--and one they pass with high marks.

During student days at the polytechnic, Hannah is a big-city, smart-alecky English Lit major with logorrhea, a person so jumpy she appears to have wasps rather than ants in her pants. Annie, in dramatic contrast, is a shy thing from the provinces, made the more so by a ghastly skin rash. Hannah blatantly spouts one-liners to all and sundry (she impolitically cracks that Annie's rash "looks like you've been doin' the tango with a cheese grater"), while Annie chronically turns her head to hide her unsightliness. How they ever become friends at all is never really explained--though Hannah is definitely take-charge while Annie is definitely vulnerable--but one comes to accept it, although some flashback scenes are strained and the acting can appear mannered.

The flashbacks go to show the filmgoer how time--even a short time--can do its work, how maturity does indeed make us different people. In the contemporary scenes, the contrasting natures of the women remain, but their edges are trimmed and sanded, the hyper-reality of school days giving way to the steady rhythms of everyday with dialogue that lingers over jobs, flats, and finances.

Career Girls captures nicely the delicate sparring of "getting to know you" again and just as nicely revisits and recasts an old dichotomy--strength vs. vulnerability--during a lovely sequence over a Chinese dinner. As one way of cementing their friendship, the two keep bumping into old acquaintances: an old boyfriend of Hannah's (now a smug real estate agent who doesn't even recognize them), their old roommate Claire (out jogging on Hampstead Heath), and, most poignantly, an old student buddy Ricky (Mark Benton), found a wreck of his former self on their old doorstep.

Folks familiar with other of Mr. Leigh's works--*High Hopes*, *Life is Sweet*, and last year's highly lauded *Secrets and Lies*--will recognize many of his traits: the tweaking of Thatcherite hustlers, the leaving of scenes at loose ends, the steady gaze on individual characters, the easy, natural dialogue... Once again he is able to make quite ordinary lives memorable for us.

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