

A DANGEROUS WOMAN

The end of the year always triggers a flurry of films from Hollywood producers hurrying to qualify them for Academy Award consideration. Films released at year's end are thought to be fresher in the minds of Academy voters and more likely to garner votes than the hot movies of the previous spring and summer. A new film opening in Washington, *A Dangerous Woman*, seems to be using this tactic. As it turns out, the film carries with it a performance by Debra Winger that this reviewer thinks merits Oscar attention. She is the principal reason--and reason enough--to see this new domestic drama.

Ms. Winger's Martha Horgan, a mildly retarded young woman in a small California town who lives, somewhat testily, next to her aunt and contemporary, Frances Becham (Barbara Hershey), a well-off widow. Martha works at the local dry cleaners with her best friend Birdy (Chloe Webb), but she loses both her friendship and her job when she straightforwardly accuses her boss of shoddy dry cleaning practices and rightly labels as a thief one of her co-workers and Birdy's boyfriend, Getso (David Strathairn). She then befriends an itinerant handyman, Mac (Gabriel Byrne), who comes to work for Frances. Mac, a moody Irish Catholic, apprehends that Martha is unspoiled and pure--he even confesses to her and asks her for absolution during one drunken foray into her cottage. A second such visit goes too far, however, and Mac and Martha end up coupling on her couch in what is a graphic yet somehow decorous sex scene which earns the film its "R" rating.

Enlivened by love both personal and physical, Martha's latent desire for independence grows, an independence hardly anyone is willing to grant her, especially the aunt who has always organized her life. She gets a makeover and a new hairdo at the local beauty parlor (catered to by a lively stylist, Jan Hooks, in a nice cameo). She refuses the cast-off dresses Frances offers her for an upcoming party. She persists, even in the face of indifference, in trying to tell Birdy the truth about her sleazy boyfriend. Her desire to do the latter leads her finally to Birdy's apartment and a grim encounter with Getso. From here on the plot tumbles a bit into bathos as Martha first goes to jail and then learns she is pregnant by Mac. It's all resolved, none too neatly, but what stays compelling is Ms. Winger's incarnation of Martha.

The triumph of Debra Winger's performance is her convincing creation of a woman-child, a star-turn which is devoid of vanity and sentimentally but full of careful study about how such a person might really act. Her whole face and body personify her internal child. From the first time you see her on the town's street, striding in a gangling walk that brings to mind an earlier adult-child, Jerry Lewis, you know this girl is "different." She pouts like a first-grader when she can't get a Tupperware set she wants. Her telltale facial stance is a quizzical, pursed-lip expression, like a kid trying hard, so hard to understand what adults are telling her. While Martha's vocabulary is clear, she must still struggle for words and concepts. Ever innocent and straight, she cannot tell a lie, and her truth-telling continually gets her in trouble. Aware of and intrigued by sex, she remains open-eyed and tentative about it (e.g., she gets a tongue-kissing lesson from Mac but performs it herself like a licking doggy). In Ms. Winger's fine effects and closely-observed nuances, I was reminded of another film acting performance of a less-than-articulate person, Dustin Hoffman's splendid *Rain Man*.

Irish actor Gabriel Byrne as Mac is an alternately wholesome and forbidding presence. His character is meant to be mercurial; in one scene he shifts from offering Martha mild caresses to bluntly calling her a bitch. His heart is in the right place, but he drinks too much. He lapses and needs absolution. There is something of the Mysterious Stranger about him (his background is not explained), something of Tennessee Williams' Gentleman Caller. His is a ruffled, fitful decency that leads him to stand by Martha. Barbara Hershey, who can be a fine film actress, here has a thankless role. She plays a somewhat cranky, domineering person, used to ordering Martha's life and doing "what's right" for her. While her Frances has moments of sympathy and vulnerability, her appearance in a scene is principally an excuse for Martha to contest her.

Stephen Gyllenthal's direction and Naomi Foner's script (based on a novel by Mary McGarry Morris) are not faultless. There are several scenes and subplots introduced which go nowhere, such as a dramatic car crash/confrontation sequence which opens the picture. The conflict and characters introduced in this striking scene (wherein Frances' affair with a local politician is discovered by his raging wife) simply fade or dissipate, and we feel no follow-up. Here and elsewhere it's as if sequences were cut for whatever reason and the cuts badly masked.

But this is Ms. Winger's show, and she commands the screen. Besides the Hoffman comparison, I was reminded of other screen portrayals of this nature and quality. The acting of Tom Hanks playing a slightly older overgrown kid in *Big* comes to mind, another child in an adult's body performed with sensitivity and style. I could go further back. In Ms. Winger's representation of a poor naif who is "taken advantage of," jailed, and eventually bears a child, I am reminded of Jane Wyman as *Johnny Belinda*, a role that won her the 1948 Oscar. The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences could do worse than reward Debra Winger with a similar statuette next March.

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