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Film

Ageless *Innocence*

Scorsese's Masterful Film Illuminates Wharton's Classic Novel

BY DAVID MERMELSTEIN

There are those who prefer that lush dramas of manners be the exclusive purview of Merchant Ivory. Such people have not yet seen Martin Scorsese's latest film, *The Age of Innocence*. Based on Edith Wharton's famous book, Scorsese's picture is as luxuriant as they come; and at more than two hours, it boasts the epic qualities that distinguished the late Sir David Lean's films.

Putting Wharton's novel on the screen is, of course, a brave step for Scorsese, who has built a formidable career upon an *oeuvre* of gritty, visceral pictures that often involve deranged men. Wharton's milieu—an old-fashioned world of privilege and grace—is the opposite of what Scorsese knows best, and yet he has succeeded masterfully in capturing on film the spirit and conflicts Wharton so eloquently put to paper.

More than a mere costume drama, Scorsese's film is an insightful look into a Byzantine and confining world and the toll exacted by its strictures. That Scorsese should choose to film a story set in New York during the 1870s might strike some as strange, but the director has sublimated neither his signature cinematic techniques nor his traditional thematic interests in this effort.

Scorsese has long been captivated by the individual's battle with his society (think of Jake LaMotta's struggles in *Raging Bull* or even Travis Bickle's in *Taxi Driver*), and that same concern surfaces here as well. In *The Age of Innocence*, the protagonist is far more refined, a better person really, vastly more rich, and fighting against a society less dangerous. But it is a similar struggle all the same.

Amongst Wharton's potted palms and dark-paneled sitting rooms, Newland Archer (Daniel Day-Lewis) fights an internal war: his profound sense of duty and decorum in conflict with the demands of his heart. At first Archer wants what anyone in his spats would: marriage to the comely May Welland (Winona Ryder) and a secure position at one of New York's finest law firms. But after meeting May's cousin, the Countess Ellen Olenska (Michelle Pfeiffer), at the opera, Archer no longer knows what he desires. His struggle, largely self-contained, is at the center of *The Age of Innocence*.



Scorsese's powerful, passionate *Innocence*

Day-Lewis does not have an enviable role to play. Though sympathetic, Archer is conceited, cowardly, and confused. He is more a reactive character, so Day-Lewis is forced to motivate his character through the behavior of others. That said, the actor gives a powerful, understated performance. He is, perhaps, at his very best near the picture's end, when he is old and somewhat beaten down by life. In those moments, Day-Lewis is marvelous.

Most of the time, though, the actor is overshadowed by the two women with whom he shares the screen. Ryder at first appears wispy and vacuous, but in time we realize that her May is far more cunning than supposed. Not only has she fooled her beau (and, later, husband), she has also manipulated viewers. Her last scenes are filled with double meanings and wifely contrivance, and only after we no longer see her do we afford her the credit she earned while on screen.

Pfeiffer, on the other hand, delivers an upfront portrayal of the scandalized countess. Ellen Olenska is a woman who does not beat down her feelings. Pfeiffer has a smoldering quality here that is magnetic; in the scenes she shares, she almost eclipses those around her. She may well be this film's most complex character, and she carries that burden off with a slightly shabby sexiness that is more than a little tragic.

One hesitates to use too many superlatives

in describing the supporting cast. Suffice it to say that the choices are beyond reproach. Geraldine Chaplin, Sian Phillips, Mary Beth Hurt, Carolyn Farina, and the late Alexis Smith are superb as society women whose prejudices, to a greater or lesser degree, cloud their vision and run their lives. Richard E. Grant, Alec McCowen, Michael Gough, and Norman Lloyd are their male counterparts, and they are no less effective. Particularly memorable are Miriam Margolyes' comical Mrs. Mingott and Jonathan Pryce's well-honed Riviere.

As important as any of them, or any of the film's leads, is Joanne Woodward, who narrates the picture. The choice is an inspired one, for she offers explication when it is most needed, and her plangent voice is a thing of beauty. Like Robert Redford in *And a River Runs Through It*, Woodward helps anchor the film. She guides us through Wharton's baroque world and illuminates Scorsese's.

Elmer Bernstein's bittersweet score adds soulfulness to Archer's predicament. As with all good music for the movies, its contributions are restrained, but vital. The main theme most of all just barely lingers in the memory after the closing credits.

All of this—the actors, Woodward's narration, the music—is Scorsese's brainchild. And, again, it shows. In the luminous fadeouts, the eerie close-ups, the crane shots, the fast cuts, we feel Scorsese's presence. Some will deem Scorsese's direction too intrusive, a distraction from Wharton's work. But to believe that is to miss the point. What the director has

THE AGE OF INNOCENCE

starring
Michelle Pfeiffer, Daniel
Day-Lewis & Winona Ryder

directed by
Martin Scorsese

screenplay by
Martin Scorsese & Jay Cocks

Columbia
(citywide)

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