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All About Kissing

The Portrait of a Lady

Directed by Jane Campion. Written by Laura Jones, from Henry James' novel. Starring Nicole Kidman and John Malkovich. Opens Friday, Jan. 17.

By Michael Sragow

When an incredulous Jane Campion fan asked what I hated about her version of Henry James' *The Portrait of a Lady*, I immediately responded, "Everything." Actually, I thought Barbara Hershey, as the subtle villainess, Madame Merle, made a good first impression: I laughed appreciatively when the heroine, Isabel Archer (Nicole Kidman), surprises Merle at the piano, because Hershey gives the right ironic lilt to the line, "I am afraid there are moments in life when even Schubert has nothing to say to us." But sooner or later, everyone, including Hershey, wilts in Campion's artificial hothouse atmosphere, which suffocates James' account of a lively American girl's unsentimental education as she quests through Europe in search of a life of value. I *did* hate everything about the movie if you define "everything" the way James did — as the sum of the essential and the significant. (Isabel asks Madame Merle, "What have you to do with me?" and

Madame Merle answers, "Everything.") What Campion and screenwriter Laura Jones have left out of Isabel's progress is her inner landscape — the foundation of the book. James revealed in his preface that when he sat down to write the novel, he said to himself, "Place the center of the subject in the young woman's own consciousness." The only consciousness here belongs to the filmmakers. A sad, paltry thing it is.

James biographer Leon Edel noted that at moments in *The Portrait of a Lady*, "The story verges on melodrama when it isn't pure fairy tale: a rich uncle, a poor niece, an ugly sick cousin who worships her from a distance, three suitors, a fairy-godfather who converts the niece into an heiress, and finally her betrayal by a couple of her cosmopolite compatriots into a marriage as sinister as the backdrop of a Brontë novel." To Edel, James' work is a prime example that what gives a novel life *isn't* the story — "it was the *way* in which the story was told, the qualities of mind and heart that flowed into it, suffusing it with the warmth and texture of life itself." (Or, as Sam Peckinpah said, "It's the *way* you blow up a bridge.") Campion and Jones tell it with full-frontal banality; it doesn't *verge* on melodrama, it *drowns* in melodrama. Like the most blatant hacks (but with flurries of art-house filigree), the filmmakers use a raging hormonal imbalance to account for Isabel's odd choice to marry Gilbert Osmond (John Malkovich), that paragon of useless good taste. Poor Isabel: She's transformed from a seeker after truth and beauty to a sort of hard-shelled ditz whose destiny changes with a kiss.

Although I'm all for adapters of classic work boldly announcing their freedom from tradition, Campion and Jones' devices aren't far removed from Baz Luhrmann's in *William Shakespeare's Romeo & Juliet*. This period piece begins with contemporary young ladies in languid poses, photographed with the fungoid gloss that Campion long ago made her visual signature. We see a girl whose blank face seems to scream out "tabula rasa" subtly swaying to the music on her Discman before we fade into the intense, empty face of Nicole Kidman. If Campion and Jones were saying solely that, throughout the years, "girls will be girls," the device would be condescending and facile; what makes it worse is that on the soundtrack we hear the girls' silly chatter about kissing — and when you get right down to it, this movie really is about nothing more than kissing.

Before we get a chance to acclimate ourselves to the strange closed world of American expatriates in the late 1800s, Isabel, at her uncle Mr. Touchett's British estate, is already putting off the admirable, forward-thinking Lord Warburton (Richard E. Grant), surprising everyone including her termagant aunt (Shelley Winters) and her sickly, loving, observant cousin, Ralph Touchett (Martin Donovan). Then we learn of her previous suitor, the aggressive American businessman Caspar Goodwood (Viggo Mortensen), who's been tipped off to her location by her roving journalist friend Henrietta Stackpole (Mary-Louise Parker). Before long Isabel has a dream of Ralph and Caspar and Warburton making love to her. Jones has written that if James "is turning in his grave at the vision of

Isabel's romantic sexual fantasies, I hope he is turning with pleasure." From what — imagining himself in Isabel's place? (Really, this latter-day Jamesian sexual revisionism has gone too far.)

By the time Ralph advises his father to give half his inheritance to Isabel, the film's tone has already been set: ugly, brutish, and warped. And there on in, the moviemakers relentlessly telegraph the plot turns, so that rather than empathize with Isabel as her upward-aspiring vision plays tricks with her, we deem her incredibly stupid for not seeing that Gilbert Osmond is a well-dressed homunculus. The moviemakers guarantee that we'll feel superior to Isabel by giving away at the outset that Madame Merle was Osmond's mistress. In the famous last line of the novel, which of course has no correlation in the movie, Henrietta Stackpole teaches the spurned-yet-again Caspar Goodwood "the meaning of patience." One wishes it had been taught to Campion and Jones. Throughout, they seek to grab us with clipped scenes and stark effects, the nadir being a flickering black-and-white montage of Isabel freaking out during an Egyptian tour over her response to Osmond's ardent courting, a sequence complete with a spinning-parasol pattern out of *Vertigo* and, yes, talking lima beans. And the direction of the actors is ludicrously overemphatic — at one point, Osmond brays in imitation of a donkey. James wrote that in his novel he strove to attain "the maximum of intensity with the minimum of strain"; Campion and Jones exert the maximum of strain to achieve the minimum of intensity. **SF**