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# FILM REVIEWS

## Campion's elegant, chilly 'Portrait'

**VENICE**

### THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY

(BRITISH-U.S.)

A Gramercy release of a Polygram Filmed Entertainment presentation of a Propaganda Films production. Produced by Monty Montgomery, Steve Golin. Co-producer, Ann Wingate.

Directed by Jane Campion. Screenplay, Laura Jones, based on the novel by Henry James. Camera (Technicolor, Panavision widescreen), Stuart Dryburgh; editor, Veronika Jenet; music, Wojciech Kilar; production and costume design, Janet Patterson; supervising art director, Martin Childs; art direction, Mark Raggett; supervising set decorator, Jill Quertier; sound (Dolby), Peter Glossop; sound design, Lee Smith; associate producer-assistant director, Mark Turnbull; second unit director, Colin Englert; casting, Johanna Ray and Associates. Reviewed at Culver Studios, Culver City, Sept. 3, 1996. (In Venice Film Festival — noncompeting.) Running time: 144 MIN.

Isabel Archer ..... Nicole Kidman  
Gilbert Osmond ..... John Malkovich  
Madame

Serena Merle ..... Barbara Hershey  
Henrietta

Stackpole ..... Mary-Louise Parker  
Ralph Touchett ..... Martin Donovan  
Mrs. Touchett ..... Shelley Winters  
Lord Warburton ..... Richard E. Grant  
Countess Gemini ..... Shelley Duvall  
Edward Rosier ..... Christian Bale  
Caspar Goodwood ..... Viggo Mortensen  
Pansy Osmond ..... Valentina Cervi  
Mr. Touchett ..... John Gielgud

**M**uch like Martin Scorsese's "The Age of Innocence," Jane Campion's "The Portrait of a Lady," her much-anticipated follow-up to "The Piano," emerges as a literary adaptation of exceeding intelligence, beauty and concentrated artistry, but one that remains emotionally remote and perhaps unavoidably problematic dramatically. Arrestingly well made, this highbrow melodrama about the misfortunes of a young American woman of privilege in Europe in the 1870s is poised to attract serious, upscale audiences and will certainly spark split opinions among critics and viewers when it is released at the end of the year. But, like Scorsese's film, its flaws and chilliness will most likely prevent it from blossoming into a true audience favorite, making for a respectable but moderate commercial future.

Especially during the first few reels, one is aware of a fiercely focused and disciplined director bringing her will to bear upon formidable material. In fact, the initial section of the story, during which the beautiful, 23-year-old heroine rejects the idea of marriage out of



**WOMAN OF MEANS:** Nicole Kidman stars as Isabel Archer in Jane Campion's adaptation of Henry James' "Portrait of a Lady."

hand and acquires a vast fortune that allows her to live as she likes, establishes a clear connection with Campion's previous headstrong, independent leading ladies.

But when Isabel Archer (Nicole Kidman) places herself in a cage through marriage to a manipulative, spirit-sapping man, her life, as well as the film, loses definition and clarity. Wrap-up comes off as far too fuzzy and inconclusive in light of the intellectual surety with which pic begins, leaving the viewer perplexed by the story's arc and ultimate point.

Still, most obscure scene may be the opening one, which suggests a more radical interpretive film than that which follows. Over black-and-white images of contemporary 20ish girls frolicking together with a sort of flower-child abandon, an Australian woman's voice intones about the challenge of finding the right mate, someone who can be like a mirror to oneself. Any hope that this sequence will relate to anything else in the picture, or will be resolved by a companion book-end, is to remain frustrated.

But Campion then bursts through to the core of her concerns, as Isabel, in an admirably edgy scene, turns down the marriage proposal of Lord Warburton (Richard E. Grant). "I shall probably never marry," she speculates,

adding that she views marriage as a barrier to life's other opportunities.

Left parentless in Albany, N.Y., Isabel is staying at Gardencourt, the splendid estate of her aunt, Mrs. Touchett (a subdued Shelley Winters) and the latter's aged husband (John Gielgud). While the early scenes are necessarily devoted to introducing these and other characters, including Isabel's consumptive cousin Ralph Touchett (Martin Donovan) and the overweening Henrietta Stackpole (Mary-Louise Parker, pushing it), the attention of the director and screenwriter Laura Jones (who adapted "An Angel at My Table" for Campion) never strays far from reasserting Isabel's insistence upon exploring life to the fullest.

Campion's concentrated, poetic style sometimes catches the viewer off-guard, notably in Gielgud's memorable death scene. Also commanding is the introduction of a pivotal figure in Isabel's life, Madame Serena Merle (Barbara Hershey), a middle-aged beauty whom Isabel takes to be the Complete Woman.

But it's this unattached woman of the world who, paradoxically, leads Isabel into domestic oppression. In Italy, Isabel becomes intrigued by Madame Merle's friend, the affected American dilettante Gilbert Osmond (John Malkovich), a lazy artist.

Pic then jumps right over what would seem to be the most dramatically loaded events in Isabel's life — the erosion of her will, her decision to marry, her presumed introduction to sex by Osmond, the death of a baby boy at age 1 — to pick up the couple's life in Rome three years later. Already, Isabel has become an icy matron, at odds with her husband over the latter's desire to thwart the courtship between Osmond's teenage daughter, Pansy (a very fine Valentina Cervi), and a good-looking young Englishman (a purposeful Christian Bale).

This sideline intrigue proves moderately interesting in its own right, but the focus gradually returns to the deadening effect that the domineering Osmond has had on Madame Merle, Isabel and, potentially, his daughter, and to the question of how Isabel might escape. Eventually, she finds a way out, but the solution seems tentative.

Campion presents the story in a dark, lush, mysterious manner, using a style that perhaps relies overly upon closeups and occasionally indulges in the exoticism of the foreign for its own sake. A couple of dream/fantasy sequences are startlingly good: one in which Isabel imagines herself surrounded by her three suitors on a bed, and an even more inventive one that recounts, in mock-silent documentary style, her continuing preoccupation with Osmond during the course of long international travels.

Kidman is everything one could ask for as Isabel — bright, alert, optimistic. Malkovich's quirks and hard-to-read behavior work well for the deceptive Osmond, while Hershey is excellent in her early scenes in which Madame Merle is meant to represent woman at her best, but a tad less credible when she is brought low in the late going.

Donovan seems a bit soft at first as Isabel's sickly, admiring cousin, but his performance ultimately comes from behind to pay off. Grant is effective as the highly eligible bachelor who courts both Isabel and her daughter-in-law, while Viggo Mortensen's eager courtier proves a bit overbearingly earnest.

Physically, the film is ravishing, with Stuart Dryburgh's resplendent lensing taking full advantage of the carefully chosen British and Italian locations and showing off the lush beauty of Janet Patterson's production and costume designs. Wojciech Kilar's classically pitched score is supplemented by numerous well-known selections by Schubert and Strauss, and pic holds the interest throughout the nearly 2½-hour running time.

Still, this is a film that appeals to the head far more than to the heart, making for a portrait that seems somewhat less than complete.

—Todd McCarthy