Movie Review: 'Atonement'

by David_Elliott

"Atonement" has the glow of a film doing major literary beautification, the Serious Quality patina of movies that come at year's end to woo Oscar. They make you fret: Is it really that good, and will it last?

'ATONEMENT' - Keira Knightley and James McAvoy star in the adult drama 'Atonement,' based on the best-selling novel by Ian McEwan. CNS Photo courtesy of Alex Bailey. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) "Atonement" is that good, and it should last.

Joe Wright, again using the faceted gem of his 2005 "Pride & Prejudice," Keira Knightley, has with adapter Christopher Hampton fashioned a teeming but never merely cake-piled film of Ian McEwan's novel. To brand it "Masterpiece Theatre" or "Merchant and Ivory" is, despite some vapors of Jane Austen, Evelyn Waugh and Henry James, to be a glutton for glibness.

The plot pivots on an act of barely adult foolishness, compounded by juvenile spite. The young man becoming adult is Robbie Turner (James McAvoy), bright son of the housekeeper (Brenda Blethyn) at a succulent English estate. He is the virtual, adoptive son of the wealthy family and, despite the class barrier, has a crush on the gorgeous heiress Cecilia (Knightley).

A very hot summer includes some dicey business with a broken vase and a plush fountain (water is a major motif). And then a note, which Robbie mistakenly sends to Cecilia in a hasty, wounding version. Her kid sister, Briony, makes this gaffe resound with her voyeurism and a cruelly adolescent jealousy that, by way of her evolving conscience, provides the narrative voice of the story.

Briony is played in superb succession by the brisk Saoirse Ronan, by the grown and guilty Romola Garai, and finally by one of Britain's grandest talents, Vanessa Redgrave. It is Briony's imagination, with furtive echoes of "The Fallen Idol" and "The Go-Between," that reflects like a muse's mirror the love of Robbie and Cecilia.

The lovers are acted with profound sincerity by McAvoy and with a snappish hauteur that surpasses itself by Knightley. Both actors enlarge our sense of them, much as Laurence Olivier and Merle Oberon did so long ago in "Wuthering Heights."

"Atonement" has all the pleasurable adornments you'd want, including the estate with its Constable pastures and lofty halls, swank '30s wardrobes and Noel Coward-ish verbal zings. This is a world so obviously doomed that it seems to exist in a crystal ball, yet people live in it.

What shakes it to pieces is World War II. In the 1940 campaign in France, director Wright, cinematographer Seamus McGarvey and designer Sarah Greenwood touch more than the edge of greatness.

As Robbie, embittered but still love-swamped, makes his way with a few comrades past tragic marks of the German invasion to the beach panic at Dunkirk, the story coils as privacy meets history. In a long Steadicam sequence, chaos arrives with startling and lyrical anguish, with touches of Fellini and Bosch, and goes beyond the war madness depicted by Spielberg in "Empire of the Sun" to equal John Boorman's best work on "Hope and Glory."

This is a truly great sequence, so good that stitching up the story's late threads becomes a bit taxing and bookish. But the scenes in a London hospital rival it, and the force of human gravity carries right through to Redgrave's infallible appearance.

The nuances are not simply pegged in, they breathe. This war-hexed romance may possibly get to modern, mature audiences as "Brief Encounter" did in the postwar period, and without the lubricating seduction of Rachmaninoff's music.

"Atonement," a triumph of adulthood, atones for a lot of shoddy stuff at the movies in 2007.

A Universal Pictures release. Director: Joe Wright. Writer: Christopher Hampton, Ian McEwan. Cast: Keira Knightley, James McAvoy, Saoirse Ronan, Romola Garai, Brenda Blethyn, Juno Temple. Running time: 2 hours. Rated R. 4 stars.

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