

by Kimberly\_Gadette

### Movie Review of "NOTES ON A SCANDAL"

It's always a great pleasure to see two marvelous actors face off against each other. In "Notes On A Scandal," the filmmakers treat us to a double delight with England's Judi Dench versus Australia's Cate Blanchett, both nominated repeatedly for Oscars, and both having won for Best Supporting Actress (Dench for 1998's "Shakespeare in Love," and Blanchett for 2004's "The Aviator").

Mirroring the novel's device as a journal, the film opens in Barbara Covett's voice. Sitting on a park bench overlooking a London cityscape as if it were her particular piece of property, Dench's Barbara Covett muses in voiceover: "People have always trusted me with their secrets" but who do I trust with mine? You, only you." So begins the predatory tale of friendly alliances turned sour, first between new art teacher Sheba Hart (Cate Blanchett) and a 15-year-old male student who claims to need extra attention, and then between Sheba and the older-but-wiser schoolteacher Barbara Covett. Their names are obvious clues: "Covett" wants what she cannot have, while "Hart" gives much too freely of hers. Covett wants Hart any way she can get her "if it means that she's reduced to blackmailing her friend, then so be it.

Screenwriter Patrick Marber ("Closer") had a special challenge in that he had to adapt Covett's first-person diary and reconfigure the story, filtering it through the omniscient eye of the camera. Where the filmmakers could, "Notes On A Scandal" utilizes Covett's acerbic wit and no-holds-barred summation of humankind unduly pressing in on her. Her male teenage charges are "little towers of testosterone," Sheba's Down Syndrome child is "a tiresome court jester" and when Covett first sees Sheba in the faculty lounge talking to a larger woman, it's "the blonde and the pig in knickers."

Having worked together once before in 2001's "The Shipping News," Blanchett and Dench also share a far more unique distinction "in 1998, they both played Queen Elizabeth, and were both subsequently nominated for Oscars (Blanchett in "Elizabeth" and Dench in "Shakespeare in Love"). If the Golden Globes are any precursor, then the two will probably garner acting nominations once again. And rightly so: Dench's Covett feigns a kind yet lonely soul while masking a far more manipulative creature, her eyes every so often giving her away as they flash sparks of venom, letting us in on the fact that this is one dangerous woman.

Blanchett's Sheba Hart, the object of too many others' affections, allows the flattery to turn her head, until her head, as well as her world, spins out of control. The actress actually glows from within, effortlessly

capturing the hardest of hearts with a toss of a curl or a flip of a hip. Blanchett gives us the bored bourgeois mommy, hoping for one more sexy highlight before settling in to a middle class, middle-aged existence. In this performance, Blanchett's vulnerability that ultimately gives way to a gut-wrenching rampage, is absolutely stunning.

Bill Nighy ("Love Actually" "Pirates of the Caribbean") as the older husband who is the last to know is superb, his jovial-fellow-turned-cuckold played to perfection. As the 15-year-old student cum seducer, Andrew Simpson hits the right chords, using an interesting mix of vulnerability and deception to hide a more purposeful agenda. It is in the parallel between the boy's and the older schoolmarm's trickery that makes this film so unique.

In this quick-to-judge media age, when inappropriate sexual liaisons occur, we assume that it is always the minor who is the victim. In this rendition, however, that is not necessarily so. But sadly, the film builds and builds and then fizzles out before it reaches the final destination. It's as if the big climax that we were expecting, that the film alludes to with its swelling music and escalating scenes was all in our heads. Which then poses an ironic, unintended question: like Sheba Hart, have we also been deceived?

Grading this movie on the curve of the Deschutes River: B

[Click here to see the movie trailer for "Notes on a Scandal".](#)

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Production Credits: "NOTES ON A SCANDAL" Directed by: Richard Eyre Screenplay by: Patrick Marber Novel by: Zoe Heller Cast: Judi Dench, Cate Blanchett, Bill Nighy, Andrew Simpson Rated: R Running Time: 98 minutes Grade: B

*The Screen Savor: "Adultery in a Minor Key"™ by Kimberly\_Gadette*