

Movie Review: 'Evening'

by David_Elliott

People who call "Evening" a chick flick are not far wrong but may be ducking what the film offers.

The best element is casting, possibly the most elite gallery of women this year. Can a film go wrong that has Vanessa Redgrave, Claire Danes, Toni Collette, Natasha Richardson, Meryl Streep, Glenn Close, Eileen Atkins and endearing young Mamie Gummer?

'EVENING' - In 'Evening,' Vanessa Redgrave, right, plays an elderly mother who reminisces about her romantic past to her daughters, one played by Natasha Richardson, left. CNS Photo courtesy of Gene Page. At times, "Evening" is ripe to go wrong. The scene of old Ann (Redgrave), who is dying through the entire film, chasing a moth in her childish trance is just mawkish. And there are some lines like "Nice hair is nice."

Adapted by Susan Minot (with another writer) from her novel, the movie keeps a double ledger of plot. Ann is dying while grown daughters Nina (Collette) and Connie (Richardson) fret and watch over her deathbed. A night nurse (Atkins) also hovers, sometimes seen by Ann as an angel.

Those scenes flash back to a brisker youth, Ann's 1950s time as a larky beauty (Danes) with dreams to be a singer. She visits her dear friend Lila (Gummer) at a handsome beach home, for Lila's wedding. Lila's mom (Close) favors marriage to a handsome bore, but Lila still burns for quiet and manly Harris, who was the housekeeper's son and became a doctor after military service in Korea.

Ann also is drawn to Harris, acted stolidly by Patrick Wilson (yet with the smile of young Paul Newman). Wedding vapors kindle old and new hopes on warm nights, lustrously shot by Gyula Pados for fellow Hungarian Lajos Koltai, cinematographer turned director.

Jesting flirtatiously, Lila's alcoholic brother Buddy (Hugh Dancy) sulks and wisecracks. Maybe he wants

Ann. Maybe he wants ... well, let the sudden kiss speak for itself.

Pillowed by lush imagery, the cast remains alert, and there is a very moving bed scene of Redgrave and Streep. How can you not be moved by the heartfelt quavering of adorable Lila (Gummer is Streep's daughter) or by the wistful last talk of Redgrave and Richardson (Redgrave's daughter)?

Good acting makes a big difference. Koltai, if not inspired, is seldom pat. Minot is a nuanced writer, though she may have issues with the estate of playwright Philip Barry.

The moneyed, premarital whirl is in obvious debt to Barry's "The Philadelphia Story." And many figures echo the great film of his "Holiday": Danes, of Kate Hepburn's free-spirited heiress; Wilson (less charmingly), of regular guy Cary Grant; stiff daddy Barry Bostwick, of snob Henry Kolker; Gummer (a bit), of dutiful Doris Nolan; boozing, impudent Dancy (very much), of trapped brother Lew Ayres.

RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) There is even a special private room for dalliance, as in "Holiday." "Evening" reaches for more depth, at times plodding, never cloddish. The lessons about choice and loss and getting on in life have some decent heft, and there is a sunset magic in Redgrave's eyes.

A Focus Features release. Director: Lajos Koltai. Writers: Susan Minot, Michael Cunningham. Cast: Vanessa Redgrave, Claire Danes, Toni Collette, Meryl Streep, Patrick Wilson, Hugh Dancy, Natasha Richardson, Glenn Close, Mamie Gummer. Running time: 1 hour, 53 minutes. Rated PG-13. 2 1/2 stars.

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