

Film Review: *Dangerous Liaisons*

(*Dangerous Liaisons*: Warner Bros.; A Lorimar Film Entertainment; Based on the play by Christopher Hampton; Adopted from the novel *Les Liaisons dangereuses* by Choderlos de Laclos; Screenplay by Christopher Hampton; Produced by Norma Heyman and Hank Moon-jean; Directed by Stephen Frears.

Glenn Close (Marquise de Merteuil)

John Malkovich (Vicomte de Valmont)

Michelle Pfeiffer (Présidente de Tourvel)

In the two hundred odd years since the young officer from Amiens, Pierre Ambroise François Choderlos de Laclos, gave us *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, the work has never ceased to exert upon the reader a perennial and diabolical influence. It has always enjoyed a *succès de scandale*, nowhere more markedly than in the prim world of nineteenth-century England. And now we meet the 1782 classic transferred to the screen by Stephen Frears. The result is proving to be something of a cinematic feast. For the modern movie-goer who would not so much as be caught dead reading an eighteenth-century novel - epistolary at that - it will turn out to be a mixture of classical French elegance cheek-by-jowl with a measure of moral cynicism that seems quite at home in our day.

The original novelistic form of *Dangerous Liaisons*, as producers Norma Heyman and Hank Moonjean have chosen to entitle their film, does not come to us directly from Laclos. It has been detoured through the transforming pen of Christopher Hampton, who also supplied the screenplay, having first adapted the masterpiece to the stage. This theatre version enjoyed a stunning success both in the West End and on Broadway. It was only a question of time until it would make its way to the screen. Like Hampton, Frears has remained laudably faithful to Laclos's work, without however adhering slavishly to the original.

What constitutes the appeal of *Dangerous Liaisons* is remarkably similar to the enthralling and enduring quality of its eighteenth-century counterpart: the consummate marriage of formal elegance and moral depravity. This is

much the most attractive aspect of the film as, for me at least, it is of the novel. One finds no tension between the two opposed themes, no hint of artistic raggedness, no conflict on the creative level to parallel the appalling moral struggles of which the innocent are powerless victims. The preemptory flick of Madame de Volange's fan signals an impending checkmate for her daughter Cécile: one step closer to Valmont's endgame. The Marquise de Merteuil sits easily on her *bergère*, outfitted in vibrant yellow, eloquently sharing her creed of feminine duplicity with a callow but quick-learning *protégée*, Mlle de Volange. Glenn Close as the Marquise cuts a handsome figure of a woman, commanding of presence and possessed of a singularly concentrated sense of purpose. Whether her unwitting pawn is Cécile or her mother Mme de Volanges, Danceny or even ultimately the Vicomte de Valmont, there is little doubt: this lady is in the business of winning. Hubris looms in the form of her single weakness. She cannot grasp - at least not soon enough - that she is succumbing to the same Achilles' heel that she preys upon in Valmont. That fatal flaw in their immoral arsenal is the vulnerability which rises in the soul experiencing authentic feeling. Nourished too long and too successfully on a diet of factitious emotions, neither Valmont nor the Marquise de Merteuil is any longer able to take the measure of themselves on the scale of banal feelings. Surely this is the essential moral tragedy of their dangerous liaisons: moral bankruptcy has nothing more upon which to feed. As Lear, from the sterile richness of pragmatic egotism, observes to Cordelia: "Nothing will come of nothing."

Dangerous liaisons is a splendid visual banquet. Stephen Frears revels in a sort of cinematic epicureanism, much as Roland Barthes regaled us with his daring intellectual "tricks" or John Fowles toys with his consummate verbal virtuosity. Often heavy-handed and facile, Frears nonetheless sometimes attains moments of moving subtlety, as in those wonderful scenes where Valmont and Merteuil penetrate the masks to probe the sensitive layers beneath the elegance and grace.

Having seen both the Hampton stage production and the Frears film, I have had the opportunity to compare and ponder the differing effects of the use of the English and the American idiom and accent. For my part, I found the relaxed American speech patterns, though less elegant, nevertheless tailored to the lax moral fibre with which the protagonists weave their tapestry of depravity. As Valmont, John Malkovich speaks as malevolently with the face as with the tongue and Michelle Pfeiffer reaches a nice balance of haplessness, helplessness and nascent desire in the staccato, diffident flow of her speech.

All in all, Stephen Frears has succeed in creating a worthy echo of Laclos's novel without really attempting to upstage his master. The film's centre of gravity is different from, though not alien to, that of the original. Laclos chose to lift the veil just a little on the widespread corruption nestled, like a tarnished jewel, at the heart of the French upper class in the dying decades of the *ancien régime*. Frears luxuriates in the unalloyed joy of the hunt and of the deadly immoral game in which the Marquise and Valmont ceaselessly engage. The weaknesses of this film are merely those of the age: a certain superficiality in the treatment of superficiality and the failure to plumb the depths of moral evil with a sure aesthetic instinct. The creator of the film has perceived much in Laclos that is timeless and relevant to our modern purposelessness, as indeed there is much to perceive. He has somewhat overindulged himself in the complexities of the novel, thereby losing sight of Laclos's great redeeming aesthetic gift: discretion. Rodin, I am sure, had this in mind when he suggested that the single essential artistic principle was: "Toujours la vérité, mais pas toujours toute la vérité."

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