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Ladies in Lavender: A Critique

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Ladies in Lavender

Set in a Cornwall community in 1936, two old spinster sisters, Janet (Maggie Smith) and Ursula (Judi Dench) Widdington, wake one morning in their calm cottage after a violent storm to find a handsome young Pole named Andre (Daniel Brühl) has washed up onto their beach shore, barely alive and injured. The sisters take him into their care and into their hearts. Andre was headed towards America to start a new life before his mysterious arrival in England, possessing a great gift for playing violin. Janet tries carefully to contend with Ursula, who becomes foolishly lovesick for Andre and full of jealousy that leads to heartbreak. His playing captures the attention of a young aspiring Russian painter, Olga Daniloff (Natascha McElhone), who offers him an opportunity in a letter that the sisters keep hidden from him. The sisters are torn between letting Andre follow his musical aspirations and keeping him in their lives for their own different reasons, although he slips away without their knowledge. Janet and Ursula are left with one another and the changing tide. Ladies in Lavender is a beautiful, compelling and gentle drama, filled with masterful acting, moving music and subtle humor, that grips your attention to the very end.

Dench and Smith steal the spotlight in the film, as Academy-Award winners notable for their brilliant on-stage and screen performances (Verniere, 2005, p. e12). “The pleasure of watching these old pros going about their business with effortless refinement is enough of a selling point,” Gene Seymour said to *Newsday* (Anderson, et al., 2005, p. B10). As Janet, Smith shares a strong, protective bond with her sister and is brusque and bittersweet. When Ursula asks Andre if he is hungry by making munching

motions with her mouth to communicate meaning, for example, she invites Janet to say, “Oh Ursula, stop it, you look like a cannibal” (Powell & Dance, 2004).

Dench is an ageless, spirited and slightly mischievous dreamer as Ursula. Seymour describes Dench’s character as “emotionally vulnerable and delicately yearning,” a character she does not play often (Anderson et al., 2005, p. B10). Ursula shakes her sister to get out of bed and look at the post-storm sun, showing the eagerness of a child (Powell & Dance, 2004). She creeps upstairs to watch Andre sleeping when Janet goes outside to the garden, showing her impish nature (Powell & Dance, 2004). We can only watch Ursula helplessly, as she foolishly struggles with her love for Andre that she never voices except through her eyes and facial expressions (Catterall, 2004).

Miriam Margolyes plays Dorcas, the sisters’ barbed, tough Cornish housekeeper and cook, who serves as a source of humor throughout the film. She gets easily flustered trying to make Andre understand how she wants him to peel potatoes. Andre peels out a smiley face in a potato, to which Dorcas relies, “Now don’t get artistic, just peel the blummin’ thing” (Powell & Dance, 2004). Natascha McElhone plays Olga, who serves as Andre’s opportunity for his musical success as well as a distraction. Daniel Brühl plays the foreign stranger, talented musician and object of affection, Andre, but does nothing remarkable as an actor worth noting.

Music is an essential element to the film. It is Andre’s gift for playing violin that stirs feelings in Ursula and interest in Olga. The music sets the tone perfectly in each setting, like the upbeat song, “Zabawa Weselna,” Andre plays at the local pub (Verniere, 2005, p. e12), and the slow violin plucks and bass notes of “Potatoes” in the Dorcas and Andre potato-peeling scene. Tear-jerking with an “unusual elegance and artistry,” as Rex

Reed of the *New York Observer* describes it (2005, p.28), the musical score was composed by Nigel Hess and played by The Royal Philharmonic Orchestra with famous violinist, Joshua Bell. The final piece, “Fantasy for Violin and Orchestra,” reaches the hearts and souls of the entire audience, as well as closure for Ursula.

I couldn't agree more with online film critic and screenwriter Mary-Ann Johanson about this film: “There's a marvelous mythic sensibility to this lovely film about last chances and elemental emotions” (2005). Based on a short story by William J. Locke and envisioned by director, Charles Dance, the film ends as it began - the sisters return to their serene lives and walks along the beach. We are sad for Ursula, as we want her to win with love, but are nevertheless touched by Andre's music and the kindness of those who gave life and love to him.

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