



Fact Sheet

Friday 23 October 2006

Media Studies

Film Review: *The Devil Wears Prada/ A Prairie Home Companion*

Recalling a lesson from drama school Meryl Streep says the teacher had asked the class: “How do you be the Queen?”

Streep said members of the class responded: “Oh, it’s about posture and authority.”

However, the teacher’s reply was: “No, it’s about how the air in the room shifts when you walk in.”

Meryl Streep clearly took those words to heart and made them her own because her presence infuses a unique quality into every movie in which she performs. She certainly shifts the air on-screen in a way that nobody else can.

Choose a selection of the films from her thirty-year career and you will be looking at some of the finest performances ever recorded in motion pictures:

A few of my favorites: *Kramer versus Kramer* in 1979, *Sophie’s Choice* in 1982, *Out of Africa* in 1985, *The Bridges of Madison County* in 1996, and *The Hours* in 2002 – and that’s just a few of them.

Meryl Streep’s quite phenomenal abilities have been recognized with thirteen nominations for Academy Awards – a record which separates her by a long way from her contemporaries and places her in the company of luminaries from an earlier period: Laurence Olivier, Bette Davis and Katherine Hepburn.

Her nominations include ten for Best Actress and three for Best Supporting Actress.

She has won two Oscars: Best Supporting Actress for “*Kramer versus Kramer*” in 1979 and Best Actress for “*Sophie’s Choice*” in 1982.

In 2004 Meryl Streep received the thirty-second Life Achievement Award from the American Film Institute – the highest American honor for a career in film.

She was only the sixth woman to receive this award.

Streep is indeed a very rare creature – a character actress with star quality. You don’t go to her movies just to watch Meryl Streep being herself once again. You go along in the expectation that you will be entranced by the new character that she conjures into life on the screen.

Her ability to transform herself and inhabit the role of a character is simply astounding.

This chameleon-like ability is showcased to great effect in two movies which are both screening currently: “*The Devil Wears Prada*” and “*A Prairie Home Companion*”.

The two characters which Streep plays in these movies could hardly be more different one from another.

In “*The Devil Wears Prada*” she plays Miranda Priestly the super – bitch editor of a New York fashion magazine who is imbued with seemingly limitless power within the ephemeral and fickle world of high fashion.

Miranda sees herself as the absolute monarch of her realm and treats her subservient employees as if they are her own fashion accessories – useful for a short time and then discarded with disdain.

She is a really nasty piece of work and it's a tribute to the writers as well as to Streep's performance that we quickly grow to detest her and fear for those who must work under her vile authoritarian regime.

Into this cat-scratch-cat world comes a young woman called Andrea – played with great confidence by actress Anne Hathaway.

Andrea is a newly-graduated journalist who sees the opportunity of working on Miranda Priestly's magazine as a good launching-pad for her career.

Sensing the underlying quality of the applicant, Priestly employs her as one of her personal assistants and proceeds to work her like a roman slave adding unrelenting humiliation to the girl's round-the-clock burden of work.

The dramatic tension in the movie emerges from the battle of wills between the two women.

Young, talented Andrea is determined to make a go of her job and resist being crushed and thrown aside by her ruthless task-mistress.

Miranda just keeps pouring on the heat, demanding more and still more commitment from her underling.

As the tension escalates and the pressure of work causes Andrea's private life to begin to crumble we know that a breaking point must surely come.

When it does come, it's a dramatic moment that's handled with skill and a touch of humor.

There's actually quite a bit of humor layered through the movie and this has the effect of softening the effect of the brutal, whimsical savagery and destructiveness which is depicted as the norm in the world of high fashion.

“The Devil Wears Prada” is a tightly-written movie with good performances from the supporting cast but the pivotal character is the feared and fearful Miranda Priestly.

Meryl Streep plays her as if she were fashioned from ice-cold, tempered steel.

A loathsome character revealed to perfection by an acting genius.

You may find the self-serving world of high fashion to be a turn-off but “The Devil Wears Prada” employs an almost surgical precision in its satire of this wasteful industry and this is one of the achievements of this movie.

The other is Meryl Streep's performance.

The combination rates four stars.

Meanwhile, at the art-house theatre around the corner, there's Meryl Streep yet again – but this time playing a totally different character.

In “A Prairie Home Companion” Streep plays one of a duo of country and western singers – The Johnson Sisters. The other sister is played by a rather-restrained Lily Tomlin.

There is no cold steel in Streep's character this time – not so much as a stray iron filing.

Wearing clothes that would cause Mr Prada to fall into a decline with an attack of the vapors, Streep is soft-edged and a little fey, easily overwhelmed by the syrupy emotions of the songs she sings.

She radiates a dewy-eyed sensitivity that has made her vulnerable to life's slings and arrows – particularly the arrows launched by Cupid.

Off stage, she is shown to be a warm-hearted single-mother glowing with love for her angst-ridden poetry-writing teenage daughter for whom she tries, somewhat ineffectually, to provide understanding and encouragement.

Streep is completely convincing as the down-home country and western singer and her vocalising is a delight – yet another revelation of the abounding talents of this woman.

Apparently, in her early student years, Meryl Streep contemplated pursuing a career as a singer and even took some operatic training.

However, until now, she has only sung in two movies, the most recent being “Postcards from the Edge” which was released sixteen years ago.

In “A Prairie Home Companion” she sings a number of songs and displays – as one would expect - an ability to interpret the lyrics thoughtfully and touchingly.

Her vocal range, meanwhile, moves between caressing notes with near whispers through to raunchy, throaty growls.

In the movie, you quickly develop the expectation that every time Meryl steps up to the microphone something exciting is going to happen.

And the movie itself is good fun.

It's a gentle, chuckly comedy fantasy inspired by the final live-to-air performance of a real-life long-running radio show which was, in fact called, “A Prairie Home Companion”.

Meryl Streep is not actually the star of this movie, she's merely one of an ensemble of well-known and not-so well-known performers including Woody Harrelson, John C. Reilly and Kevin Kline.

The person whose presence is felt most strongly throughout the movie is a guy called Garrison Keillor who simply plays himself as the gently-funny, laid-back host of the radio show.

Keillor was, after all, the person who, in real life, originated the radio show called “A Prairie Home Companion” in St. Paul, Minnesota, back in 1974 and kept it going for some thirty years.

Now aged 64, Keillor is a prolific author, storyteller and comedian and wrote the screenplay for this movie.

The film was directed by Robert Altman, the veteran Hollywood maverick who has for long irritated the Hollywood establishment by determinedly pursuing his own quirky style of movie-making regardless of the cost and lack of large box-office returns.

However, “A Prairie Home Companion” is far less quirky than some of his other movies and, with its witty dialogue, easy-listening music and good performances it should do well enough at the box office.

The radio show takes place on the stage of an old theatre in front of a live audience. The stage is cluttered with people and things: a large band, a row of microphones for the singers, a lectern for the presenter and a sound effects man and his equipment.

The backdrop is formed by a piece of scenery representing the front porch of a weatherboard prairie home.

Director Altman's signature style, typified by over-lapping dialogue and proscenium framing with lots of action taking place on screen, is particularly well-suited to capturing the essence of this situation.

A lot of the action also takes place off-stage behind the scenes and Kevin Kline is at his comical best as the show's self-important security man, a narcissistic ladies man in a sharp pin-striped suit and slicked-down hair.

He has some really funny lines mixed with some chortly Pink Panther-style prat falls.

Kline's voice-over narration at the very beginning of the movie delightfully apes the style of a Raymond Chandler private detective story tickling the funny bone right from the start.

If you have sometimes been disappointed by Robert Altman movies this one will not be one of those.

It's charming, nostalgic, funny and satisfying and I'd give it four out of five.

And then, of course, there's Meryl.

It used to be that the career of a movie actress was pretty much over by the time she turned forty.

There have always been exceptions, of course, and Meryl is certainly one of them.

At 57 she seems to be getting better all the time and, happily, has plenty of work coming on.

She's currently working on six or seven more movies.

And that's got to be good news for all of us.

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October 24, 2006