

Stephen Frears contributes something

High Fidelity, directed by Stephen Frears, based on the novel by Nick Hornby

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It's difficult to put one's finger on the career of Stephen Frears, the British director of *High Fidelity*. Born in 1941, the filmmaker worked at the Royal Court Theatre in London, a hotbed of experimentation and political radicalism at the time, before going into film work in 1966. He worked as assistant director to Karel Reisz on *Morgan!* and subsequently assisted Reisz on other films, Albert Finney on *Charlie Bubbles* (1967) and Lindsay Anderson on *If...* (1968). In other words, Frears was involved with relatively interesting artistic and intellectual circles.

His first feature film, *Gumshoe* (1972), starred Finney as a Liverpool bingo caller who reinvents himself as a Philip Marlowe-style private detective. There's not too much to the film, but it does stay in the memory for some of its modest, human moments. If I could use a word that is so often *misused*, Frears' films at their best communicate a gentleness.

He worked extensively in British television during the 1970s, not making his second feature, *The Hit*, until 1984. That film concerns a stool pigeon (Terence Stamp) tracked down in Spain after 10 years by hired killers working for the crime boss on whom he has informed. The film is no masterpiece, but again the director treats the ins and outs of the odd relationships with a certain delicacy.

Frears attained probably his greatest degree of recognition and critical acclaim in the mid-1980s, with *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1986), *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (1987) and *Prick Up Your Ears* (1987). The first two Frears made in collaboration with the writer Hanif Kureishi and dealt with the consequences for the younger generation in Britain of the conflict or confluence of cultures, ethnic and sexual.

I felt the Frears-Kureishi efforts were somewhat overpraised. The willingness to explore unorthodox sexual themes was no doubt freeing, particularly for those who'd had to conceal their preferences. It was all to the good, as well, that the complex reality of a multi-ethnic society was more or less honestly addressed. Moreover, against the fairly miserable efforts of American directors at the time, British films seemed to shine. They at least continued to address problems that one could recognize as human.

However, a good many of the British efforts, produced by Channel Four among others, seem in retrospect too dependent on a recipe of their own: a heaping together of different cultural influences and sexual practices, organized against a backdrop of urban decay—humorously or otherwise treated—to which a *soupçon* of radical politics was added. This would, we were led to believe, cut a path to human liberation. It struck me that the filmmakers were looking for shortcuts. A number of these films simply seem dated. (*A Letter to Brezhnev* [1985] and the like.)

In 1988 Frears “fulfilled his longtime wish” and went to work in Hollywood, a move “he hoped would broaden his potential while providing greater financial rewards,” according to one commentator. As many others before him have discovered, the individual who sets off to conquer the American studio system runs the risk of being conquered himself. *Dangerous Liaisons* (1988) was not an artistic success and although many considered *The Grifters* (1990) a ‘return to form,’ Frears certainly hit a low point with *Hero* (1992), a banal and fairly pointless effort. At the time I rather too harshly wrote him off.

Nor did his subsequent efforts in the 1990s make a

deep or even favorable impression: *Mary Reilly* (1996), *The Van* (1996) and *Hi-Lo Country* (1998). It's not clear that Frears has a single theme that obsesses him. He obviously feels sympathy for those on the margins of society. But his eclecticism has seemed a weakness, a tendency perhaps to adapt to stronger personalities, including some of his leading performers, and various social milieus.

In *High Fidelity*, Frears' latest work, Rob Gordon (John Cusack) is a record store owner in Chicago, whose girlfriend, Laura (the Danish actress Iben Hjejle), has just walked out on him. Rob addresses the camera and describes his difficulties in life and love. The film revolves around his efforts, carried out with varying degrees of seriousness, to win Laura back.

There are a number of irritating aspects to the film. Rob and his two employees (and sidekicks) live in a mental world where almost everything is referenced to popular music and its history. They continually compile and compare lists of “five greatest ...” or “ten greatest ...” this or that. They know the original rendition of every imaginable song. They argue at considerable length about pop music esoterica. This sort of thing wears thin in the film, as do people who operate this way—insofar as there are such fanatics—in real life. A legitimate response to those who can remember all the Number One songs of 1967 or 1982 might be: hasn't anything entered your head since then that might have knocked some of that out?

Cusack's addressing the camera also fails to have the sort of dramatic impact it might have, simply because what he tells us is not terribly enlightening. I don't know Nick Hornby's novel, set in Britain, so it's impossible for me to determine whether the book provides more of a perspective on the central character than the film does. Rob describes himself as not terribly smart or energetic and proves true to his word, but, unfortunately, he's all we have to lead us through things. *High Fidelity* therefore always feels somewhat stunted, restricted as it is to his point of view. And when it suddenly expands into social satire, it seems to overreach.

Nonetheless, Frears and his performers bring something to the film that makes it appealing. Are there works in which a less than compelling narrative (let's say, even a quite inadequate one) becomes merely an occasion for filmmaker and actors to offer certain

attractively human qualities—love, desire, sincerity, anxiety—to the public? In other words, while there are occasional *intentionally* amusing and even insightful moments in *High Fidelity*, there seems to be another element, working beneath and behind the narrative, that's drawing one's primary interest.

Cusack, Joan Cusack, Lili Taylor and Sara Gilbert have always been honest and sympathetic in their acting. One cares about them. Hjejle (a veteran of the *Dogma* group films) is radiant. Todd Louiso and Jack Black are more charming than annoyingly quirky as the store employees. Catherine Zeta-Jones and Lisa Bonet are effective as women who pass through Rob's life. (Tim Robbins strikes the only sour note among the performers, overacting as he generally does.)

What's appealing can't simply be a happy accident. Frears is presiding over the goings-on, so one must give him credit. Forced to sum it up, one might say, simply, that the positive impact of the film results principally from the kindness and affection with which it was made. In exercising “gentleness” once again, Frears perhaps holds up, deliberately or not, an alternative to the almost unrelenting harshness of everyday life just at the moment. And that must be worth something.



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