

Another timeless love affair: Joe Wright's *Atonement*

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24 January 2008

Directed by Joe Wright, screenplay by Christopher Hampton, from the novel by Ian McEwan

Atonement is director Joe Wright's follow up to 2005's *Pride and Prejudice*. It reunites him with actress Keira Knightley, who was nominated for an Oscar for her work in that film. Like its predecessor, *Atonement* has proved to be another darling of the award show circuit, winning the Golden Globe for Best Drama on January 13. On January 22, it was nominated for a number of Academy Awards, including the categories of best picture, best cinematography and best supporting actress (for Saoirse Ronan), among others.

Set in England during the Second World War, events in *Atonement* are seen primarily through the eyes of Briony Tallis (Ronan), the imaginative 13-year-old daughter of the wealthy Tallis family. Wright and screenwriter Christopher Hampton employ a familiar device throughout the work: One sees certain episodes through Briony's eyes and then again from an objective viewpoint so the viewer may witness what actually happened. The central conflict of the film will arise due to Briony making certain judgments and accusations based on an insufficient understanding of events playing out before her eyes.

Briony has an older sister, Cecilia (Keira Knightley), who strikes one as being somewhat more liberated than the rest of her family. At the very least, she smokes constantly and is vaguely unhappy. Cecilia squabbles with her friend Robbie Turner (James McAvoy), the son of a Tallis family servant, until the two discover one day that they are in love.

This discovery comes as the result of a letter written to Cecilia by Robbie. Intending to send her a letter of apology for an incident which occurred early in the day, Robbie inadvertently sends Cecilia a very obscene letter which he'd written about her for his own

amusement in a moment of frustration. Rather than being repulsed by the letter, as Robbie expects, Cecilia "suddenly" becomes aware that she is in love with Robbie and he with her. The scenes which play out around the delivery of the letter are some of the best in the film. It makes for a thoroughly entertaining and perhaps even surprising episode in an interesting first half-hour of the work. Unfortunately, the qualities found here are not sustained through the remainder of the film.

The obscene letter is one in a series of misunderstandings that leads Briony, having delivered the message on Robbie's behalf and making sure to read it in the process, to the conclusion that Robbie is a "sex maniac." When late the same evening in which the letter incident has taken place Briony witnesses her cousin Lola being—she believes—sexually assaulted by an older man in a dark field outside her home, she accuses Robbie of the crime. He is soon taken away by police as both his mother and Cecilia protest.

From here, the film makes a leap forward in time. Robbie, given the choice of remaining in prison or joining the military, has chosen to go to war. Able to reunite with Cecilia before deploying, the two rekindle their affair. Robbie learns that Cecilia left her family in disgust at their having allowed him to be sent to prison for something she was sure he did not do. Now a nurse, both she and Robbie are destined to be separated again by the war. Briony (now played by Romola Garai), also studying to become a nurse, is racked with guilt over her false accusations against Robbie.

It's here that the film begins to disappoint. Cecilia, who seemed a more substantive and promising character in the earlier parts of the picture, is now reduced to repeating "Come back to me, Robbie" for the duration. Her affair with Robbie, which involved

considerable passion in the first part of the film, is now reduced to a number of clichés. There is even the inevitable scene in which Robbie chases after a bus which is taking Cecilia away from him as a lush and sentimental theme plays out on the score; one can only be grateful it wasn't a train and that Cecilia wasn't waving a white handkerchief.

The film focuses so intently and so narrowly on the star-crossed lovers that little room is left for the rest of the world. The treatment of the war itself is superficial. In Wright's film, the war consists primarily of a series of shots in which weary soldiers trudge along in front of a picturesque sunset. There is little here, frankly, that feels especially genuine or, for that matter, terribly specific to the times. While certain events make their way into the film—the evacuation at Dunkirk in May and June of 1940, the bombing of the Balham tube station on October 14, 1940—there is ultimately no reason why *Atonement* had to be set during World War II. In fact, there's no reason why the film could not have been set during the First World War or during the War of 1812 for that matter. Anything might have supplied the necessary “epic” event (for this is an “epic romance”) to keep the lovers apart. One doesn't feel that these characters' lives are truly bound up with the times in which they live. They are, consequently, very thin creations.

One's final impression of *Atonement* is that it is a missed opportunity. There are a number of interesting themes in the material the filmmakers had available to address. There is the false accuser and the trauma their accusation causes not only for the accused, but for the accuser herself. There is the war, and especially the Dunkirk evacuation. There is a millionaire war profiteer who covers up his sexual adventures with a young girl by letting an innocent man go to jail in his place. There is the servant who steps out of his “place” to begin an affair with a wealthy socialite.

In their treatment of such material, however, the filmmakers have only skimmed the surface. At times they provide us with a memorable moment or, more often, a memorable image: Cecilia lying on a diving board, not listening to her millionaire suitors as they chatter on about their businesses. But these are moments which, though perceptive at times, are rarely ever penetrating. They are moments which, finally, do not add up. Taken as a whole, *Atonement* is a

disappointing work.



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