

Is Chéri genuinely ‘subversive’?

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1 August 2009

Directed by Stephen Frears; screenplay by Christopher Hampton

Over the opening sequence of *Chéri*, a voiceover asserts that in Paris, during the *Belle Époque* (the late 19th century to World War I), successful courtesans were the most powerful women in society. They could amass considerable wealth. As they aged, however, they were ostracized and confined to a narrow circle of friends, namely, their fellow prostitutes.

Veteran British director Stephen Frears’ new movie is based on the 1920 novel by Colette (and, briefly, its sequel, published in 1926). The movie centers on the splendid Léa de Lonval (Michelle Pfeiffer), the most successful of her profession, now approaching fifty and ready to retire (“Is there anything in the world more wonderful than a bed all to yourself?”).

Her friend and rival, the opulent and corpulent Charlotte Peloux (Kathy Bates), has a dissolute son in need of taming before he can be married into wealth to secure his mother’s future. Charlotte chooses Léa for the job and Fred, or Chéri (Rupert Friend), as he was nicknamed as a child by Léa, is agreeable.

The older woman squanders a considerable fortune on Chéri even as she maintains her emotional detachment. To her surprise, and in spite of her guardedness, the couple stays together for six years. For his part, Chéri remains a spoilt, petulant boy who has a propensity for gender inversion. Their relationship seems to float through time and space like a weightless, overstuffed pillow.

But the depth of the emotional liaison—a forbidden love that has surreptitiously developed—only becomes clear when Chéri accepts another of his mother’s arrangements, this time with disastrous results.

Chéri is visually intoxicating. The costume and scenery are lush. If, however, there is a socially critical element in the Colette novel, the filmmakers were not

fully able to extract it. Although Frears does say something about the doomed and isolating nature, or unnaturalness of being rich, this sentiment in the film is too vague and buried in elegance. (Frears states that he tried to “deal with the surface and the underneath at the same time.”) Christopher Hampton’s script is tepid, a problem Frears was not inclined to overcome.

For lack of being taken in hand, the actors sometimes run amok. Bates seems incapable here of subtly delivering spiteful lines (to Pfeiffer) such as: “Don’t you find that now the skin is a little less firm, it holds perfume better?” The talented Friend can’t quite work out who he is and how to perform when contradictory impulses are at play. He stumbles over lines that are worth remembering, such as, “No one is as busy as the woman who has nothing to do.”

Pfeiffer comes through intact, albeit with a flat American accent. Her character’s dilemma, by analogy, is meant to suggest, and does suggest, something about Hollywood’s unfairness toward its actresses as they age. Sadly, she seems to be saying to the audience that despite her long career and great beauty, she is at risk of being discarded.

In general, the film’s preoccupation with hairstyle, clothing and decor goes hand in hand with a thematic passivity. Nonetheless, the director does show that Léa’s vulnerability is the product of decades of easy living and life on the fringes—an unhappy state of affairs that renders her incapable of helping Chéri, beyond keeping him free of drugs and syphilis.

Her ultimate pain is not that she is in the twilight years of her profession, but that she cannot provide her lover with an internal compass, something denied those who hail from her world. While courtesans gain monetarily by servicing the rich, they are stripped of their right to live like human beings. In any case, as Frears says, “It all comes tumbling down in the end”—emotionally, physically and historically.

The “lost realm of courtesans,” as described in the film’s production notes, is distinguished by “the beautiful, ambitious lower-class women who found power, influence and fabled wealth long before contemporary women” and who were “shunned from the rest of polite society ... [They were] the first emancipated women.” This last notion is extremely questionable, and seems rather outdated. It may help explain why the filmmakers view the writings of Colette as especially relevant.

Frears has genuine and serious social concerns. Among these is a sense of the tragedy of the socially advantaged, who are forced to obey impossible social rules. Speaking of his 2006 movie *The Queen*, he told an interviewer: “I would say of Prince Charles or the Queen that they are the most privileged people in the country, and in some ways the least privileged. The things that you and I take for granted, like maternal love and warmth and all those things, these rich people have gone without. But of course you and I know that they’re absolutely vital to people, and the people who don’t have them, miss them ...

“It’s a terrible life. Whereas we can have happy relationships with our wives, our children, you know, just ordinary family lives. Tragic figures ... So will Paris Hilton find happiness?”

In another interview, Frears stated that he considered making films about society’s victims as a form of political criticism: “In the 80s and 90s, I made a succession of films about Pakistanis, gay people, women, the French aristocracy, and I came to realize that they became a sort of metaphor for ‘opposition’ and that they were really all about Mrs. Thatcher and ways of attacking Mrs. Thatcher.” He then adds, “I think I like subversive films.”

How would one make a subversive film today? While Thatcher in Britain and Reagan and the two Bush administrations in the US were abhorrent to many artists and intellectuals, what happens when a “New Labour” (or an Obama!) comes to power? No doubt Frears does not quite mean to say this, but his reference to “opposition” in the “80s and 90s,” by implication, suggests that he does not find himself in opposition, or the same degree of opposition, today.

This is an objective problem. Such people supported Labour replacing the Tories, and probably haven’t approved of the Blair-Brown policies, but are fairly

clueless as to how to respond. This has its artistic consequences.

With *Chéri*, Hampton was apparently allowed to set the film’s tone—with weak results. By comparison, for example, *Camille*, George Cukor’s 1936 film, with Greta Garbo, based on the Alexandre Dumas (fils) novel, tells a similar story with greater feeling and, oddly, social conviction.

Frears is a director who, over the course of nearly four decades, has done or tried to do interesting things: *Gumshoe*, *My Beautiful Laundrette*, *Prick Up Your Ears*, *Dangerous Liaisons*, *The Grifters*, *The Snapper*, *The Hi-Lo Country*, *High Fidelity*, *Dirty Pretty Things*, *The Queen* and more. He is intelligent and sensitive. He perhaps intends, with *Chéri*, to make a cautionary tale about the collapse of the gilded age in the catastrophe of 1914 and beyond. Such a parallel is entirely legitimate.

The circumstances of the rich, celebrities and royalty are tragic when examined from a certain point of view. The artistic treatment of their situation, however, needs to involve a broader, angrier critique of a social order destructive in so many ways and on so many levels. The portraying of society’s upper echelons needs to be forceful and not simply oriented toward the unfortunate fate of this or that individual, no matter how inhuman and wretched that fate may be.



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