

Albert Nobbs: A model of repression

David Walsh
15 February 2012

Directed by Rodrigo Garcia, screenplay by Glenn Close, John Banville and Gabriella Prekop, based on a story by George Moore

In *Albert Nobbs*, directed by Rodrigo Garcia, the title character is a woman who has passed as a man for decades, working as a waiter in a Dublin hotel in the 1890s.

Albert (Glenn Close) is a perfect servant, obedient, undemanding, always ready to perform one function or another at the behest of the hotel owner, Mrs. Baker (Pauline Collins) or a guest. She spends her evenings counting up her hard-earned savings, which she keeps hidden under a floorboard in her room.

Obligated to share her bed—much against her will—with a workman, house painter Hubert Page (Janet McTeer), Albert inadvertently reveals her female form in the middle of the night. She begs Hubert not to tell. “He” promises, but soon reveals “himself” to be a woman as well. Furthermore, Hubert is apparently happily married, to Cathleen (Bronagh Gallagher), and Albert soon pays the couple a visit.

Encouraged by Hubert’s example, although she is confused by the exact arrangements of her new friend’s marriage (did Hubert tell Cathleen her gender on their wedding night, or before, or ... ?), Albert timidly pursues Helen Dawes (Mia Wasikowska), one of the hotel’s young maids. Albert has a dream of opening a shop with the money she has accumulated through a thousand sacrifices and acts of abasement.

Helen, however, has taken up with a rough-and-tumble employee at the hotel, Joe Mackins (Aaron Johnson), who wants to emigrate to America (“There’s no hope for us here”). He initially encourages Helen to go out with Albert, to see if she can pry gifts, or even money, from the waiter.

A typhoid epidemic temporarily closes the hotel and has a major impact on Hubert’s life. In its wake, Albert asks the now pregnant Helen to marry her, but the latter scoffs at her unexpected suitor’s unmanly lack of physical aggressiveness. A confrontation between Joe—who becomes abusive toward Helen as the harsh reality of their situation dawns on both of them—and Albert has a tragic outcome.

The strong point of the film is its compassionate portrayal of one of society’s most wretched unfortunates. Albert lives a life of unbearable loneliness, indeed total “apartness.” She has done her best to be invisible to everyone around her, to turn into a shade. Her existence is as close to a non-existence as she can manage.

Albert’s occupation facilitates her effort. To the hotel guests, she may as well not exist. Servants and waiters at the time were taught not to make eye contact with their betters—Albert is only too happy to oblige.

Even this ghost, however, when confronted by the example of

happiness apparently represented by Hubert and Cathleen, proves to be human and desperate for affection and companionship. Within the framework of *Albert Nobbs*, this proves fatal to her. But the alternative, in any case, is a variety of living death.

One of the film’s built-in difficulties, it should be noted, is a central figure so thoroughly damaged and the victim of almost unrelieved misery. Albert’s trials and tribulations generate appalled fascination, but characters who engage in some amount of kicking and screaming against their life conditions, even if misdirected and anti-social, tend to exercise more interest. Around the two-thirds mark, the film grows a bit tedious.

At any rate, the ultimate source of *Albert Nobbs* is a story by Irish writer George Moore (1852-1933), which first appeared as a number of chapters in *A Story-Teller’s Holiday* (1918), and then on its own in his *Celibate Lives* (1927). Moore, from an Irish landowning family, was a free thinker who spent a number of years in the 1870s in Paris, where he associated with many of the impressionist painters, as well as some of the advanced writers of the day, including Alphonse Daudet, Stéphane Mallarmé, Ivan Turgenev and Émile Zola. The latter had a particular importance for the Irish writer.

Moore is credited, among other things, with introducing the realist, Zola-influenced novel to English-language readers, in works such as *A Modern Lover*, *A Mummies Wife*, *A Drama in Muslin* and *Esther Waters* (often considered his strongest work) in the 1880s and 1890s. His books provoked controversy and efforts to ban them for their forthright discussion of prostitution, adultery and homosexuality.

Critic Brendan Kennelly writes eloquently that, in *Albert Nobbs*, Moore criticizes “the atmosphere of unrelieved poverty and squalor; the frustration of all ideals; the suppression of individual thinking; the hysterical fear of sex as the supreme evil of which man is capable; the confusion of servility with obedience, furtive inhibition with virtuous self-denial, caution with wisdom; the fear of full expression and hence the distrust of the artist.”

A reading of the story, both touching and understated, confirms this comment. It is frightening and piteous when Albert, unmasked as a woman, falls to her knees in front of Hubert. The latter exclaims, “My good woman ... get up from your knees and tell me how long you have been playing this part. Ever since I was a girl, Albert answered. You won’t tell upon me, will you, Mr Page, and prevent a poor woman from getting her living?” Over the course of tortured decades she has never told another living soul her secret.

While recounting her life to Hubert, Albert recalls a time, before she began to dress as a man, when she was unlucky in love: “It was the hopelessness of it that set the tears streaming down my cheeks over my pillow, and I used to stuff the sheet into my mouth to keep back the sobs lest my old nurse should hear me; it wouldn’t do to keep her awake, for she was very ill at that time; and soon afterward she died, and I was left alone, without a friend in the world.”

The editors of a collection of Moore's writings write that the ideas he "sought to express in his shorter fiction were always connected by a determination to explore the singularity, even peculiarity of the individual human condition, no matter how diverse the background or the setting. Moore's Irish tales are concerned with the unfulfilled or troubled life, the narratives in which external forces, particularly the Church, seek to suppress the individual will and desire."

Albert Nobbs would serve a valuable purpose if its only result were to encourage readers to seek out Moore's uneven, but occasionally remarkable body of work.

Inevitably, thanks to its motifs of cross-dressing and sexual transgression, Moore's tale was taken up by feminist and postmodern writers, returning to life in 1977 as *The Singular Life of Albert Nobbs*, by French writer-director Simone Benmussa. In her hands, according to a commentator, the story entered the service of "materialist feminism," which argues that, "gender is not innate. Rather, it is dictated through enculturation, as gender divisions are placed at the service of the dominant culture's ideology."

Or as another likeminded thinker proclaimed, "There is nothing given about gender. ... Identity is rather an effect of signifying practices rooted in regimes of power/knowledge characterized as compulsory heterosexuality and phallogocentrism."

To argue that female identity is *entirely* "a historical and cultural construction," that gender has no objective, physiological basis and *simply* operates to uphold existing relations, is absurd and speaks to the type of wildly misguided and reactionary "theorizing" that went on in academic left circles in the 1980s and 1990s—and still goes on. (And one must add, if this is what the filmmakers think they have proven in their adaptation of Moore's short story they are deluding themselves.)

In any event, Glenn Close played the leading part in Benmussa's play in an Off Broadway production in 1982 and has been endeavoring to bring the work to the screen since that time. The performer puts immense effort into her demanding role, and convincingly inhabits the unhappy Nobbs. Garcia (son of Colombian writer Gabriel García Márquez) directs with some sensitivity to the general painfulness of the proceedings. Australian-born Wasikowska (*The Kids Are All Right*, *Jane Eyre*, *Restless*) continues to impress with the range of her work and the depth of the feelings she conveys. Numerous secondary players, including Collins, Mark Williams, Brendan Gleeson, Jonathan Rhys Meyers and Antonia Campbell-Hughes, stand out impressively.

In bringing Moore-Benmussa's work to the screen, the filmmakers have not, fortunately, created a work fully in the spirit of "materialist feminism." Some attention has been paid to the class relations of the day and the harshness with which the affluent treated the servant class in particular. The script presents the Anglo-Irish aristocrats, the other wealthy guests who wipe their shoes on the hotel's staff and assorted parvenus, along with the hypocritical, grasping Mrs. Baker, with some degree of scorn. Inequality is an issue here.

In regard to Nobbs' motives, Close told interviewer Emanuel Levy, "Albert doesn't want to end up in the poorhouse ... At that time Ireland was extremely poor. Around the corner from the hotel was abject poverty. She knows that without her job that's where she could end up. And she knows anyone can get fired at any moment. There is a sense of fear among all the hotel workers."

However, almost inevitably, there is an artistic accommodation with the demands of identity politics. While poverty and social cruelty are present in *Albert Nobbs*, they function as something of a backdrop to

the story of gender complications and oppressiveness.

Moreover, somewhere along the line elements have been added, either in Benmussa's play or in the present screenplay. For example, in the film Albert informs Hubert that she was raped at a young age by several assailants and we are encouraged to believe this brutal experience played a part in her change of gender.

Albert makes no mention of such an episode in Moore's story, although she speaks about unwanted sexual attentions. Without going into all the details, in Moore's original Albert is an illegitimate child of "grand folk" raised by a nurse, with money supplied by her biological parents. She even attends a convent school. However, when her mother and father both die, the income dries up and she and her nurse have to go to work and live in a much rougher area, and this causes a crisis. Fear of bastardy and sex, i.e., her own internal system of repression, and the legitimate anxiety that her only choices are prostitution or "service" as a low-paid maid (she contemplates suicide), spur her on to assume a male role when the opportunity presents itself.

Likewise, as the gender issues are pushed farther into the foreground and treated in more detail, the working class characters, Joe in particular, become more unattractive. In the original story, Joe and Helen take off for London, without incident, and Albert grows old counting her money at the hotel.

The result of the accommodation is a more amorphous, less pointed work than might have been possible. Along these lines, Close, one of the film's producers, told *New York* magazine, "I think I always believed that there was something about that character which was universal ... I just sense that there are people isolated in the privacy of their rooms, going on Facebook. That's not who they are. What we do to survive I find fascinating: When we all walk out the door, we put on a face. For Albert, the stakes are just much higher."

This tendency to dissolve the socially and historically pointed into fairly bland "universal" themes is something the contemporary film world is going to have to get over.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact