

A new film version of *Far from the Madding Crowd*; Brian Wilson's story in *Love & Mercy*

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Far from the Madding Crowd, directed by Thomas Vinterberg; screenplay by David Nicholls, based on the novel by Thomas Hardy

Far from the Madding Crowd is the latest screen adaptation of Thomas Hardy's famed 1874 novel. Set in rural England, it is the story of a free-spirited young woman who attracts three suitors of diverse social and psychological make-up.

Directed by Danish-born Thomas Vinterberg, the movie is pleasant and straightforward, but with a flatness that reflects certain artistic problems: above all, a lack of urgency and historical concreteness.

The film begins in a bucolic setting of expansive green fields. (Hardy set his novels in Wessex, a fictional stand-in for his native Dorset in southwest England, where much of the new film was shot.) Bathsheba Everdene (Carey Mulligan), a willful young woman meets local farmer Gabriel Oak (Belgian actor Matthias Schoenaerts), who almost immediately proposes marriage.

But Bathsheba does not want to be any man's property: "I'm too independent for you." This, despite the fact that Bathsheba is penniless and Gabriel has a sheep farm. ("I have 100 acres and 200 sheep.") Soon after, their economic circumstances are reversed. Gabriel loses his herd and Bathsheba inherits a large farm from a deceased uncle. He now becomes her vassal.

Adjacent to Bathsheba's property lies the farm belonging to the prosperous William Boldwood (Michael Sheen). In a rather irresponsible prank, she sends Boldwood, a lonely and taciturn man, a valentine inscribed with the words "Marry me." The middle-aged bachelor becomes obsessed with his young neighbor, offering Bathsheba "shelter and comfort ... If you will marry me out of guilt and pity, I don't mind." Later, highlighting one of the movie's—and novel's—themes, she muses: "It is difficult for a woman to define her feelings in language which is chiefly made by men to express theirs."

Having dispatched her second suitor, she falls madly in love with the reckless, pleasure-seeking gambler, Sergeant Frank Troy (Tom Sturridge), whose plan to wed Bathsheba's servant, Fanny Robin (Juno Temple), has come to naught due to a misunderstanding. When Troy marries Bathsheba, the union is from the start an unhappy one—the soldier treats his wife and her employees dreadfully—and is finally shipwrecked when a poverty-stricken Fanny dies in childbirth.

Overcome with grief and guilt, Troy plunges into the ocean and is presumed to have drowned. Years later, down on his luck, he

reappears like Lazarus risen from the dead. Unable to bear the thought that Bathsheba will now be completely out of reach, Boldwood kills Troy, a desperate act that puts him behind bars for life. A much matured Bathsheba finds true love with Gabriel. Not only are they now economic equals, but having withstood various slings and arrows, they have become emotional partners.

Hardy's fourth novel takes its title from a line in Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" (1751), about the dead lying peacefully in their graves. It appears that through the title Hardy was ironically countering the notion that rural folk led less dramatic, complicated lives than urban residents. The economic and social conflicts and contradictions, argues Hardy, are as acute in the countryside as in the city.

The novel concerns itself in particular with rigid Victorian morality and social roles. One historian, K.D.M. Snell, notes that Hardy, in his major novels, was attempting "to formulate the conditions in which affectionate and lasting relationships could take place ... [H]is work persistently gives an embittered and bleak account of marriage and marital relations in its descriptions of what he termed the 'false marriage.'" Bathsheba and Troy are a prime example of a marriage in which the two partners have hardly anything in common and know almost nothing about one another.

Class mobility, and upward mobility in particular, was another of Hardy's concerns, rooted in his own personal circumstances. Hardy's father was a stonemason and builder, and the family lacked the means to send Hardy to university. He remained acutely aware of class divisions and his own supposed social "inferiority," as well as the fragility of an improved social standing, throughout his life.

In *Far from the Madding Crowd*, Gabriel makes the transition from landowner to wage laborer overnight. One minute he is comfortable enough to ask for Bathsheba's hand; the next, he is turning his farm over to the creditors and becomes an itinerant worker. Troy loves Fanny, but he is an opportunist and primarily desires Bathsheba's wealth and position. When Bathsheba considers marrying Boldwood, who proposes to pay off Troy's debts, it is as "a mere business compact."

Hardy (1840-1928) wrote in his 1895 preface to the novel: "The change at the root of this has been the recent supplanting of the class of stationary cottagers, who carried on the local traditions and humours, by a population of more or less migratory labourers, which has led to a break of continuity in local history, more fatal than any other thing to the preservation of legend, folk-lore, close

inter-social relations, and eccentric individualities. For these the indispensable conditions of existence are attachment to the soil of one particular spot by generation after generation.” This was a period of vast industrialization, urbanization and the decline of rural society, which Hardy sought to grapple with.

With his movie version of the novel, director Vinterberg (best known for *The Celebration*, 1998) has created a work that is fortunately some distance removed from the subjectivist and narcissistic Dogme 95 group, which he founded with fellow Danish filmmaker Lars von Trier, and some distance removed from Vinterberg’s own dreadful *Dear Wendy*, 2004, scripted by Trier.

His *Far from the Madding Crowd* is respectfully done and drenched in pretty images. But when landscape panoramas play such a dominant role, it is usually at the expense of thought-provoking content. In this case, the film’s default setting is an ahistorical feminism; and laden with a modernist sensibility, historical imagination is barely in play here.

Most of the work’s strengths lie in what the movie is not—it is not bombastic or toxic. It is not violent. It does not bore one with gratuitous sex, etc ... Rather than a determined search to locate what’s universal in the novel through concrete historical treatment, the movie is essentially a series of personal relationships, with no particular historical or social significance.

Both Mulligan as Bathsheba and Schoenaerts as Gabriel spend an inordinate amount of time in gazing mode—the human equivalent of the film’s preoccupation with scenery—although one suspects the Belgian-born Schoenaerts is otherwise a fine actor. Sheen is always striking, but his Boldwood strains, no doubt because the actor must fill in too many blanks. Jessica Barden as Liddy—Bathsheba’s maid—is amusing and endearing in the film’s opening sequences, but recedes into the background for most of the movie. Sturridge as Troy barely makes a ripple.

In comparing Vinterberg’s interpretation with British director John Schlesinger’s well-known 1967 version of *Far from the Madding Crowd*, the most significant difference is that Schlesinger’s nearly three-hour film, although uneven and occasionally awkward, retains more of the novel than Vinterberg’s movie.

Graced with a remarkable cast—Julie Christie as Bathsheba, Alan Bates as Gabriel, Peter Finch as Boldwood and Troy marvelously performed by Terence Stamp—Schlesinger’s work does not tend to scrub away the novel’s tension-filled rough edges. And, unlike Vinterberg, Schlesinger attempts to maintain the humor of the lower rustic classes, an important element in Hardy’s classic, embodied by characters such as Matthew Moon and Joseph Poorgrass. Vinterberg comes close with Liddy, but is not really interested in concentrating on this social layer.

Also treated more effectively by Schlesinger is the pivotal, wrenching scene when Troy discovers Fanny and their child in a coffin in Bathsheba’s house. Horribly, Troy tells Bathsheba: “This woman [Fanny] is more to me, dead as she is, than you ever were, or are, or can be ... I am not morally yours.” In the new movie, the scene is fairly brief and tepid, devoid of the requisite dramatic punch, much to the work’s overall detriment.

A great deal of effort and talent has been expended to make an

agreeable and rather forgettable trifle.

Love & Mercy

Love & Mercy, directed by Bill Pohlad; screenplay by Oren Moverman and Michael A. Lerner, based on the life of Brian Wilson

[Reposted from our coverage of the 2014 Toronto International Film Festival.]

“I keep looking for a place to fit / Where I can speak my mind / I’ve been trying hard to find the people / That I won’t leave behind / They say I got brains / But they ain’t doing me no good / I wish they could,” Brian Wilson sings in “I Just Wasn’t Made for These Times,” a song on The Beach Boys’ seminal album, *Pet Sounds*, released in 1966.

Wilson was, in fact, very much made for “these times,” as his remarkable music and the widespread popular response to it over the years so clearly demonstrate. However, he was definitely not made to conform to—or escape intact—the soul-crushing music industry in “these times.”

Attempting to tackle the pop genius’ complicated history, director Bill Pohlad’s biopic *Love and Mercy* divides Wilson’s life into two different phases: the early Beach Boys years, including the artist’s acute mental collapse, and the more recent decades when Wilson is rescued from the clutches of a Machiavellian psychiatrist by his future wife Melinda. The movie cuts back and forth between the two periods. The younger Brian is played by Paul Dano, while Wilson’s older self is played by John Cusack. Elizabeth Banks plays Melinda and Paul Giamatti is the manipulative Dr. Eugene Landy.

The film is at its most interesting and creative when it tries to dissect Wilson’s inner turmoil. The scenes featuring Dano are more intricate and convincing than those with Cusack, which tend to be rather conventional, even superficial. Unfortunately, *Love and Mercy* makes little effort to grapple with the postwar social climate and conditions in America that produced such an extraordinary figure. This helps account for the movie’s relative thinness.

To Pohlad’s credit, he does capture something of Wilson’s manic search for musical perfection. A segment in *Love and Mercy* corresponds to the statement Wilson has posted on his web site: “I would have the musicians keep playing over and over again till the sound made sense. I worked overtime on that; I worked hours to get it right. If the sound didn’t make any sense, then I wouldn’t know what to do—I’d be lost! It’s instinct that tells me. I have an instinct for music, or a feeling about it, and I’ll have my feelings guide my hands.”



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