The Dressmaker, *The Girl on the Train*: The "return of the native" and other issues

Joanne Laurier
15 October 2016

The Dressmaker, *written and directed by Jocelyn Moorhouse, based on the novel by Rosalie Ham*; The Girl on the Train, *directed by Tate Taylor, screenp lay by Erin Cressida Wilson, based on the novel by Paula Hawkins*

The Dressmaker

In his *Letters and Social Aims* (1876), Ralph Waldo Emerson borrowed from a Miss C. F. Forbes this thought: "The sense of being well-dressed gives a feeling of inward tranquility which religion is powerless to bestow." The Forbes adage also serves as an epigram for Australian author Rosalie Ham's novel, *The Dressmaker* (2000).

In Australian filmmaker Jocelyn Moorhouse's new film of the same title, a quirky comedy-drama based on Ham's book, the art of beautifying the human body is the weapon of choice to vanquish intolerance and ignorance in an outback hamlet.

After a long absence, Tilly Dunnage (Kate Winslet) returns in 1951 to her hometown of Dungatar. Her aging mother, Molly (Judy Davis), called "Mad Molly" by the villagers, lives in squalor, looking more like a psychologically damaged "street person" than the mother she left behind. Tilly was drummed out of town a quarter-century earlier, accused of responsibility for the mysterious death of Stewart Pettyman, a schoolmate. With her daughter out of the way, Molly has been the victim of the vindictive authorities. Victimizer-in-chief has been the corrupt, licentious Evan Pettyman (Shane Bourne), the late Stewart's father and a village big shot.

Celebrated in Europe as a designer and seamstress, Tilly greets the town dressed in bright red haute couture. She lights a cigarette and calmly announces, "I'm back, you bastards." In fact, she wants to sort things out with her mother, and also learn what really happened to Stewart. At first, the ornery Molly fights her daughter tooth-and-nail (Molly: "I was just taking a trip down Memory Lane with Lizzie Borden here.").

Tilly uses her sewing machine as a lion tamer uses his whip, creating fashionable gowns and attire to subdue the disapproving locals. The brilliance and elegance of her handiwork stands out against the drabness of Dungatar, a town whose name suggests something of its dreariness and overall atmosphere.

On Tilly's side is the local police sergeant Horatio Farrat (Hugo Weaving), a secret cross-dresser, easily seduced by exotic fabrics and feather boas. Tilly soon meets the handsome, dashing Teddy McSwiney (Liam Hemsworth), who objects to his players being distracted by the flamboyant dressmaker during a crucial Australian rules football match. ("I have an unusual talent for bias cutting," she responds.) Teddy lives in a trailer with his own semi-outcast mother and mentally handicapped brother.

In the course of her battle with the town's respectable citizenry, Tilly takes on, among others, the mean-spirited schoolteacher, Beulah (Kerry Fox), liberates Evan Pettyman's long-suffering wife Marigold (Alison Whyte), goes toe-to-toe with a rival dressmaker and Pettyman recruit, and administers hash brownies to ease the pain of elderly Irma (Julia Blake), the wife of the town's former doctor (Barry Otto), who, before he was slowed down by his hunchback, was cruel to both his spouse and his patients.

Events come to a head surrounding an amateur production of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and the bodies of

© World Socialist Web Site

the wicked pile up as Tilly finds her "inner tranquility" and Dungatar is cleansed.

The Dressmaker is an imaginative, zany parable that promotes a certain argument in favor of cosmopolitanism and sophistication against dusty, small-town backwardness. It generally lambastes the powerful and favors the marginalized.

Jocelyn Moorhouse shares something in common with Tilly. With this film, she is making her own return—to cinema, after a hiatus of 18 years. For better or worse, there is a "Rip Van Winkle" quality to the production, which is something of a throwback thematically (and also in terms of its personnel, such as Judy Davis), to the Australian New Wave of several decades ago.

The actors embrace the mayhem, with the remarkable, energetic Davis in the lead. Weaving's sweet, graceful performance binds many of the disparate and shifting strands and moods of the narrative. In one scene, a character, who is entranced by a Billie Holiday recording, says movingly that "she's got a lot of pain in her voice." It seems to sum up *The Dressmaker* 's general attitude towards its characters, good and bad. Along with that goes the idea that creating beauty is essential to people's lives.

The Girl on the Train

Directed by Tate Taylor, *The Girl on the Train* is a murder mystery based on the eponymous 2015 novel by British author Paula Hawkins. Emily Blunt plays Rachel Watson, a lonely alcoholic who daily rides a train that passes through a posh New York suburb, Ardsley-on-Hudson, where she once lived with her former husband Tom (Justin Theroux). He is now happily remarried and residing with his wife Anna (Rebecca Ferguson) and their baby daughter in the same lavish house that he once shared with Rachel.

Semi-voyeur Rachel is also fixated on one of Tom's neighbors, Megan (Haley Bennett), whose relationship with husband Scott (Luke Evans) represents the epitome of true love to Rachel. (Appearances are deceiving, for in honor of her numerous lovers and careers, Megan describes herself as the "mistress of reinvention.")

As an excessive drinker, Rachel is prone to blackouts. She has been made to think that she is solely responsible for the break-up of her marriage. The fact that Tom now has a child with Anna—Rachel was unable to conceive—only adds to her misery. In addition, to conceal the fact that she is unemployed, Rachel has been lying to her roommate, Cathy (Laura Prepon), about why she takes the commuter train each morning.

One day when her train is traveling through Ardsley, Rachel spies Megan in the arms of another man. Devastated that her ideal love fantasy has been dashed, she disembarks with the intent of confronting the adulteress. Rachel is drunk and things become foggy. There is a scuffle and Megan goes missing. What has Rachel done? When she asks someone she believes to be an eyewitness, he responds, "It's probably the worst thing you can imagine."

The Girl on the Train is a proverbial train wreck. It is overwrought and badly put together. Blunt-Rachel's perpetual state of angst is tiresome, and the other female leads only add a further hyped-up element of emotionalism. In the upper middle class enclave, Theroux as Tom is the sun around which the trio of neurotic beauties revolve. But out of the blue, all his pluses turn to minuses. Despite an impressive array of talent, *The Girl on the Train* is sloppy and unconvincing.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site