

Promising Young Woman: Law-and-order campaign against the rights of the accused

Joanne Laurier
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Written and directed by Emerald Fennell

Promising Young Woman is the directorial debut of British filmmaker Emerald Fennell—and not a promising one. The film, which she also scripted, is a slightly fleshed-out polemic against the presumption of innocence and more generally any rights for those accused of sexual assault, particularly on college campuses.

In Fennell’s film, Cassie Thomas (Carey Mulligan), a medical school dropout, sets out to prove that every man she encounters is a predator at heart. Experience proves her to be correct. That being the case, it follows logically that every claim of sexual assault should be taken a priori as fact and anyone who doesn’t accept that principle can only be a criminal’s accomplice.

Promising Young Woman is a repugnant, unfunny, cartoonish work, which, of course, has been widely praised in the American media. The hundreds of critics who have lauded it either lack any trace of artistic or democratic sensibility or are simply intimidated into going along with this type of material. As one reviewer noted approvingly, in response to another film in the same genre, it is indeed a “boom time for feminist revenge narratives.”

The film earned five nominations for this year’s Academy Awards, including Best Picture, Best Director and Best Actress (Mulligan). Fennell’s work was also named one of the 10 best films of 2020 by the National Board of Review and received four nominations at the recent Golden Globes Awards.

By truly shameful contrast, *The Mauritanian*, directed by Kevin Macdonald, which takes an unsparing look at the barbaric treatment of Guantánamo detainee Mohamedou Ould Salahi, did not receive a single Academy Award nomination. This gives some idea of the current state of mind in these circles.

In *Promising Young Woman*, Cassie still lives with her concerned parents (Jennifer Coolidge and Clancy Brown) in Ohio. She works as a low-paid barista. The apparent source of her dysfunction and depression is the rape of her friend Nina Fisher, another former medical school student. The

now deceased Nina was sexually assaulted years ago by fellow classmate Al Monroe (Chris Lowell), presently an anesthesiologist.

So consumed is Cassie by Nina’s fate that she has undertaken a mission: she routinely entraps men in bars by dressing provocatively and pretending to be drunk beyond the point of consent. Her nocturnal ruses end in humiliation for the men who are without exception prepared to victimize a defenseless woman. Cassie records her “victories” in a book with apparently hundreds on entries.

The film operates at a terribly low level, psychologically and artistically. Fennell’s screenplay treats the male characters in particular in the most demeaning and contemptuous terms. In the description of one scene set in a bar, for example, we learn that a character is “a sweaty Alpha-bro whose super-fragile masculinity is always one rejection away from shattering to pieces.” In regard to his obvious plan to accost Cassie in her semi-conscious state, this individual proceeds to observe, “It’s how things are done. It’s just a f---ing round of golf!”

The script includes further unpleasant sketches of males on the make: the camera, we are told, lingers “on the men dancing in particular, their bodies, the sweat running down their backs as they grind and thrust. The slow-mo, the lascivious pan-up, the sort of erotic gaze normally reserved for oiled-up music-video hotties. Except we’re looking at regular dudes in chinos with absolutely no dancing ability.”

In the course of one of her mini-sting operations, Cassie “commends” a licentious seducer for not raping her: “At least you didn’t try to have sex with me while I was passed out. You do get points for that. I want you to be proud of yourself. A few guys ... eh they don’t mind so much. But you, *you* woke me up before putting your fingers inside me. That was sweet.”

Nary a stereotype is overlooked in *Promising Young Woman*. Walking home at one point, Cassie stares down a group of construction workers catcalling her. The script indicates the men are “spooked.”

Cassie also goes after those who supposedly sided with

Nina's abuser. She sets up a medical school colleague Madison (Alison Brie), married with children, having the woman think that in an inebriated state she may have had sex with a stranger.

In a pivotal scene, Cassie confronts the dean of the medical school (Connie Britton), who tells her that many such incidents like the one involving Nina occur at the college. The following exchange takes place:

DEAN WALKER (patient, kind) What would you have me do? Ruin a young man's life every time an accusation is made? Have them expelled? That wouldn't be fair. Accusations like this, they ruin lives.

CASSANDRA So you're happy to take the boy's word for it?

DEAN WALKER I have to give them the benefit of the doubt, yes.

CASSANDRA Of course you do.

DEAN WALKER Innocent until proven guilty. It has to be.

This is especially nasty and sinister. The implication here, that the principle of innocent until proven guilty is some sort of get-out-of-jail-free card for sexual assailants and should immediately be scrapped, will warm the heart of every policeman and authoritarian.

Also on Cassie's revenge list is the lawyer (Alfred Molina) who had the audacity to defend Nina's rapist. What she finds, however, is a man so emotionally paralyzed and riddled with guilt over his role in the case that Cassie takes pity on him. After all, no need to demolish someone who has demolished himself.

When Ryan (Bo Burnham), also a former medical school classmate and now a pediatric surgeon, enters the picture, it appears that Cassie will turn in her avenging angel wings for a chance at romance. But when the distraught Madison hands Cassie an old cell phone containing a video of Nina's assault, the anti-rape crusader rises again.

What does this all add up to?

The filmmakers have led themselves, knowingly or not, into a reactionary blind alley. Since women must obviously be protected against the bestial male gender, the movie ends up demanding more law and order, fewer democratic rights and more intervention by the police. The ruling elite uses the hysteria of these elements to create the atmosphere in which more spying, more police brutality and more repression can take place.

It is absurd and unrealistic, and in its own way patronizing, to suggest, as the film does, that alleged victims belong to a category of human beings immune from lying—or making mistakes. As the WSWS has pointed out: "The proponents of the #MeToo campaign attempt to present the position that all accusers must be unquestionably believed as a 'left-

wing' view. They characterize as 'progressive' the idea that those who defend the accused are 'rape apologists' and that requiring an accuser to subject herself to cross-examination is unfair and 'places the victim on trial.' These are presented as basic principles of the struggle for women's rights."

Fennell, Mulligan and their collaborators take as their "artistic" premise that the entire male sex is monstrous and predatory. The filmmakers may argue that they know this is not in fact the case, but that "progressive" myth-making of this sort has its value. It does not. The wrongheaded and dismal conceptions distort and falsify the drama at every important juncture.

The movie, animated by the spirit of the provocative campaign over the Brock Turner case in 2016 and similar episodes, is specifically aimed at college students. Its venom is directed against all those who would uphold elementary democratic rights in such incidents, hence the attack on the attorney who defended an individual accused of rape and the dean who verbally, at least, pledges allegiance to constitutional rights.

Fennell's line is that of Hillary Clinton, Joe Biden, the Democratic Party and all those who seek to channel the instability and panic of middle-class layers in a murky and unsavory direction.

There is also the issue of money and privilege. As the WSWS has pointed out, a "gender cleansing" is taking place on college campuses in which hundreds of millions of dollars are at stake in the form of tenure, fellowships, department chairmanships, etc.

Along these lines, German socialist Clara Zetkin once pointed out that for petty-bourgeois women, the fight for "economic equality" means nothing else than "the realization of free trade and free competition between men and women. The realization of this demand awakens a conflict of interest between the women and men of the middle class and the intelligentsia." Whereas, "the liberation struggle of the proletarian woman cannot be—as it is for the bourgeois woman—a struggle against the men of her own class. ... Hand in hand with the men of her own class, the proletarian woman fights against capitalist society."

In any event, *Promising Young Woman* is a deplorable work from every vantage point.



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