

An education

A film review by Rev Dr Steve Taylor

“An education” is a movie about a moment. It captures a life coming of age, a decade poised on the threshold of sex, drugs and rock and roll and the intellectual struggle between the school classroom and the university of life.

The result is a movie so satisfying it is easy to lose sight of what is essentially a sordid tale, that of a 16 year old being seduced by an older man.

Jenny (Carey Mulligan) is pretty and bright. Her high school education immerses her in English literature and opens her imagination to a wider world.

Enter a handsome stranger, David (Peter Sarsgaard), with whom she accepts a lift one wet and windy rainy afternoon. He offers her a ride out of her suburb and into a city filled with music, art and sophistication. But a ride is rarely free and in hindsight no character gets off lightly. Jenny is left wounded by her romantic arrogance, David is found floundering in his web of lies, Jenny’s parents are rendered shallow by their middle-class aspirations in post-World War 2 Britain.

“An education” is based on true life, an adaptation of the 2003 autobiographical memoir of British journalist Lynn Barber. But a film is not a book. Words on a page need to be crafted onto a screen, internal dialogue captured in sound and image.

Take for instance the scene in which Jenny stands in her bedroom, considering the choices that lie in front of her. Written words could describe her inner thoughts. Instead, camera angles are artfully employed to present us with two Jennys, one in person, the other in the mirror. Who is the real Jenny? Who will she become as her choices are made? Hence plot and character development have been visualised.

“An education” is thus a triumph for the directing skills of Dane Lone Scherfig and the screenwriting skills of Nick Hornby. Hornby is best known for his best-selling novels. It says something of his artistic abilities that he is able to not only write stories of boys in High Fidelity, Feverpitch and About a Boy but also script the images and dialogue that portray so authentically the complexity of a teenage girl.

He is helped in no small degree by the acting skills of Carey Mulligan as Jenny. She is superb, seamlessly sashaying between giggling, giddy teenager and sophisticated socialite. Mulligan is well supported by a hard working cast, including Alfred Molina as Jenny’s father and Academy Award winner, Emma Thompson as the unforgiving Headmistress. David’s partners in deceit, Dominic Cooper as Danny and Rosamund Pike as Helen, act as a fitting foil.

“An Education” is an absorbing movie. While the ending is hopefully Hollywood, it demanded a darker conclusion. “I was damaged by my education,” summarised Lynn Barber in her real-life memoir. Such is life in the school of hard knocks, as adult lies and parental neglect fail teenage romanticism.

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