The Deep Blue Sea

Screened at Cornerhouse, Manchester

Reviewed by Anne Ryan November 2011

In this new film the two Terences form the perfect marriage - Terence Davies, the director who has shown his past growing up in war-time Liverpool and Terence Rattigan the playwright of thwarted middle-class passion. As with Noel Coward's Brief Encounter, ***The Deep Blue Sea*** is a love story, but this time we see what happens when a woman follows her desires and throws away everything else in her life.

In this impressionistic adaptation of Rattigan's play, Terence Davies shows us a world still dominated by the war in which the heroine dares to leave her marriage.

Rachel Weisz is both beautiful and intelligent as Hester, married to a kind but dull man. She brilliantly conveys the frustration of a woman trapped in a comfortable prison. Her life is pleasant, she has filled all of her society's goals, and only realises how unhappy she is when she discovers passion. For Hester love comes in the form of Freddie, a former RAF pilot, living off the glamour of his war-time heroism. In this role Tom Hiddleston effectively portrays the emptiness of a man whose future is behind him and soon finds himself trapped in a doomed relationship.

As Hester's husband, Simon Russell Beale makes one believe in the essential goodness of a man who believes that he is doing the right thing and sees his comfortable world threatened by an emotion he cannot control. The three leads are supported by a scene stealing cameo from Barbara Jefford as Russell Beale's mother the voice of middle class respectability.

The performances are uniformly excellent. Weisz's luminosity coupled to her evident intelligence brings a depth to her character. Hiddleston is all too believable as the shallow object of her affections and Russell Beale is given a rare opportunity to scale his theatrical technique down to the demands of film.

Hester has lived a life of quiet desperation and we first see her recovering from a suicide attempt and in a series of flashbacks we follow the story of her doomed search for passion. In the materially circumscribed world of post-war England she is "comfortable", her husband, a judge is kind if unexciting, but in her affair with the callow Freddie she thinks she has found the answer – passion, or more basically sex.

To him this is a fling which will take place within the boundaries of society, but Hester does not stick to the rules. In a series of telling episodes she flouts the social norms as Freddie becomes aware that he is in too deep.

Weisz has described her character's behaviour as a kind of madness; she is so desperate that she will throw everything away and make a fool of herself. Only the audience can see that

Freddie is not worthy of this level of commitment, perhaps what Hester really wants is passion itself. He treats her badly and gives her nothing, but still she pursues him sacrificing security, social position and eventually her dignity.

Hester’s ultimate tragedy is that she cannot have a bigger more dramatic life; the film hints that this may be a legacy of the war, when events, emotions and actions were on a grander scale. It is also reflective of the limited lives that women lived. Unlike Davies’ mother, the dominant influence in his life, Hester is not trapped with a violent brute, but her husband can never fulfil her dreams – could anyone?

It is good to see Terence Davies working again and one hopes that this film will allow him to gain funding for future projects. No other modern director can portray this beauty and passion, reminiscent of the 50's melodramas of Douglas Sirk. However I found this adaptation over faithful to the spirit of the times. He succeeds wonderfully in portraying the emotional and material poverty of people’s lives, the rigid social conformity and the repressed emotions of the English middle classes. This is a world that has gone and unlike David Lean in Brief Encounter, a modern director has the freedom to really portray the sexual passion which motivates Hester. With Celia Johnson and Trevor Howard we relied on the glance and the unspoken words to show real passion. Perhaps Davies has been over-respectful, in portraying so faithfully the behaviour of the times he does not really explore the depths of a passion, which can motivate someone to throw their whole life away.