

## London Bitches Falling Down: "Mrs. Henderson Presents" and "Match Point"

Written by Mike Schulz

Tuesday, 07 February 2006 18:00

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### **MRS. HENDERSON PRESENTS**

Beginning with its first reel, I had a pretty fair inkling that I would wind up hating *Mrs. Henderson Presents*, but the point of no return occurred around the 30-minute mark.

The film opens in 1937 London, where wealthy widow Laura Henderson (Judi Dench), bored with a new life of needlepoint and tea, decides to re-open an abandoned theatre called The Windmill, which will devote itself to showcasing "artful," live nudes along with vaudevillian song, dance, and comedy. She hires Jewish impresario Vivian Van Damm (Bob Hoskins) to oversee its operations, and eventually finds herself facing Van Damm's wife, which comes as a shock; Henderson didn't realize Van Damm was married. She brushes the woman off with secondhand rudeness, and, in a fit of pique, recounts the offense to Lady Conway (Thelma Barlow), who sizes up Henderson's romantic longings immediately. "It is as I suspected. Your heart has *stirred*," Lady Conway says. "Then I must consult a physician," Mrs. Henderson replies.

It was at that point that my head sunk in despair, secure in the knowledge that *Mrs. Henderson Presents* was

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going to be just as terrible as I suspected. And we still had 80 minutes to go.

That simple, revealing scene between the two elderly widows showcases just about everything that's wrong with *Mrs. Henderson Presents*. To begin with, the dialogue is insufferable. Henderson's retort is one of those snappy, god-awful, cracking-wise-to-mask-inner-pain comebacks you hear so frequently in lame stage comedy – we're invited to marvel at Henderson's ability to be witty while her heart is breaking. Throughout the film, screenwriter Martin Sherman never lets us forget how arch and clever his characters are; people don't speak in *Mrs. Henderson Presents*, they *banter*, and generally in obvious, sniggering fashion – Sherman isn't aiming for "ha ha ha" so much as "*hoo hoo hoo* ." (It's the sound of audiences inordinately pleased with themselves for *getting* the joke.) The movie could almost be *parodying* British upper-class twittiness, except that would show a degree of insight that Sherman doesn't appear to possess.

A bigger problem with that scene, though, is that nothing has remotely prepared us for Henderson's romantic attachment to Van Damm; up to this point, her congress with him has only been snippy, imperious, and even anti-Semitic, and Dench doesn't give the role enough shadings to suggest any deeper feelings beneath her surface surliness. From the start, Mrs. Henderson is a hateful caricature of smarm and self-involvement, yet I fear we're supposed to find her delightful merely because it's Dame Judi Dench in the role. Dench has reached a most unappealing stage in her phenomenal career; she shows up and, whether or not her work *merit*s acclaim, audiences reflexively genuflect. The actress is still capable of wonders, of course – her brief performance in *Pride & Prejudice* was marvelously wicked *and* wickedly funny. But in *Mrs. Henderson Presents*, she's just going through the motions, delivering her excruciating sitcom dialogue with practiced, unsurprising smugness; Dench practically arrives with her own laugh track.

The worst thing about that scene, though, is that even if Dench *had* previously clued us in on Henderson's yearnings, the plotline would still have come from nowhere – Sherman and director Stephen Frears (who should know better) don't give us drama so much as dramatic *ideas*

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, and none of them has follow-through. We're told that the presence of live nudes on stage will be an affront to British tastes, yet Henderson's productions are greeted with almost no resistance whatsoever, even from the stuffy Lord Chamberlain (an ill-used Christopher Guest). A roster of no-talents auditions for the company, yet in the next scene, the show has been cast with

*genuine*

talents – where the hell were

*they*

during the audition sequence? Van Damm bellows to Henderson that her backstage shenanigans are making the theatre "the laughingstock of London."

*Really*

? (The public didn't seem disapproving at all, and this crisis is never referred to again.) Frears and Sherman serve up stock, clichéd situations and then all but

*ignore*

them, which makes their inclusion even more offensive; if weren't for the hideously insistent soundtrack telling us, at all times, exactly what to feel, audiences might not feel anything at all.

Except, perhaps, lethargy. And dissatisfaction. And – in my case – a seething anger that reached a peak whenever the film wallowed in maudlin sentimentality. The film's nadir comes at the very end, when our heroine gives a rousing speech to a throng of theatregoers, explaining that her idea for putting nudes on stage came from a "French postcard" she found hidden in her son's room after his death in World War I. Assuming the image on the card to be the only naked woman her son had ever seen, the discovery touched Henderson enormously; she erected the Windmill to allow young men going into battle one chance, at least, to see a live, nude woman before they, too, potentially perished. The music swells, the crowd applauds, and I desperately wanted to tell the dear British crone that, regardless of her good intentions, fear of death isn't exactly the *reason* men hide nude photos under their mattresses.



**MATCH POINT**

Woody Allen finds himself in London, too, with the adultery drama *Match Point*, and the change of venue is good for the artist, as his literate dialogue has grown so strenuously superficial and oftentimes *phony*

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that it might only be the British accents that are keeping viewers (and most critics) from properly recognizing this failing. Before expounding on my disappointment, let me stress that

*Match Point*

is worth seeing, especially if you're new to Allen's

*oeuvre*

: The performances are uniformly terrific – I particularly liked Emily Mortimer and the rakish Matthew Goode, who's like Hugh Grant's cheerier younger brother – and the plot is controlled and satisfying, employing a wonderful visual motif of a tennis ball teetering on a net than has an unexpectedly juicy, subversive payoff.

*Match Point*

is often deliciously evil. Yet, for this Allen-phile at least, the film borrows too many themes, and even story twists, from the Martin Landau subplot in

*Crimes & Misdemeanors*

, and while Jonathan Rhys Meyers and Scarlett Johansson give great sizzle, too much of the film's opening hour is dawdling; the film luxuriates in its ravishing upper-class hauteur (which gives Rhys Meyers' eventual monstrousness a context), but until it turns aggressively, enjoyably nasty in the final reels,

*Match Point*

feels dramatically slight. Even if we can't guess exactly where events will lead – and, in a happy surprise, Allen

*does*

have shocks in store – the lead-up to those events feels unduly protracted; I'd say about a half-hour could have been excised with no noticeable loss. It's great to see Allen stretching his legs on the other side of the Atlantic, and

*Match Point*

has much of the structural finesse of an expertly executed short story. I just wish his characters would stop speaking as if they were

*reciting*

a short story, and a familiar story, to boot.