

Liar, Liar: "Atonement"

Written by Mike Schulz

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ATONEMENT

It seems that lately, whenever I leave the film version of some well-regarded or beloved novel - be it *No Country for Old Men* or *Gone Baby Gone* or one of the Harry Potters - I feel a nagging guilt for not having previously read the books they're based on, and I'd consider remedying that if I wasn't concerned about being subsequently

disappointed

by the adaptations. (Or, in the case of most of the Potter movies,

even

more

disappointed.) After seeing director Joe Wright's

Atonement

, though, I was completely annoyed with myself for being unfamiliar with author Ian McEwan's 2001 precursor - I was dying to understand what, when the end credits rolled, inspired a majority of my fellow audience members to applaud.

You could easily argue that the clappers were moved by the film itself; *Atonement* has an impressively complex, epic structure, it's impeccably detailed, and God knows it's prestigious. (Some screen helmers are said to direct with both eyes on the audience; Wright directs with both eyes on the Oscar.) But despite the movie's lofty ambitions and technical acumen, I found it to be a mildly engrossing yet mostly enervating experience. The film is so controlled and distractingly self-conscious that it doesn't allow you an honest emotion or reaction; Wright's movie might have been the masterpiece McEwan's novel is purported to be if it didn't keep

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shoving its magnificence down our throats. Like the Harry Potter movies,

Atonement

seems designed to give the book's readers exactly the respectful adaptation they're hoping for, leaving the rest of us - perhaps cowed by the novel's intimidating pedigree - to fight the urge to ask what all the fuss is about.

The film's opening scenes take place at an English country estate in 1935, where a relatively benign encounter between the wealthy Cecelia Tallis (Keira Knightley) and the working-class Robbie Turner (James McAvoy) is overseen - and completely misunderstood - by Cecelia's 13-year-old sister, Briony (initially played by Saoirse Ronan, and then, as an 18-year-old, by Romola Garai, and eventually by Vanessa Redgrave). Not realizing, or maybe just not *caring*, that Cecelia and Robbie have fallen in love, Briony perpetuates a hateful lie about the young man that separates the couple, and the remainder of

Atonement

concerns both the pair's attempts to reunite - with Robbie now among the Allied troops in France - and Briony's attempts to right her destructive wrongs.

Yet it seems to me that if you don't buy *Atonement's* central romance, you're going to have a hard time buying the rest of the film, and Knightley and McAvoy (with matching cheekbones) don't suggest great lovers so much as a great photo-spread for a '40s-era

People

magazine. Neither performer is bad; Knightley hits the right notes of repressed ardor, and McAvoy has some touching and forceful moments, especially when you feel just how thoroughly he wants to wring Briony's neck. Wright, though, doesn't stage their scenes so much as

pose

them - the couple doesn't engage in one spontaneous moment, or share so much as one laugh - and the director's artful, love-among-the-ruins compositions continually call undue attention to themselves; every shot between the two is so hell-bent on suggesting *A Passion for the Ages* that the individual characters have almost no chance to register.

This sort of self-consciousness, though, extends to nearly everything about the film, even the elements of it that you really admire. When, in the movie's first few minutes, the sounds of Briony's typewriter *clack-clack-clacking* become enmeshed with Dario Marianelli's piano score, the effect is thrilling - the composer turning the act of writing into its own musical language. Yet later, the opening and closing of a cigarette lighter and the beating of an umbrella against the hood of a car join the cacophony, and for no particular purpose; it's merely a stylistic flourish that makes you unduly conscious of Marianelli's contribution. And the film's visual

coup de grâce,

a six-minute, unbroken tracking shot of thousands of dazed and dying soldiers on the beach, is a miraculous piece of choreography, but we're so aware of it

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as

choreography - with everyone hitting their marks at exactly the right instant, as in a crackerjack bedroom farce - that a sequence that should've been wrenching instead feels show-offy and hollow.

Scene after scene presses its point with disheartening obviousness - Garai's Briony, a wartime nurse, scrubs her hands of sin like Lady Macbeth - and the actors offer little sense of interior life; they're only there to serve screenwriter Christopher Hampton's purely functional purposes. (The exception is Redgrave: I smiled at the movie exactly once, when the actress performed a gesture so wonderfully human and random that I couldn't even *tell* you what it was.) Fans of McEwan's novel - and they appear to be legion - may indeed swoon to this handsomely mounted adaptation, yet I, for one, left the auditorium disappointed by the movie's lack of soul. There is a great passion on display in

Atonement

, but sadly, it's the passion of a film inordinately in love with

itself

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