

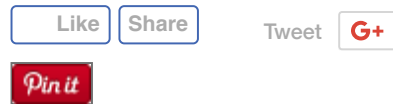


_(/).

Film Review: Love & Friendship

A delicious marriage of Whit Stillman and Jane Austen in a comedy of manners with a contemporary spin that delights from start to twisty finish.

By [Erica Abeel \(Http://Www.Filmjournal.Com/Taxonomy/Term/93\)](http://www.filmjournal.com/Taxonomy/Term/93) May 10, 2016



Reviews

Specialty Releases



[\(/www.pinterest.com/pin/create/button](http://www.pinterest.com/pin/create/button)

Since he first charmed moviegoers in 1990 with *Metropolitan*, Whit Stillman has occupied a cinematic niche uniquely his own. In that film and the subsequent *Last Days of Disco* and *Damsels in Distress*, he satirized the foibles of the urban *haute bourgeoisie*, but with a gentle, bemused humor and more whimsy than bite, as if depicting eccentric relatives. His films may be contemporary-ish, yet they unscroll less in a precise period than the ahistorical

space of Stillman's quirky sensibility.

With *Love & Friendship*, Stillman vaults back 200 years to train his optic on the landed gentry of Jane Austen. It proves a delicious marriage of minds. The film is based on an early novella of Austen's that was posthumously published, which Stillman has set to "completing" with fresh characters and a tangy denouement. If his previous contemporary films feel somehow quaint and unanchored in time, so does *Love & Friendship* reflect both the Georgian period of Jane Austen and Stillman's comic riff on it.

Undergirding the plot is that familiar Austen imperative: the need for money, particularly by a woman who lacks it. In Austen-land, the remedy is to snag a man of means. As he lines up the players in this quest/comedy of manners, Stillman drolly supplies capsule introductions at the

outset that both acknowledge the difficulty of keeping track of who's related to whom and fly by absurdly fast. The distancing device establishes the wink-wink tone of what's to come. Yet there's more than arch pastiche here. In *Lady Susan Vernon* (Kate Beckinsale, glorious), Stillman creates his most memorable heroine, flawed and feisty, a woman who uses love as a means of survival.

Lady Susan, a widow, is irresistible and intelligent, yet, as she succinctly puts it, has “no money and no husband.” What she does have in abundance is the ability to outsmart those around her (particularly the men) and play them like pieces in a game of chess. We're a long ways here from *Lizzy Bennet*! Lady Susan arrives for a stay at Churchill, the lavish estate of her in-laws, to wait out some nasty rumors about her dalliance with a certain Lord Manwaring (labeled in the intro as “divinely handsome”), who's inconveniently married. Only her sister-in-law Catherine (Emma Greenwell) detects the guile beneath the woman's charm and seductive effect on men.

At Churchill, Lady Susan meets studly young Reginald DeCourcy (Xavier Samuel), parrying his allusions to those pesky rumors and instantly charming him. Their courtship is conducted in decorous walks about the estate, as she maneuvers him into marriage-proposal mode. The marriage is of course vehemently opposed by the DeCourcy clan—all the reason to “humble these DeCourcys,” Lady Susan declares to her sidekick, the American Alicia Johnson (a miscast Chloë Sevigny, perhaps on hand to reprise the pairing with Beckinsale in *Disco*).

The romance is menaced by the unexpected arrival of Lady Susan's daughter Frederica (Morfydd Clark), who rather fancies Reginald herself. Lady Susan counters by inviting to the house Sir James Martin (Tom Bennett) as a match for her daughter, a filthy-rich dunce who riffs about “the twelve commandments” and other goofy stuff in a hilarious manner. When Frederica protests, “But marriage is for your whole life,” Lady Susan responds, “Not in my experience.” Stillman deftly steers this *contredanse* toward a raffish ending that would have made Austen blush.

Throughout, the characters let fly with witty banter that at times sounds more Oscar Wilde and Evelyn Waugh than Austen—yet the dialogue both honors the original source and delivers barbed truths with a modern ring (“Too old to be governable, too young to die,” a woman says of herself). Beckinsale delivers her complicated stretches of dialogue with naturalness and flair. As pretty boy DeCourcy, Xavier Samuel is pitch-perfect as the Stillman-esque man, holding the winning hand yet a little innocent and blank and certainly no match for a mastermind like Lady Susan, who in another life could have been a Disraeli or Metternich.

In a curious coincidence, both Stillman and the theatre group Bedlam (in its current reimagined play of Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*) have chosen to foreground and underscore the venal attitudes of Austen's culture, the maniacal fixation on money and property that powered the gentry beneath the elegant finery and demeanor. Stillman's Lady Susan could be viewed as simply a pragmatist in a tooth-and-claw fight for survival in the world she has inherited. In this wickedly knowing comedy, the politics of the boudoir and drawing room become a blood sport.

Click [here \(http://www.imdb.com/title/tt3068194/?ref=nm_sr_1\)](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt3068194/?ref=nm_sr_1) for cast and crew information.

Movie Reviews, Box Office News, and More

SHOWEAST (<http://www.filmexpos.com/showeast>) **CINEEUROPE**
(<http://www.filmexpos.com/cineeuropa>) **CINEASIA** (<http://www.filmexpos.com/cineasia>)

ABOUT US (</about-us>) **CONTACT US** (</contact-us>) **ADVERTISING OPPORTUNITIES**
(</advertising-opportunities>) **MOVIE REVIEWS R** (<http://www.filmjournal.com/filmjournal/about-us/rss.jsp>) **SS FEED** (<http://www.filmjournal.com/filmjournal/about-us/rss.jsp>)

© 2018 FilmJournal International. All rights reserved. Read our **[TERMS OF USE](http://www.filmjournal.com/terms-of-use)**
(<http://www.filmjournal.com/terms-of-use>) & **[PRIVACY POLICY](http://www.filmjournal.com/privacy-policy)** (<http://www.filmjournal.com/privacy-policy>).