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Film Review: The Beguiled

Sofia Coppola ventures into Southern Gothic territory in this artful but shallow remake of a pulpy, Civil War novel about the effect on a group of sexually repressed women of a charismatic soldier.

By ***Erica Abeel (Http://Www.Filmjournal.Com/Taxonomy/Term/93)*** *Jun 20, 2017*

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Sofia Coppola is known for her cool films about ennui and dislocation, particularly among the ranks of the world's more privileged. In a departure, *The Beguiled* tackles the genre of a Southern Gothic thriller; it's also heavier on plot, suspense and dialogue than her previous work, and arguably more commercial. Clocking in at a tight 94 minutes, this mostly entertaining film settles for the duration at a girls' boarding school in Civil War Virginia, as it records the seismic effect on the cloistered women and girls produced by the arrival of a wounded Union soldier.

Nicole Kidman, Kirsten Dunst and Colin Farrell deliver expertly pitched performances (that surely argued for Coppola's win of Best Director at Cannes). The cinematography of Philippe Le Sourd captures to perfection the mist drifting through gnarled oaks and Spanish moss, and the dilapidated grandeur of a pillared antebellum Southern mansion, often shot at the violet hour. And yet, and yet —there yawns an emptiness at the core of the film, inviting speculation as to what exactly Coppola wanted to make of this twisty tale.

Coppola adapted *The Beguiled* from the 1966 novel by Thomas Cullinane. Don Siegel's 1971 film version with Clint Eastwood played up the tawdrier aspects, including specifics on the girls' sexual fantasies and a backstory involving incest. Sidestepping much of the pulp, Coppola substitutes restraint flecked with dark humor, yet neglects both the story's potential emotional resonance and overheated psychodrama. In her aesthetic, it seems, emotion is in bad taste.

The film opens as a girl from the Farnsworth School goes mushroom-picking in the woods—an action that will neatly close the circle in sinister fashion toward film's end. An exquisite vista of oaks forming an arch, as in a Gothic cathedral, introduces the ongoing theme of Christianity, which Martha, the upright headmistress (Kidman), has a way of interpreting to suit her own motives. When the girl abruptly stumbles on the badly wounded Corporal John McBurney, a deserter from the Union army, he persuades her to bring him back to the school. Martha agrees to sew up his slashed leg and shelter him from the military because—her refrain—"it's the Christian thing to do."

Since McBurney is played by charmer Colin Farrell (a mercenary, hence the Irish brogue), and this community of females has long been deprived of any male presence, it's no surprise that they each connive to win his attention. The very chemistry of the place becomes altered by this shot of testosterone. In one scene, Martha sponges down McBurney's body, trembling as she lingers around his hips. A pouty, teenage siren (Elle Fanning, doing a replica of her annoying teen bit in *20th Century Women*) plants one on him while he's unconscious, only to be shouldered aside by her competition.

Yet it's sad, faded Edwina (Dunst) who McBurney appears to prefer. Her natural radiance dulled down, Dunst is a bundle of depression with a spinsterish hunch, to whom the charismatic intruder offers a chance at undreamt-of happiness. Believing that he's landed in pig heaven, McBurney comes on as though all this female desire is his to play. After his shocking betrayal, the women's grisly revenge will prove him wrong (and Martha's line, "Bring the anatomy book!" will trigger laughter).

Every detail feels thought through and necessary. When Martha loads a pistol, the better to protect her charges, we know, following Chekhov's famous dictum, that it will be used. So, too, will the axe and saw McBurney wield to tame the encroaching wildness of nature (read: female sexuality loosed by his presence). Coppola's team has evoked with museum-quality accuracy the world of the Farnsworth School during a period that hasn't yet seen electric light. Many scenes utilize daylight, while the candle-lit interiors grow dimmer to match the festering of darker instincts. Le Sourd used vintage lenses to create a gauzy look, the palettes blending together; the women's high-necked dresses, at war with the climate, suggest bottled-up heat.

Yet this film coasts mainly on surfaces. Issues and questions are raised, grazed, but remain unexplored. For instance, what is being suggested about how women react when a male enters their community? That he'll unleash a catfight? Or does the chilling final tableau deliver a feminist message about women's ability to band together against a male exploiter? That the film can be read a number of ways will either intrigue or frustrate viewers.

More problematic is that the key scene—McBurney's "betrayal," the fulcrum on which the story turns—goes unexamined, as if Coppola were just following a script, rather than the wellsprings of the man's character. Till then, McBurney's not presented as a bad guy, but, rather, a casualty of war with a courtly manner, who finds himself genuinely smitten with Edwina. The film's most poignant figure, Edwina eventually falls into rank behind her sisters, with no attempt by Coppola to probe her grief at the loss of love—another vacuum in the script. Despite these holes in the narrative, the sizzling dynamic between Kidman, Dunst and Farrell—three sterling actors at the top of their game—makes the film resonate beyond its flimflam plot and lack of a grounding concept. Kidman in particular, with her indelible portrait of a principled woman warped by desire, will surely be in the conversation come awards time.

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