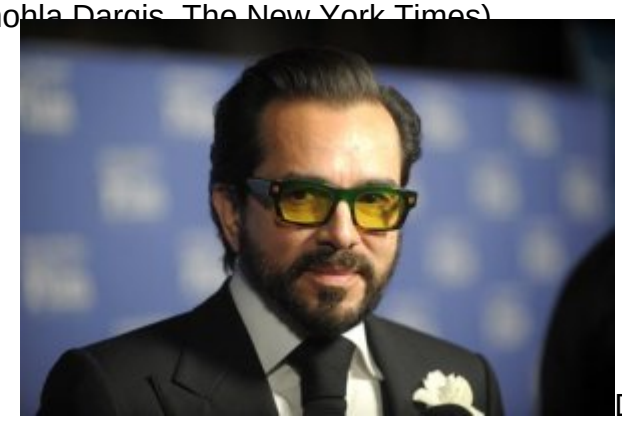
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Note from Roger â?? The Handmaiden

Description

Before getting to Mr. Durlingâ??s note, I saw this film yesterday. Itâ??s an extraordinary effort from the South Korean Director Park Chan-Wook. Already an admirer of his now seemingly classic works of *Old Boy* (2003), and *Lady Vengence* (2005), I experienced an entirely new level of his artistic craft with *The Handmaiden*. Mesmerizing and undaunting with a raw, creative, narrative flair, Mr. Park delivers an explosive human drama â?? thrilling and compelling. Parkâ??s best work to date. (See below review by Manohla Dargis, The New York Times)



Dear Cinephiles,

â??Far too good to be watched in one sitting,â?• exclaims the Philadelphia Inquirer about THE HANDMAIDEN, and I couldnâ??t agree more. Gorgeous, classical, and erotic, I donâ??t think youâ??ll see a more delicious film this year. If you love cinema AT ALL, you have to see THE HANDMAIDEN. Itâ??s the visual equivalent of drinking champagne!

Below find the New York Times Review. It plays tonight (Tuesday) at 5:00pm, tomorrow (Wednesday) at 7:30pm, and next Sunday through Wednesday at the Riviera Theatre.

See you at the movies!
Roger Durling

Click here for tickets.



â??The Handmaidenâ?? Explores Confinement in Rich, Erotic Textures
By Manohla Dargis â?? The New York Times

The art of the tease is rarely as refined as in â??The Handmaiden.â?• Set in Korea in the 1930s, this amusingly slippery entertainment is an erotic fantasy about an heiress, her sadistic uncle, her devoted maid and the rake whoâ??s trying to pull off a devilishly elaborate con. The same could be said of the director Park Chan-wook, whose attention to voluptuous detail â?? to opulent brocades and silky robes, luscious peaches and creamy shoulders â?? turns each scene into an invitation to ooh, aah and mmm. This is a movie that tries to ravish your senses so thoroughly you may not notice its sleights of hand.

Itâ??s not for nothing that one of its heroines, Sookee (Kim Tae-ri), is a pickpocket, though thatâ??s getting ahead of her story. It opens with Sookee weepily saying goodbye to some adults and wailing children, their gushing matched by the torrential rain. Sheâ??s off to work for Lady Hideko (a sensational Kim Min-hee), a pale beauty who lives with her tyrannical uncle, Kouzuki (Cho Jin-woong), a collector and purveyor of art and rare erotic books whose darting tongue has turned black from his ink pen. The realms of his bibliophilic senses are suggested when a client asks if one of his books is by the Marquis de Sade. â??Itâ??s Sade-esque,â?• the uncle says, all but winking at the audience.

The kinks grow more outrÃ© and twisted, the winks dirtier and broader. The uncle has raised Hideko from childhood, away from the world, intending to wed her for her fortune. Heâ??s also turned her into a puppet, having trained her to read erotic fiction aloud for the delectation of his potential customers. Fate in the form of the con man (Ha Jung-woo) intervenes. Disguised as a count, he insinuates himself into the uncleâ??s home and seemingly into the nieceâ??s affection, enlisting Sookee in the ruse as Hidekoâ??s new maid. The count plans to marry Hideko and then ditch her, a plan that seems doomed when Sookee and Hidekoâ??s lady-maid intimacy steams and then boils over.

The inspiration for all this intrigue is Sarah Watersâ??s ambitious 2002 novel, â??Fingersmith,â?• a lesbian romance set in Victorian Britain in which she slyly has her way with established literary themes like avaricious male guardians and cloistered female wards. In adapting the movie, Mr. Park, who wrote the script with Chung Seo-kyung, has moved the story to Korea during the Japanese occupation. This setting initially seems more thread than cloth, conveyed in the smatterings of soldiers who pass through the story and in the mixing of languages, although it also factors into the villainy of the uncle, a Korean whoâ??s embraced a Japanese identity, asserting, â??Korea is ugly and Japan is beautiful.â?•

Mr. Park is a genre virtuoso, known for thrillers like â??Oldboy,â?• whose filmmaking is notable for its visual order and extreme violence, a combination that creates a seductive, at times unsettling aesthetic of immaculate frenzy. The violence in â??The Handmaidenâ?• tends to be more restrained than in some of his other work, more psychological and rather less blunt and bloody. A notable exception is some sadomasochistic whip-work thatâ??s far more vigorous than is found in, oh, say, â??Fifty Shades of Grey.â?• Thereâ??s also a characteristic Grand Guignol flourish toward the end thatâ??s outrageous enough that you may find yourself at once laughing and gasping, only to hastily avert your eyes.

Itâ??s one of the rare times you want to look away in â??The Handmaiden,â?• which Mr. Park has turned into an emporium of visual delights. Part of Sookeeâ??s journey is one from perdition into opulence, from a lowly thievesâ?? den into the sumptuousness of the mansion. Yet appearances remain deceiving, which is one of this storyâ??s themes. Everything inside the manor and out has been calculated to enchant, from the grounds with their carpets of green and bursts of flowering trees to the interiors with their wood paneling and floral wallpaper. Nothing is more perfect than Hidekoâ??s petal mouth with its lusciously carnal red lipstick.

Yet beauty can be a curse; a prison, too. Hidekoâ??s uncle has forbidden her to leave the grounds, turning her into a bird in a gilded cage. Under his steady gaze and severe hand, with the ever-present threat of violence (there are rightfully ominous allusions to a basement), she has been raised amid material plenty with luxuriously appointed rooms as well as drawers and shelves stuffed with elegant feminine frippery â?? gloves, hats, gowns. Mr. Park loves displaying all these goods, much like a proud merchant (or Gatsby), even as moment by moment he pushes the narrative into ugliness, scratching off the gilt to reveal a grim drama in which Hideko plays both the leading lady and slave.

Mr. Parkâ??s attention to this worldâ??s sumptuous surfaces at first can seem at odds with the underlying evil, as if â?? like the uncle â?? he were putting his aesthetic sensibility above all else. Mr. Park just seems to be enjoying himself too much, as the camera glides over satiny robes and bodies or pauses on an exquisite tableau. In one such display, as another of the uncleâ??s confined women narrates a tale, two shoji screens behind her part, an opening that mirrors the sexual conquest sheâ??s relating. Yet Mr. Park also slips in little jokes, comic line readings and clownish faces that ease the tension, lighten the mood and suggest thereâ??s freedom in laughing into the void.

The void is by turns enslaving and emancipating in â??The Handmaiden,â?• which plays with familiar form as a way to deliver unexpected meaning. A rebus, a romance, a gothic thriller and a woozy comedy, â??The Handmaidenâ?• is finally and most significantly a liberation story. Mr. Park may not seem to be doing all that much with the big ideas simmering here, including how the relentless pursuit of aesthetic perfection â?? especially when it comes to inherently imperfect human beings â?? can serve as a means of terror. But the ideas are here, tucked into a different kind of erotic story, one that alternately jolts and delights as Sookee and Hideko laugh their way to a new ending.

(Source: sbiff.org)

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