



Nick Prescott's Reviews

Perfume

Talent: Ben Whishaw, Dustin Hoffman, Alan Rickman, Rachel Hurd-Wood, John Hurt.

Date of review: Thursday the 1st of February, 2007

Director: Tom Tykwer

Duration: 141 minutes

Classification: MA (15+)

We rate it: 4 and a half stars.

Perfume, based upon the renowned novel by Patrick Suskind, is two wondrous things at once: it is one of the most exquisitely well-made films of the last decade, and one of the most unusual and haunting stories I can recall becoming engrossed in. While it's certainly not for all tastes, Tom Tykwer's film is nonetheless a breathtaking piece of cinema.

Both novel and film are set in the early decades of 18th century France. The film's action begins in Paris, and as the wonderfully evocative, gravelly vocal chords of John Hurt describe the city in voiceover, Tykwer's camera creeps through cobbled lanes and alleyways, eventually thrusting us into the centre of a raucous, overcrowded marketplace. We are immediately confronted with the putrid-looking goings-on at a fish stall, which is run by a heavily pregnant woman whose wares look anything but fresh. As flies assault the stalls and the crowds press in upon the stallholders, the woman collapses to the ground and gives convulsive birth to a baby boy. This infant survives against the odds, and grows up to become the story's central figure, Jean-Baptiste Grenouille.

Grenouille is an extremely unusual character. Beyond his aggressive talent for survival and his ruthless street cunning, his defining characteristic is his extraordinarily acute sense of smell. Grenouille is able to discern the component parts of any perfume with unerring accuracy, he can follow the faintest of scents from miles distant, and as the story progresses he develops the ability to devise and create bottled perfumes of his own devising. As his obsession with perfumes deepens, Grenouille becomes driven to create "the ultimate scent", the scent that can only be derived from the essences of the most exquisite beings on the planet. It is how Grenouille obtains the raw materials for these scents that becomes the most compelling and disturbing part of this extraordinary tale, and it is the narrative thread that we follow as the story transforms into a compelling psychological thriller.

Like the novel, Tykwer's film is subtitled "The Story of a Murderer". Audiences know that they're in for a dark ride with a film like this, and Tykwer creates a wonderfully forbidding atmosphere precisely by staging so many of his scenes in staggeringly low levels of light. Cameraman Frank Griebe has done an extraordinary job of photographing *Perfume*; the widescreen compositions are beautiful from the very first frame (yes, beautiful, despite the troubling subject matter the frames so often contain); every colour, every mote of dust and every beam of candlelight glows with almost tangible beauty. The music too is perfectly judged, and the performances throughout are utterly convincing. From the talented newcomer Ben Whishaw (*Grenouille*) to dependable actors like Alan Rickman and Dustin Hoffman to the luminously beautiful Rachel Hurd-Wood, Tykwer's cast helps make every moment of *Perfume* utterly compelling. For filmgoers interested in exploring troubling subject matter through a refined and intelligent piece of art, *Perfume* is without peer.

Nick Prescott