



Nick Prescott's Reviews

Across the Universe

Talent: Evan Rachel Wood, Jim Sturgess, Joe Anderson, Bono, Joe Cocker.

Director: Julie Taymor

Duration: 133 minutes

Classification: M

We rate it: 4 stars.

Director and co-writer Julie Taymor gets points here for concocting one of the strangest and most fascinating musicals of recent years. *Across the Universe* is a story of the 1960s and of the now, performed as a dramatic musical set entirely to the great songs of The Beatles. With a strong and affecting narrative tied together by often breathtaking modern performances of the great Lennon/McCartney pieces, *Across the Universe* is a strange and at times staggering trip.

Despite having directed a number of films now (the ultra-confronting *Titus* among them), Julie Taymor is still best known as a visionary theatre director: her celebrated stage adaptation of *The Lion King* is still playing at theatres around the world, and is still packing them in. While I've never gotten around to seeing that particular opus, after seeing *Across the Universe* I'd believe that Taymor could turn even gauche Disney fluff into memorable theatre.

Across the Universe is set in Liverpool, New York, California and Vietnam, and is a passionate love story and ode to the activist and politically volatile decade that The Beatles helped to compose the soundtrack to. Our hero and heroine (Jim Sturgess and Evan Rachel Wood) are, respectively, a Liverpool boy and an upper-class American girl, both of whom grow up through the turbulence that characterised the 1960s, and who become lovers, activists and artists, and, ultimately, symbols of the youthful spirits of their time. The story entails cross-cultural romance, sexual revolution, the conflict between art and commerce, conscription, the protest culture, the sixties drug scene, the music business and class conflict. It's a heady mix, and for the most part Sturgess and Wood prove themselves utterly up to the task of giving spirit to it all. Taymor has used these wonderful actors (both of whom prove themselves gifted singers as well) to ground her kaleidoscopic odyssey in human warmth and passion, and this helps to drag even the most dubious audience-member into the film effortlessly. This reviewer was in two minds to begin with, but within ten screen minutes I was sold on the conceit of this film; clunky though it all may sound from one perspective, it's at times a deeply affecting portrait of one of the most important decades of the twentieth century. The 1960s of course also represent that time many

of us wish we could rekindle the spirit of, and it's clear that Taymor is holding this idea up for us to inspect. One can't watch the Vietnam sequences in *Across the Universe* without thinking of that other conflict that has helped to define this first troubled decade of the 21st century.

Like all of Taymor's work, *Across the Universe* features many sequences of inspired inventiveness and breathtaking visual beauty. The music is all energetically performed, and singers like Bono and Joe Cocker not only contribute memorable cover versions of some of the crucial songs, but make interesting cameos in the film too. While the odd set-piece (for example the sequence set in a returned-soldiers' hospital ward) descends into surely unintentional comedy, for the most part the film absolutely seduces the audience with its visionary mix of politics, romance and artistry. *Across the Universe* might just prove the most memorably idiosyncratic love story of the year.

Nick Prescott