



Nick Prescott's Reviews

Notes on a Scandal

Date of review: Thursday, 8th of February 2007

Talent: Judi Dench, Cate Blanchett, Bill Nighy, Andrew Simpson, Phil Davis.

Director: Richard Eyre

Duration: 92 minutes

Classification: MA (15+)

We rate it: Four stars.

Notes on a Scandal, adapted from Zoe Heller's novel by the talented Patrick Marber (who wrote the bleakly brilliant Closer, which played a couple of years ago) is a dark and haunting fable about obsession and cruelty within human relationships. The subject matter is indeed somewhat unpleasant, though as with all well-crafted and cleverly written narratives of this kind, the fact that the story itself is forbidding doesn't mean that the experience of seeing it played out should be. Notes on a Scandal is a slow-burner, and its bleak tale of obsession and compulsion makes for a compelling piece of cinema.

One of the great pleasures of this kind of film is that it often attracts the very highest calibre of performers. For complex human dramas like this to work well on screen, the acting must be flawless, and with the cast that director Richard Eyre has assembled for this piece, it's no wonder that every moment rings stunningly true. Blanchett, Dench and Nighy are all their brilliantly convincing selves, and the precocious newcomer Andrew Simpson, who plays the teenager at the centre of the scandal of the title, is no slouch himself. Simpson, scarcely 17 years old, is someone we'll be seeing a lot more of in the future.

The film's setting is one of the bleaker suburbs of London, (Islington, if I'm not mistaken), an area stricken in socio-economic terms, and struggling to maintain anything like decent educational and infrastructural standards. Judi Dench plays Barbara, a rather wearied secondary-school teacher whose best years have been spent trying to bring order to the chaos that is the suburb's public school. Barbara is near retirement, and is clearly something of a loner, with no significant human other in her life; there's something entirely chilly about her, and her colleagues treat her as an efficient but unnerving outcast. Barbara seems to come alive, however, when she meets the new art teacher, Sheba, a woman deeply "alternative" in her style; she's young, self-possessed, and determined to try to give some polish to the rough diamonds she has in her class. As a beautiful and faintly enigmatic woman married to

an older man and clearly driven by an earthy, passionate spirit, Sheba, in Blanchett's utterly capable hands, is immediately intriguing.

The relationships that evolve between the beautifully drawn characters in *Notes on a Scandal* are by turns surprising, unnerving, devastating and chilling. It is difficult to describe them in specifics without giving too much away; one must skirt around the twists and surprises that drive the film and speak of its themes instead. As mentioned above, they include obsession and compulsion; they also encompass bleak lust and devastating revenge. (If audience members recall the misdirected passions at the heart of *Enduring Love*, they'll have an idea of the kind of territory I'm speaking of.)

Notes on a Scandal is troubling stuff; it is a story that functions as both a cautionary tale about betrayal and social taboos and as a powerful psychological thriller. Gripping, grim and stunningly well made, this is a demanding piece of cinema that, for all its darkness, sheds some meaningful light on the more uncomfortable elements of human behaviour.

Nick Prescott