



Nick Prescott's Reviews

Wah-Wah

Talent: Gabriel Byrne, Nicholas Hoult, Emily Watson, Miranda Richardson, Julie Walters, Celia Imrie, Olivia Grant, Zac Fox.

Date of review: 29th June, 2006.

Richard E. Grant is, for many cinemagoers, one of today's most cherished actors. Since his raucously brilliant, star-making performance in *Withnail & I* (1986) Grant has enjoyed almost constant work as an actor, and his pedigree is up there with the best of them. From seething villains to bitchy butlers, from romantic luvvies to noble heroic leads, Grant has shown, in a career of breathtaking scope, that he can convincingly portray almost anything. He has demonstrated enviable skill as a writer, too; his wonderful film memoir "With Nails" (published in 1997) documented, with amazing humour and wit, his first few projects as a major star. With *Wah-Wah*, his directorial debut, Grant has combined the two aspects of his creative life (filmmaking and writing) and used them to tell a funny, moving and heartfelt coming of age story, inspired by his own experiences as an adolescent in Swaziland.

Telling a semi-autobiographical coming-of-age story must be a very challenging thing, given that it has been done so often, and in many cases so well. Any filmmaker wanting to take a crack at this kind of material must face the age-old dilemma of trying to convince an audience that there will be something for them in what began life as an extremely personal story. Why should anyone be interested in Richard E. Grant's childhood, even if he is a famous actor? The trick is to acknowledge this from the outset, and show that the experiences in the story at hand are at once recognisable and illuminating. Grant has taken up this challenge with astonishing grace and panache, and his warm, moving script and subtle and generous direction combine to make *Wah-Wah* an absolute delight from beginning to end.

In the wonderful diary he has recently published to co-incide with the release of *Wah-Wah*, Grant describes the conversation he had with *Withnail* creator Bruce Robinson: Robinson told him to begin his story by "thinking about what happened on the day it begins that had never happened before". For Grant, the strange story of his adolescence began when he witnessed his mother's adulterous romp with a work colleague of his father's. Instantly confronted with the fact that his parents' marriage was far from perfect, young Grant felt his life change irrevocably. Living in Swaziland in 1969 was an unusual thing for an English family to do; with the reign of the "Empire" coming to an end, many of the British diplomats and emissaries found themselves watching the sun set on their livelihoods and life plans. Souls were searched, decisions made, and hopes and dreams re-evaluated. Such an emotional

background sets the scene for a fairly dramatic foreground, and Wah-Wah delivers there too.

The story describes many of the kinds of events we have all experienced in our own lives, but the fascinating time and place Grant conjures up helps to endow the film with an element of hyper-vividness; the family's predicament is that little bit more poignant, that little bit more fascinating as it plays out in this unusual historical context.

As Ralph, the young boy at the centre of it all, Nicholas Hoult (who made such an impression in *About a Boy*) gives a tremendously convincing performance, and he is unforgettably accompanied by Gabriel Byrne (who has never been better) playing the volatile father, and the always wonderful Miranda Richardson and Emily Watson playing mother and stepmother respectively. Grant's impeccable skills as an actor show through in the performances here; he has clearly taken time to create close relationships with his cast, and the results have indeed been fruitful.

Wah-Wah is a rare piece because it tells a story that could have been harrowing in a way that renders it humane, powerful and extraordinarily life-affirming. There is humour, romance and sadness here, and it is presented with unerring grace and intelligence, and makes for an experience in the cinema that will linger with audiences for some time. A genuinely beautiful piece of work.

Nick Prescott.

Writer/director/editor: Richard E. Grant

Classification: M (Mature)

Duration: 97 minutes

We rate it: Four and a half stars.