

DVD Review: Andrea Arnold's 'Wuthering Heights' Puts 'The Great Gatsby' to Shame

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CHICAGO – First Joe Wright sucked the life out of “Anna Karenina” with his meticulously choreographed, self-conscious pageantry. Then Baz Luhrmann proved that while heavy-handed spectacle may have appealed to Jay Gatsby himself, it was a recipe for disaster when applied to F. Scott Fitzgerald’s prose. Nothing kills off the power of a metaphor more than a large neon sign erected to underline its significance.

After seeing Andrea Arnold’s quietly mesmerizing adaptation of Emily Brontë’s 1847 classic “Wuthering Heights,” I’m now hungering to see her take on other literary landmarks, particularly “The Great Gatsby.” Luhrmann’s film hammers home the meaning of Fitzgerald’s writing with such aggravating pomp and circumstance, complete with entire sections of text materializing onscreen, I was half-expecting to see a bouncing Gatsby head spring off each word as it was dutifully recited. Though Wright and Luhrmann pride themselves on their filmic exuberance, Arnold’s picture is vastly more cinematic, in part because she eliminates much of the prose altogether.



DVD Rating: **4.5/5.0**

For the first hour of “Wuthering Heights,” there is so little dialogue that it nearly resembles a silent film, though unlike the meandering eye of Terrence Malick in “To the Wonder,” Arnold keeps her gaze focused on the budding love between the orphaned Heathcliffe (Solomon Glave) and the rebellious Catherine (Shannon Beer). Whereas all the previous screen adaptation of “Heights” neglected to remain faithful to Brontë’s description of Heathcliffe as “dark-skinned,” with everyone from Laurence Olivier to Tom Hardy inhabiting the role, Arnold is wise to cast a black actor, thus illuminating the racism that fuels the discrimination faced by the young hero at the titular gloomy English moorland. Arnold portrays the hormonal bond between the two would-be lovers in near-wordless passages of such arresting naturalistic beauty that the first hour alone emerges as the most captivating screen romance since Jane Campion’s “Bright Star.” After Heathcliffe is begrudgingly allowed to live in the Earnshaw family farmhouse under the stern eye of a religiously devout patriarch (Paul Hilton), he gradually begins to fall for his daughter, Catherine, the only person ever to show the alienated boy a shred of tenderness and compassion. With his eyes blurred by the harsh sunlight and his body knocked to the ground by Earnshaw’s hot-headed son, Hindley (Lee Shaw), Catherine is the one to pull him back on his feet



Wuthering Heights was released on Blu-ray and DVD on April 23rd, 2013.

Photo credit: Oscilloscope Laboratories

Cinematographer Robbie Ryan's decision to shoot the film in a classical 1.33:1 aspect ratio is appropriate, since it illustrates the claustrophobia of the characters' societally imposed prison, even as they savor the illusion of freedom. Ryan's vivid close-ups, often viewed from Heathcliff's perspective, magnify the countless sublime details destined to haunt his mind in later years. He allows the audience to feel the strands of Catherine's hair as they glide across Heathcliff's face, or the coldness of her tongue as it licks the bloody scars on his back left by a slave driver's lash. Inexpressive actors may have killed Arnold's carefully textured mood, but her two pint-sized leads are splendid discoveries. Glave has a commanding screen presence reminiscent of a young Sidney Poitier, while Beer nails the fragility of an enraptured heart. Alas, the second half of Arnold's film is more problematic, relying too heavily on expository dialogue while recasting the central roles with adult actors so far removed from their young counterparts that they hardly seem like the same characters. Perhaps that's why editor Nicolas Chaudeurge felt compelled to include so many flashbacks in order to evoke the magic of the film's earlier passages. Regardless of its flaws, Arnold's film still serves as an exhilarating model of how to truly revitalize a time-worn book for the big screen. Brontë's language is scarcely uttered, but it haunts every frame.

"Wuthering Heights" is presented in its 1.33:1 aspect ratio, and includes an excellent 19-minute video essay from critic David Fear that details the history of Brontë's novel and its past screen incarnations. It explores Arnold's recurring interest in characters struggling against the limitations of their environment, as witnessed in her previous two gems, "Red Road" and "Fish Tank," and also provides some enlightening tidbits on the lives of her exceptionally gifted ensemble of untrained actors.

'Wuthering Heights' is released by Oscilloscope Laboratories and stars Solomon Glave, Shannon Beer, James Howson, Kaya Scodelario and Lee Shaw. It was written by Andrea Arnold and Olivia Hetreed and directed by Andrea Arnold. It was released on April 23rd, 2013. It is not rated.

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