

Surprising Fun in Revenge Tale of ‘The Handmaiden’

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on November 1, 2016 - 7:03am

- [Amazon Studios](#) [2]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [3]
- [Jin-woong Jo](#) [4]
- [Jung-woo Ha](#) [5]
- [Min-hee Kim](#) [6]
- [Movie Review](#) [7]
- [Oldboy](#) [8]
- [Park Chan-wook](#) [9]
- [Patrick McDonald](#) [10]
- [Sarah Walters](#) [11]
- [Stoker](#) [12]
- [Tae Ri Kim](#) [13]
- [The Handmaiden](#) [14]



Rating: **4.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – Although “The Handmaiden” is based in deceit, fetishes, thievery and subservience, director Park Chan-Wook (“Stoker”) keeps it light by the addition of some subversive humor, and weaves a mystery with a pitch that is like the “The Sting” meets “In the Realm of the Senses.”

Yes, there is eroticism in the film, but it is presented as a plot motivator, and is also used as a great punch line. Mostly the step-by-step story, told by emphasizing different elements of the same situation, seeks comeuppance for the evil that lurks within, even though all the players seem to have some level of larceny in their souls. That edge is the fun, as some characters end up bumbling in their own hubris, while others stay one step ahead of what could be their downfall. The dark mystery/comedy of Hitchcock, the cross cutting of Kurosawa and even the wackiness of Preston Sturges are all combined into a savory cinematic treat.

A gang of Korean thieves, led by the duplicitous Count Fujiwara (Jung-woo Ha), want to infiltrate the Japanese lair of Uncle Kouzuki (Jin-woong Jo), a wealthy book collector. There is a kept woman named Lady Hideko (Min-hee Kim) within the estate, and Fujiwara figures the best way inside is through her handmaiden. He recruits one of his thieves, Sook-Hee (Tae Ri Kim), to accept the position.



Sook-Hee (Tae Ri Kim, right) Tends to Lady Hideko (Min-hee Kim) in ‘The Handmaiden’

Photo credit: Amazon Studios

When Lady Hideko and Sook-Hee begin their relationship, they find much in common, including a sexual attraction. This is counter to the Count, who is there to try and woo the Lady of the house, while Sook-Hee provides all the inner-sanctum espionage. When the truth of Uncle Kouzuki starts to reveal itself, and the Count finds himself spinning his wheels, it is Lady Hideko and her handmaiden that will take the outcome into their own sure hands.

The best part of the story is the mystery of it, and it is woven like a tapestry through all the emotions that are part of the scam or end up being real. The Count and the handmaiden are almost like a comedy team, due to Sook-Hee's tendency not to take any guff from anyone. The differing points of the story, as it is revealed, has some delightful surprises, the kind of plot twists that make the well-told movie drama that much more dramatic.

Park Chan-Wook's ability to create atmosphere is also a highlight. The film is set in the early 20th Century, but has a timelessness due to the careful rendering of the purgatory-like estate. All the production design (by Seong-hie Ryu) adds weight to the purposeful narrative, which has threads of a steampunk gothic intervention among the Japanese gardens and pocket doors. As characters make transitions, the world that they live in provides the necessary mistiness or pathways that symbolically light the way. Sometimes cinematic beauty like this is taken for granted, in this case its presence was entrancing and enhancing.



Fujiwara (Jung-woo Ha) Comes A-Calling in 'The Handmaiden'

Photo credit: Amazon Studios

The sensuality is rooted in early Japanese erotica, which Lady Hideko is forced to read to some sweaty men – which is both highly humorous and fraught with tension – and foreshadows much of the journey. The wealth that Uncle Kouzuki has is in his rare books, but ironically (like the internet) the top shelf re-visits are reserved for pornography. What a piece of work is man.

For old-timey descriptives like passion! intrigue! and mystery!, it's difficult to find a better night at the movies than "The Handmaiden." This is a go-with-the-flow type experience, and it rewards the viewer (the voyeur) with satisfaction levels that are relative to letting go. It's like the distant ringing of the bells...a flight of fancy can read many things into the source of the music.

"The Handmaiden" continued its limited release in Chicago on October 28th. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Min-hee Kim, Jung-woo Ha, Jin-woong Jo and Tae Ri Kim. Screenplay by Park Chan-Wook and Seo-Kyung Chung, from the novel by Sarah Walters. Directed by Park Chan-Wook. Rated "R"



[15]

By [PATRICK McDONALD](#) [16]
Writer, Editorial Coordinator
HollywoodChicago.com
pat@hollywoodchicago.com [15]

© 2016 Patrick McDonald, HollywoodChicago.com

Source URL (retrieved on **Mar 29 2024 - 1:45am**):

<http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/26947/surprising-fun-in-revenge-tale-of-the-handmaiden>

Links:

- [1] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/users/hankq>
- [2] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/amazon-studios>
- [3] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/movie-review/hollywoodchicagocom-content>
- [4] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/jin-woong-jo>
- [5] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/jung-woo-ha>
- [6] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/min-hee-kim>
- [7] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/labels/review.html>
- [8] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/oldboy>
- [9] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/park-chan-wook>
- [10] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/movie-review/patrick-mcdonald>
- [11] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/sarah-walters>
- [12] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/stoker>
- [13] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/tae-ri-kim>
- [14] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/the-handmaiden>
- [15] <mailto:pat@hollywoodchicago.com>
- [16] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/about#PAT>