

Sofia Coppola Creates a Masterwork with ‘The Beguiled’

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Rating: **5.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – The human-ness of being human never changes, fundamentally. The mating season arrives, and the effect makes for both great connections and bad decisions. Director Sofia Coppola emphasizes this in a reverent film production of the story called “The Beguiled.”

It began as a novel in 1971 by Thomas Cullinan (originally entitled “A Painted Devil”) and was adapted into a film version that same year by director Don Siegel, starring Clint Eastwood (the same team that brought us “Dirty Harry”). Sofia Coppola wrote the screenplay adaptation for her directorial version, focusing on how the relationships developed and changed in a Southern girls boarding school during the Civil War, when adjacent to the property a wounded Union soldier is found. Coppola generates an understanding of how women are, in a repressed society, when faced with their own longings and desires. This is framed by a tense situation – almost a thriller – as the step-by-step recovery by the soldier produces joyful interactions, misunderstandings, jealousy and unnecessary rivalries, all based on the needs of “birds do it, bees do it.” Hell, I’ve heard even educated fleas do it.

Miss Martha Farnsworth (Nicole Kidman) is the headmistress of a girl’s boarding school in Virginia during 1864, as the American Civil War comes right up to their front door. The slaves have escaped, and Farnsworth is left with only one teacher (Kirsten Dunst as Edwina), and five students. One of them, Amy (Oona Laurence), discovers a wounded Union soldier named Corporal John McBurney (Colin Farrell) in the woods nearby, and brings him back to the school.



School is in Session: The Ladies of 'The Beguiled'

Photo credit: Focus Features

Miss Farnsworth decides to let him recover from his wounds, and the Yankee warrior becomes an unofficial mascot of the school. The girl students buzz around him, in various stages of womanhood, especially bold Alicia (Elle Fanning). Martha and Edwina have more womanly attractions toward their handsome Irish border, and McBurney takes full advantage of it, because he is both in a heavenly situation and he doesn't want to go back to the war. When decisions on who, what and where have to be made, the women will need all their strength and survival instincts.

The film is a lovely combination of Southern Gothic atmosphere and Freudian implications. Colin Farrell's Corporal McBurney is actually a decent chap, but any straight man would be influenced by such a situation, and his progression from recovering patient to the rooster-in-the-henhouse is a major fascination in the story. It really does become about the competing rage of hormones, all the way up to betrayals on both sides of the genders. More bad decisions are made on testosterone and estrogen than any of the artificial mind-altering substances.

Director Coppola plays this all out slowly and deliberately, but each scene contains the requisite sexual tensions, becoming more expressive as his healing occurs. Kirsten Dunst is extraordinary as usual, portraying a repressed sadness that had tragically been affected by the war. Unbeknownst to the others, she presents herself as the best possible outcome for McBurney, and their quasi-courtship takes on levels of excitement and dread... and is portrayed through Coppola's story design as both agitation and redemption.



McBurney (Colin Ferrell) Befuddles Edwina (Kirsten Dunst) in ‘The Beguiled’

Photo credit: Focus Features

Nicole Kidman, as she pops up in supporting roles, consistently reminds us of her superior grasp of character. Her character is also a good choice for McBurney, but can’t get to the same level of expression as Edwina – due to her repressed Southern morality – which puts the whole situation at risk. Elle Fanning is another risk taker in character, and knows her Alicia role, because it eventually becomes how all women must compete. And this is all framed through the exquisite cinematography by Phillipe Le Sourd, who gets to flex all of the sunlight-through-the-magnolia-tree Southern Gothic nature of the setting.

There is much to be said about the Coppolas – Dad Francis Ford with his classic filmography, Mom Eleanor with her narrative feature debut this year (“Paris Can Wait”) and finally the daughter, Sofia, who became the most unlikely success in a family of filmmakers. She continues to discover new storytelling byways on her cinematic path, along with the emotions behind those stories... and in “The Beguiled, it becomes the human-ness of being human, which never changes.

“The Beguiled” opened everywhere on June 30th. Featuring Nicole Kidman, Colin Farrell, Kirsten Dunst, Elle Fanning, Oona Laurence, Angourie Rice, Addison Riecke and Emma Howard. Screenplay adapted and directed by Sofia Coppola. Rated “R”



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