Strong Performance Makes ‘Lady Macbeth’ a Cogent Character Study

Submitted by JonHC [1] on July 24, 2017 - 2:36am

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Rating: **4.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – Separating a performance from the rest of the film is usually an easy task. One may be stronger than the other, or vice versa, but either way, they can be judged individually and as a whole. “Lady Macbeth” proves to be that rare character study where a single performance (from breakout actress Florence Pugh) not only makes the film but essentially is the film.



There’s more than meets the eye in ‘Lady Macbeth’
Photo credit: BBC Films

Alice Birch adapts Nikolai Leskov’s novel of the same name but adds a new perspective to the story. Birch doesn’t shy away from showing the unsympathetic darkness inside of Katherine but instead counters it by showing scenes of happiness and giving reasons for her actions. The story is so compellingly told that most of the audience will side with Katherine and be willing to overlook all of her misdeeds up until the last one. Like the film’s namesake, Katherine’s ambition drives her to commit murderous acts in order to get her way. Unlike the Shakespearean character, Katherine’s goals start off as more noble and what most of us would now consider basic human rights. It makes you ask yourself: “How far would you go to get control of your life back?”

This period piece highlights themes that end up transforming our Lady Macbeth from the Shakespearean, status-hungry enabler into a progressive femme fatale freedom fighter. Katherine was part of a system at a time where women were regarded as property, regularly sold to whoever was willing to pay. This form of slavery is one of the cornerstones of the story, and the biggest thing that makes Katherine a character

that deserves our sympathy at the beginning. Being controlled and oppressed by almost every man in her life, she reacts like any other caged animal, except her ferocity is well hidden behind her meek fasçade and her actions are much more calculated than feral.



Food isn’t enough to satiate her appetite in ‘Lady Macbeth’
Photo credit: BBC Films

Along with physical repression, we also witness a sexual one that reflects the views of sex as only a reproductive duty rather than one for pleasure. Katherine’s sexual awakening is the catalyst for her transformation, making most of her decision-making based on the protection of her sexual relationship with a worker the most important part. We see how her need for equality turns her into a different sort of oppressor from the ones she had, but an oppressor all the same. These themes are the lifeblood of the character and give us the confusing task of both empathizing with her while condemning her in the same breath.

There is a humble, yet designful approach in William Oldroyd’s directorial debut that lends itself really well to both the story and the time period. Oldroyd doesn’t shy away from letting every scene breathe with quiet contemplation. He frames many scenes with a simple symmetry that gives them a portrait-like quality. His use of natural lighting helps create the atmosphere and sets the tone for the film as a whole. Oldroyd uses nature as a way to emphasize the latent nature of our protagonist and to see how contact with it helps her open up and embrace her natural desires. Although the director’s approach is simple, it creates the perfect juxtaposition for the complexity of the character since most of the exposition is done visually.

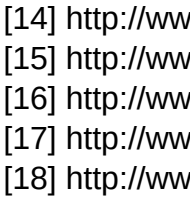


Sexual liberation is only one of the many themes in ‘Lady Macbeth’
Photo credit: BBC Films

The true power in “Lady Macbeth” stems from the quiet, controlled performance of Florence Pugh. She takes command of every scene with little more than look and gesture. As Katherine, we witness Pugh’s silent evolution from her mannerisms to her posture, and can even be seen through her eyes. There is strength in her gaze and as the film goes on, the life in her eyes begins to fade in a vacuous stare. Pugh gives a

phenomenal performance, able to embody the passions of youth while also being able to later deliver a world-weariness usually reserved for the old. Her nuanced portrayal of Katherine and command of every scene she is in will likely make “Lady Macbeth” her breakout role, and it couldn’t be anymore well-deserved.

“Lady Macbeth” opened everywhere on July 21st. Featuring Florence Pugh, Cosmo Jarvis, Paul Hilton, Naomi Ackie, Christopher Fairbank and Golda Rosheuvel. Screenplay by Alice Birch. Directed by William Oldroyd. Rated “R”


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