

## Annette Bening Proves ‘Film Stars Don’t Die in Liverpool’

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Rating: **3.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – GEORGE BAILEY: “Hey, you look good. That’s some dress you got on there.” VIOLET: “This old thing? I only wear it when I don’t care how I look.” That is how actress Gloria Grahame (as Violet Bick) was introduced in the classic “It’s a Wonderful Life”. Now she is portrayed by Annette Bening in “Film Stars Don’t Die In Liverpool”.

The movie is based on a memoir by Peter Turner, who is portrayed in “Film Stars...” by Jamie Bell. Turner was a young actor who had an affair with the much older Grahame near the end of her life in the late 1970s/early ‘80s. He lived in Liverpool, England, and took care of the Oscar winner near her demise. The unusual May/December romance is characterized through Grahame’s deep insecurities, which Annette Bening plays to perfection. It’s also a somewhat claustrophobic film, mostly taking place in hotel rooms and the small Liverpool house of Peter’s parents, but that adds to the desperation and tension. So many of those notable actresses from the studio system era (1930s-50s) were forgotten and faded away, and Gloria Grahame was certainly a prime example.

The film opens with Grahame (Bening) preparing to go on stage in the play “The Glass Menagerie.” She is stricken in her dressing room, and Peter Turner (Jamie Bell) is called. It turns out that Grahame has a advanced cancer that she didn’t disclose, so Turner puts her up in his parent’s home in Liverpool to convalesce. This distresses his mother and father (Julie Walters, Kenneth Cranham) who feel that Grahame should die beside her American family.



Annette Bening and Jamie Bell in 'Film Stars Don't Die in Liverpool'

*Photo credit: Sony Pictures Classics*

The film also flashes back to the relationship of Gloria and Peter. It is revealed that Grahame has a predilection toward younger men, which could account for her four marriages, one of which was with her stepson from her second marriage, Tony Ray. Her deep insecurities, regarding aging, acting and her life's purpose, severed many of the threads in her relationship with Peter.

At its roots, the film is a love story, and Jamie Bell interprets that love with a deep and passionate performance. He began his career as a child actor, bursting onto the scene as the title character in “Billy Elliot,” and has steadily built a character oriented career that keeps getting noticed. His Peter Turner is sensitive, naive and ultimately graceful, because he never loses the torch he carries for Grahame. Julie Walters, as his mother, provides the brash counterpoint the film needed, and serves to highlight Bell's delicate wisp of a portrayal.

The film belongs to Annette Bening, who continues to make significant contributions to the cinema arts. Perhaps she completely understands the later days of Gloria Grahame, forced to grasp any crumbs of work after her glamorous movie star days are behind her. Bening is in no way the suffering older actress, but obviously observes what happens to a career once the age lines start forming. She plumbs the depths of that sorrow, and creates Grahame as fragile porcelain doll, ready to crack at the slightest provocation.



Julie Walters in ‘Film Stars Don’t Die in Liverpool’  
Photo credit: Sony Pictures Classics

This is a period piece, having taken place 37 years ago, and the lower budget film has to stay away from larger perspectives of territory. Almost like a play, it takes place inside as Grahame suffers in her illness, depression and dread. There is an extraordinary scene with Graham’s aged mother (the great Vanessa Redgrave) and sister (Frances Barber). In front of Peter, they list the sins of the actress, including her fondness for younger men. Humiliated, Grahame is forced to run from the room. It seemed to reflect the fate of all women movie stars, constantly forced to hear what is wrong with them, until they leave.

There is a nice coda in the film that shows the actual Gloria Grahame on Oscar night in 1953. She won a Best Supporting trophy for “The Bad and the Beautiful,” in what to that point was the shortest on-screen performance to win the big prize. That is a perfect parallel to Grahame’s movie star life... short with an impact, but with a long and unknown road afterward. It stands to reason that one of her most famous films was “In a Lonely Place.”

*“Film Stars Don’t Die in Liverpool” continues its limited release in Chicago on January 12th. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Annette Bening, Jamie Bell, Julie Walters, Kenneth Cranham, Frances Barber and Vanessa Redgrave. Screenplay adapted by Matt Greenhalgh. Directed by Paul McGuigan. Rated “R”*



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