Awkward Human Nature Explored in 'On Chesil Beach'

Submitted by PatrickMcD [1] on May 25, 2018 - 12:46am

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Rating: **4.0**/5.0

CHICAGO – If you hook up with people for that inevitable physical connection, you've experienced the odd emotional wrestling match of the "first time" – whether it's the first "first time" or any other new partner first time. "On Chesil Beach" focuses on a young British couple in 1962, as they first time their virginal wedding night.

It pairs hot Oscar-nominated Saoirse Ronan and relative newcomer Billy Howie as the couple, in a story adapted by Ian McEwan ("Atonement") from his own novel. The duo have great chemistry in their lead up to the wedding night, and wonderful patience in their performances for that particular first time dance. This is relatable human nature, as that unique vulnerability emerges in everyone during such a situation, and as it is different in everyone, so does it work in its own way with the fictional couple. This is framed by both the history of their romance and their past difficulties in family… this film just connects as empathy, and is very honest in its representation.

Florence and Edward (Saoirse Ronan and Billy Howie) are freshly minted British newlyweds, in their early twenties, who have made their way to the honeymoon suite on the Chesil Beach seashore. The ceremony is over, the niceties of the walk on the beach has been accomplished and the special meal in the room has been served. Two, four, six, eight, now it's time to consummate.

Hello Young Lovers: Edward (Billy Howie) and Florence (Saoirse Ronan) in 'On Chesil Beach'
Photo credit: Bleecker Street Media

While they go through the rituals of fumbling their way through the night, the story flashes back to their development as a couple and the past challenges within their families. Florence's family is upper class business owners, while Edward has had to deal with a mother with emotional/mental challenges in a middle class environment. Both of their past lives rush up to them through the wedding night, and some of those secrets are affecting the process.

In the center of the narrative is the two person performances of Ronan and Howie. They express their awkwardness like fine instrumentation, as they approach the ultimate moment from completely different directions. The year 1962, just on the edge of incredible social change, had its footprint still in the more conservative 1950s. Most younger couples in those times were virgins on their wedding nights, and without a roadmap towards the "act," had to rely on nature and their own vulnerabilities. Ronan and Howie apply that feeling with an authentic hopelessness.

The film is also a reminder that everyone has a past, and that past affects their relationships going forward. The couple had some deep and dramatic afflictions in their history, and as the story reveals the problems of the night are being filtered through the problems of their lives. Anne-Marie Duff, as Edward's mother, creates a addled individual who has problems with boundaries, including keeping her clothes on. When Florence first meets Edward's mother, those scenes are particularly touching, as is the challenge in trying to keep a family like that together.

Faraway So Close in 'On Chesil Beach'
Photo credit: Bleecker Street Media

Director Dominic Cooke makes his major film debut and generates an interesting atmosphere around the couple. There were some elements of the story in the past that jumped around and were hard to follow, which felt that perhaps the film was cut down from a longer running time. But there is a interesting epilogue, which projects into the future, that expresses a closure to the whole journey.

I like that Saoirse Ronan has selected roles in her young career that expands the range of character creation… the girls in "Brooklyn" and "Lady Bird" were completely different from the young woman in "On Chesil Beach." She is an emotional chameleon, and shares those emotions with the person who is sitting in the theater.

"On Chesil Beach" opens in Chicago on May 25th, part of a nationwide release. See local listings for theaters and show times in your area. Featuring Saoirse Ronan, Emily Watson, Billy Howie, Samuel West and Anne-Marie Duff. Screenplay adapted by Ian McEwan, from his novel. Directed by Dominic Cooke. Rated "R"

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