

erthouse/Independent

All reviews based on a five star rating system

he House of Spirits (US/Denmark/Germany/Portugal)

Maybe there could be a worse adaptation of Isabel Allende's bestselling saga of a strife-torn Latin American family, but it's gruesome to contemplate how it would differ from this spectacularly wrong-headed movie. If it didn't have such big names attached, the epic wannabe could have been comfortably shelved, or more likely cut into miniseries-sized chunks and spread over several nights of so-so TV.

The project was sunk from the start with the selection of Bille August, the Danish director who did beautifully understated work on the period pieces *The Best Intentions*, *Pelle the Conqueror*, and *Twist and Shout*. One glance at his austere, Bergman-inflected style should have sent warning signals to anyone fond of the magic realism underpinning much Spanish-language literature (picture Pedro Almodóvar directing *Wild Strawberries* to get the effect in reverse).

Then there's that all-star cast. For a tale intended to convey the trials of four generations of women in a South American country quite like Chile (the film was mostly shot in Portugal), it spends an awful — and I do mean awful — lot of time with Jeremy Irons as Esteban Trueba, a reactionary landowner who does his very best to ruin the lives of everyone around him. With "swarthy" makeup and a prosthetic device to enhance his public-school mumble, Irons effects an unplaceable accent, but can't handle even the most familiar Spanish words — he comes across like an Iowa Republican on his first trip to Mexico.

Meryl Streep fares better as his bride, Clara. She's a gentle clairvoyant who can always

see who's going to die next, but can't quite predict the misery of life with bully-boy Esteban, even after he bans his spinsterly sister from their sprawling hacienda. When the gates close on black-clad Ferula (a terrific Glenn Close, stepping out of a gloomy Dutch painting), the movie loses the fraction of a heart it started with, and lurches from one tacky tragedy to the next.

One of the saddest things about the generally dispiriting *Spirits* is the way it reduces profound political events (meant to parallel, but not duplicate Allende's own experience) to a "sweeping" technicolor backdrop for sudsy soap opera love. With Winona Ryder as the Truebas's well-named daughter, Blanca, opposite Philadelphia's Antonio Banderas, as a dashing peasant revolutionary, the story plays like a wealthy Valley Girl dallying with the hunky pool boy. (It says something odd that Banderas and Maria Conchita Alonzo, two of the few actors with genuine Hispanic accents, seem ludicrously out-of-place here.)

But most depressing is the way the disjointed movie, edited even more brutally than the longer European version, robs *The House* of what made it so popular in the first place. Readers everywhere — especially female ones — were immensely taken by the book's evocation of a private women's culture, rich with non-linear storytelling, otherworldly omens, and bursts of unexpected violence and feeling. Despite a few luminous moments with Streep and Close, this version should be called Sidney Sheldon's *House of Spirits*... if that's not being too unkind to Sidney.

Díaz-Aroca, Verdú, Ramirez, Cruz, and Gil try the Dating Game,
Spanish-style

elle Epoque (Spain)

If anyone remakes *The House of the Spirits*, they should hire Fernando Trueba (dig the last name), the director of *Belle Epoque*, the lovely Spanish sex farce which won a slew of Spanish academy awards, and an American one, for best foreign film.

The setting is rural Spain, circa 1931, during the tentative tug-of-war between monarchists, fascists, and socialistas. A confused young army recruit and former seminary student, Fernando (handsome Jorge Sanz, who looks like a befuddled Robert Downey Jr.) has deserted his post, and is wandering towards Madrid when he stumbles onto the smalltown villa of the friendly Manolo (Fernando Fernán Gómez), a self-satisfied painter and padron. Impotent with anyone but his opera-singing wife, and secretly religious, Don Manolo's only real problem is that he's a would-be "infidel, rebel and libertine, living like an old bourgeois."

The era's chaotic politics suits his well-developed sense of cynical humour, and he likewise enjoys Fernando's passionate innocence and exceptional kitchen skills. Still, Manolo turns chilly the day his four grown daughters are due for a visit; he abruptly hustles the young man to the train station, bag in hand. One glance at these niñas, however, and Fernando makes tracks back to the villa. Soon, his life is reduced to cooking gourmet meals and deciding which sister is prettiest and most desirable — a task which isn't as easy as it sounds.

This may sound like a male fantasy supreme, but the way it's handled by Trueba and screenwriter Rafael Azcona, young Fernando is never in control for a minute. Instead, he flits impulsively — and not usually on his impulses, either — between the demure Clara (Miriam Díaz-Aroca), still adapting to recent widowhood; the voluptuous, dark Rocio (Maribel Verdú), also involved with a goofy rich kid; the mannish Violeta (Ariadna Gil), who prefers Fernando in a dress and make-up (maing him to look like Tony Curtis in *Some Like It Hot*); and feisty Luz (Jamon Jamon's Penélope Cruz), the impatient baby of the family.

When not being burdened by Fernando's latest confession of love, Manolo dreams of a free Spain, and of his absent spouse, who finally shows up with her French agent and lover (Michel Galabru, who did his own drag numbers in the *Cage aux Folles* films). Once this extended family is in place, the gorgeously shot movie takes on the sun-dappled, giddily melancholic tone of rustic period classics like Bertrand Tavernier's *Sunday in the Country* and Jean Renoir's *A Day in the Country*. But Trueba, who admitted his fealty to Billy Wilder on Oscar night, also calls on Howard Hawks and other screwball directors for his flawless timing and tart, female-centred comedy. His sense of eros, which pokes fun at gender and tradition, but never at desire, is plenty original though. And remarkably hard to shake off, at least without a cold shower.

irens (UK/Australia)

Not really bad, *Sirens* is not really good. Still, it's easy to explain why it's getting attention: there's plenty of sex in it. Or at least plenty of nudity, which amounts to the same thing for North Americans fed on a steady diet of look-don't-touch arousal — a kind of slavering puritanism, if you will (or, more likely, won't).

Whence came this special brand of glazed voyeurism? From the Brits, of course, although they at least have the ability — the craving, actually — to make fun of “private functions” we don't find all that amusing. Essentially an Australian spin on *Enchanted April*'s liberation-through-nature comedy, the early-1930s-set tale follows a young church couple's journey from England to the Blue Mountain home of Aussie artist Norman Lindsey (Sam Neill), whose subversive nude pictures are causing an uproar in Edwardian London.

It's a foregone conclusion that the free-thinking painter and his sun-dappled, supermodel-strewn surroundings will, as they anachronistically say, “shock the socks” off the young marrieds (named *Campion*, much to the delight of *Piano* fans). The only steady fun in the film is seeing how they get undone, or done, in the case of *Estella Campion* (Tara Fitzgerald), who turns out to be considerably more adventurous than her husband, the only slightly irreverent Reverend *Anthony* (Hugh Grant). Although both actors come across a little wiser than their naive characters are written, they're so good at bumbling their way towards ecstasy, you have to laugh.

But what's really going on here? Not a lot, unless you still happen to find D.H. Lawrence and Havelock Ellis controversial. More exactly, the film is mired in a late-'60s sensibility which says: if the establishment doesn't like it, it must be good for you. Writer-director John Duigan, so perfectly understated in his autobiographical works (*Flirting* and *The Year My Voice Broke*) and perfectly ghastly in his potboiling *Wide Sargasso Sea*, plays it down the middle here. He's too smart to fall into blatant sexism, so he dabbles in ultra-vague feminism and presents a blind, Pan-like figure, thoughtfully named *Devlin* (Mark Gerber), for the gals to ogle.

The rest of the time, though, the ogling is aimed where *Sports Illustrated* subscribers would expect, at Lindsey's frequently clothes-free model-muses, led by a beefed-up *Elle Macpherson*, who, no matter how many pots of stilton she sticks her fingers into, is a numbingly dull screen presence. Duigan directs her as if bedroom eyes and sloppy eating habits constitute a whole personality.

He's right, if you belong to the Hugh Hefner School of Pavlovian Responses. In that case, you'll also accept Sam Neill's sketchy performance as the real-life painter and children's book illustrator whose story this isn't; as written, Lindsey's simply a wise Rabelaisian patriarch, and that's the end of it. Fortunately, *Estella Campion* has a bit more going for her, and when the story focuses on her, things pick up dramatically. That's mainly because Fitzgerald, with her sculpted flower of a face, is bonafide star material. In fact, the somewhat muddled photography and editing both become sharper when she's around (there are some arresting images in the final quarter; Rachel

Portman's score is tops throughout).

Overall, though, *Sirens* is markedly missing what its hype boasts most: atmosphere. Worse, its (few) conclusions about sexuality, Anglo or otherwise, are conventional to the point of boredom. On the other hand, the film's up-the-buggers, let's-have-at-it philosophy may still be revolutionary to some. An unshushable woman sitting behind me on opening night provided a running commentary along the useful lines of "oh, he's cute", "look at those breasts", "nice dress", "Ohh, yuck", and "I would never do that". If that's anywhere near the intelligence level of arthouse types attracted to this tame sex-o-rama, I can't rightly accuse it of talking down to its audience.

Hugh Grant gets to the church on time, for once

our Weddings and a Funeral (UK)

A romantic comedy with an irresistible glow, *Four Weddings and a Funeral* takes place over a couple of years, but only during the events described by the title. These highlights are enough to gain intimate knowledge of a small cadre of Londoners in their 30s—that age when lust and mortality demand just about equal attention.

The main focus is on Charles (hugh-biguitous Hugh Grant), a professional bachelor whose firmament is shaken when he meets Carrie (Andie MacDowell) at wedding number one. After a night together, the mysterious woman vanishes back to America, but not from Charles's consciousness. Good thing she's a sucker for English parties, giving the inveterate procrastinator ("his lateness has a kind of greatness," somebody sighs) several more chances for connubial redemption.

Lovable eccentrics all, Charles's crowd includes his deaf, yet blunt-spoken brother

(hearing-impaired actor David Bower), a ditzy flatmate (Charlotte Coleman), a bumbling aristocrat (James Fleet) and his elegant sister (Kirsten Scott Thomas, currently starring opposite Grant in *Bitter Moon*), and a gay couple (John Hannah and movie-stealing Simon Callow) who seem the most normal people in the movie.

And it's not surprising that weasel-faced Rowan Atkinson shows up, as an ineffectual priest-in-training, since the movie was written by Richard Curtis, the author behind *The Tall Guy*, and the *Blackadder* and *Mr. Bean* series. But what makes this more than a jolly, longform Brit-com is the darkly sardonic direction of Mike Newell, who has previously ranged from the Merchant-Ivory Lite of *Enchanted April* to the bleak drama of *Dance with a Stranger* and the mystical verve of *Into the West*. Within the wonderfully fluid crowd scenes and deftly timed comic cock-ups, he gives Charles's plight a desperately melancholy edge.

Obviously, Grant helps. From the shy Chopin of *Impromptu* to the effete clergyman in *Sirens*, the ubiquitous actor has become a master of anguished embarrassment. Here, though, when his character is trapped in a couple's wedding chamber, or suddenly blurts out a David Cassidy-inspired confession of love, his chagrin is far more painful than anything you'd associate with that other stammering Grant, Cary.

The choice of MacDowell to play his opposite number isn't nearly as felicitous. Her natural allure, impressive enough to justify the leading man's ardour, must have snowed Newell into thinking she didn't actually have to do anything. Unless she's challenged soon, this latter-day Merle Oberon is in danger of being dismissed as a model who milked her *Sex, Lies and Videotape* role through ten more movies before the offers dried up. Furthermore, Carrie's behaviour is more enigmatic than the story really requires: we have little idea who she is when not seducing strangers, reciting past conquests ("less than Madonna, and more than Lady Di"), or heading off with a wealthy Scotsman, played all the more disturbingly by Corin Redgrave, In the Name of the Father's evil inspector.

Even so, the film's central conflict—whether or not to c-c-c-ommit—is the hero's to grapple with. And as frothy and familiar as this setup is, *Four Weddings* is fresh and full of feeling throughout. It manages to make "I do" the punchline of the year.

irty Two Short Films About Glenn Gould (Canada)

It's a truism (and therefore open to attack) that the musical life is impossible to capture on film. How much easier to reduce complex art to peripherals like fame, glamour, and early death, and wrap them around made-to-order melodrama — whether strained biography

cheapjack "rock'n'roll"

(Sweet Dreams) or

Hollywood's attempts
have usually
of Intermezzo,
of the
instantly render all
and evening gowns
(that they could
pounding out
me). But Canada
sometimes that's a real

thriller (Streets of Fire).
to tackle the classical world
been, at best, along the line
wherein the romantic thrust
19th-century music was to
those people in tuxedos
passionately fascinating
carry on conversations while
Chopin always intrigued
ain't Hollywood, and
blessing.

What biography has taken
more liberty with its subject and still conveyed something both elusive and concrete
about his or her spirit? In fact, people who don't give a fudge about classical music will
be charmed, dazzled, and provoked by this stylistically daring work.

Rather than build a tedious docudrama on the familiar chronological skeleton, writer-
director François Girard and co-scripter Don McKellar have taken as their guide Bach's
famous Goldberg Variations, with its quirkily symmetrical, 32-part form. There's plenty of
contrast in tone and form between the "Aria" bookends, during which the pianist —
actually his stand-in, Colm Feore (the real Gould is seen **above**) — wanders out of, and
then back into, the frozen North he loved.

Ingeniously, the treatment mixes archival images with staged scenes, brief interviews of
varying interest and, of course, Gould's own audio recordings. Highlights include some
Norman McLaren animation, a perfectly recreated '60s recording session, and a stark
ode to Gould's veritable library of colourful pills. Thanks to Feore's uncanny
embodiment (not that he actually looks like the dissipated muso) some scenes manage
to fuse the pianist's poignant and infuriating traits, as when he receives his latest
album while touring Europe, and forces a German-speaking chambermaid to listen to
it.

Listening, it seems, was his forté, even away from the piano, as evidenced in an Ontario
truckstop where Gould effortlessly keeps track of a dozen conversations, and then
transposes the idea of overlapping monologues to his Idea of North radio special —

just one example of his ability to play a CBC studio like a Steinway. Of course, the artist's well-tempered ears did not extend to those humans we would normally call friends; Gould's inability to maintain even the simplest of human contacts is on ample display here.

His well-cultivated neuroses, however, are sometimes clouded, or maybe just over-celebrated, by the self-conscious cleverness of the script — don't forget McKellar's association with style-meisters Bruce McDonald and Atom Egoyan.

Still, over-reach is the smallest problem in a project as daunting as this. Girard has packed in as much about the trials and rewards of creation as he unearths about this mysterious Canadian icon. By the time Glenn Gould returns to that icy wasteland the 50-year-old pianist entered forever in 1982, the film has offered an elegant and electrifying glimpse at one mortal's unorthodox dance to the music of the spheres.

ed Rock West (US)

The ghost of Twin Peaks (hit TV series and dud movie) hangs heavily over this Film Noir parody/tribute/knock-off, from the reverb-heavy guitar score to the casting of Lara Flynn Boyle in the Barbara Stanwyck role. As in Lynch's *Wild at Heart*, Nicolas Cage plays the sap, but he's a hell of a lot calmer here, as a drifter named Michael.

This good-natured soul with a bum leg (like Kevin Bacon's character in *The Air Up There*) has come to Montana—played with impressive versatility by Arizona—looking for roughneck work at an oil camp. When that falls through, he limps into the dusty town of Red Rock and, in a case of potentially lethal mistaken identity, is offered an absurdly lucrative job by the gruff bartender (perennial bad-guy J.T. Walsh), who wants his wife (Boyle) bumped off. Michael's an improviser, not a thinker, and he barely knows how to handle his good/bad fortune. Then, of course, the real employee (Dennis Hopper) shows up, and things get even more complicated.

This unfolding of events provides giddy fun for the film's first half-hour, while the audience's bafflement is reflected by Cage's constantly shifting eyebrows. Naturally, Hopper provides the over-the-top amusement you expect from him. But if you expect over-the-top, where is the top, exactly? As the pieces fall into place, it becomes numbingly obvious that brothers Jon and Rick Dahl, who wrote, directed and produced *Red Rock West*, are satisfied with meeting minimum requirements. In some areas, they're happy with less.

Specifically, this wayward wife collapses the formula's fragile geometry. Boyle brings nothing but a pouting mouth and distracted aloofness to the already undernourished part. Michael wants to bed her because it's in the script, not for anything we see on screen, and as her character "develops", she becomes even less dimensional.

Such standard femme fatale roles may not have been enlightened in the 1940s, but Stanwyck, Crawford et al brought a compelling vibrancy to them that made male fear

—the core of film noir—seem inescapably palpable. Furthermore, these black-and-white B-movies reflected America's uneasy postwar (that's WWII, kids) recognition that the world was made of vaguely shifting alliances, and the best one could do was stay alert to them. What do today's stylish attempts to recreate that genre say about our (or Hollywood's) perception of the world? That things were a lot cooler in the '40s? Is the Lynchian nudge-nudge, wink-wink of ironic recognition enough? Sometimes, there's a thin line between paying homage and burying your head in the sand.

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