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CINEMA

The Shooting Party

Directed by Alan Bridges; screenplay by Julian Bond, based on the novel by Julian Bond; with James Mason, Edward Fox, John Gielgud, Judi Bowker.

It's a shame that, for all its fine performances and subtly caustic sarcasm, *The Shooting Party* is not as satisfying as it should be. Set in the English countryside in 1913, near the end of the Edwardian Era, the film observes a group of genteel upper class Britons doing what they do best—socializing at a classic aristocratic ritual. James Mason, in his last screen appearance, essays the central role of Sir Randolph Nettleby, lord of the manor and host of the weekend hunt. In an introspective monologue which opens the film he describes the decadence and hypocrisy of the aristocratic tradition, in which he himself plays a part, with such insight that one wonders why director Alan Bridges and screenwriter Julian Bond let all their best material out so soon.

The rest of the film restates Nettleby's observations in a loosely constructed set of character sketches and vignettish scenes, populated by the classic British "types." We have the elderly gent who manages to put on the "show" of sportsmanship while competing with every ounce of his very proper conduct to outshoot the rest of the party. We have his cold wife who pushes her husband more than he pushes himself. We have the idealistic young woman married to an older man yet falling in love with a younger, more philosophical gentleman.

REVIEW

Bridges explores these characters and their situations with a light touch, allowing the subtle irony of the scenes to come through easily and unforced. Unfortunately, for all their effectiveness, the individual scenes don't come together to form any cohesive, meaningful statement. Rather, the conclusion falters in attempting to whitewash some of the issues and sort out the "less

guilty" from the "more guilty." This attempt at vindication just isn't satisfying.

What does satisfy are the marvelous performances from Mason and company, especially Mason. He is the epitome of the English lord in this role and brings the wry spark needed to pull off his contradictory position as organizer of the hunt and philosopher critic of the entire event. His best moment comes when meeting pacifist Cornelius Cardew (by a similarly marvelous performer Sir John Gielgud, appropriately witty in a role that could have turned to parody), who disrupts the hunt to stop the slaughter. Mason, in his best dry manner, takes the man aside as the "murderous frenzy is about over" to discuss the finer points of pamphleteering.

The Shooting Party is a film of brilliant moments and memorable performances, but the scathing criticisms are not taken to their fullest by Bridges and Bond. As a result the conclusion leaves too many issues curtly dismissed and too many situations unsatisfactorily concluded.

—Sean Axmaker

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