Anna (Julia Roberts) shoots a picture of Alice (Natalie Portman).

CLIVE COOTE. COLUMBIA PICTURES, 2004.

Quarrelsome Quartet

Plain talk about sex

CLOSER: Directed by Mike Nichols. Written by Patrick Marber, based on his play. Produced by Mike Nichols, John Colley, Cary Brokaw. Executive producers, Scott Rudin, Celia Costas, Robert Fox. Cinematography, Stephen Goldblatt. Edited by John Bloom, Antonia Van Drimmelen. Production design, Tim Hatley. Costume design, Ann Roth. Starring Julia Roberts, Jude Law, Natalie Portman and Clive Owen. Columbia Pictures, 2004. R. 100 minutes.

I've been down this road before: Mike Nichol's brilliant screen version of Patrick Marber's play starring four of the best actors now working meets up with a few otherwise sane critics in the dark alleys of their repressed urges and gets mugged.

I can't explain the phenomenon, but I have observed that critics' gang-bang assault is particularly venomous when the film in question casts a jaundiced eye on fidelity, particularly marital or living-together fidelity. If anger and angry words are exchanged in the film, verbal abuses escalate toward the party deemed most responsible, such as the director, writer or star. And if the film's straying spouse or partner does not express great remorse or come to a bad end, some critics go ballistic.

Years ago now I saw and reviewed Stanley Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut*. I thought it was a terrific film that thoughtfully torched a lot of marital taboos. Few other critics liked the film as I did for its intimate portrait of two smart people trying to save their marriage while honestly investigating the myriad temptations of adultery, and dealing with jealousy.

Likewise, I appreciated seeing the harsh depiction of male misogyny in Neil LaBute's movies I've reviewed, *In the Company of Men* and *Your Friends and Neighbors*. Basically, I like the sexually toned complexity of LaBute's work more than most other critics. Earlier this year, John Curran's *We Don't Live Here Anymore* opened and closed in one week, well before many in Eugene saw it. Two couples, best friends, go through disruptive conflicts because of extra-marital affairs. It was one of the best films of 2004, just as 2003's *In the Cut* was one of last year's best. In both films, the characters spoke with hard-earned honesty about their sexual feelings.

Most national critics, who are overwhelmingly men, hated these films. Take a look on the IMDB external reviews section if you doubt this. Frank talk about sexual relationships outside of marriage, curiosity about transgressive sexual feelings and questioning the institution of monogamy are apparently off-limits for American movies. Why? We live in a blatantly sexualized age with an obscene divorce rate and unspeakable "sex" crimes against children.

I respect Mike Nichols's nearly 40-year career as a filmmaker, and I expected him to take as direct and humorous an approach to heterosexuality as he did toward homosexuality in *Angels In America*, last year's HBO blockbuster. I was rewarded with a wonderful, enlightening film experience.

Julia Roberts (Anna) gives the best performance of her career here: self-contained, mature and generous. She has grown into her status as an icon and is now a fearless screen presence and a truly beautiful woman. Natalie Portman (Alice) has shed the last traces of girlhood to emerge as a strong-willed, contemporary young woman who knows her own feelings. She is lovely.

Jude Law (Dan) is a writer with a day job of writing obituaries, while he waits for his recently published book to take off. Dan's interested in pretty women, but he's very self-absorbed. Clive Owen (Larry) makes the most of the rough-hewn edge he showed in *Croupier*. Dermatologist Larry gets his kicks in internet chat rooms, which is where he hears from an anonymous woman named Anna who sex-talks him and wants to meet.

If you've never been on any sides of the love triangle — and there are more than three — you may learn from *Closer* that the rutting tension between two men over the same woman is more durable and deeply rooted than the sexual attraction to her. And hopefully, you may also learn that you should use the "tell me all about your sexual experience with (him/her)" ploy only if you really want to know. Think about it.

See *Closer*. It's a stand-up movie, not the cruel, bashing session some people imagine. It's for adults, so be one. Now playing at Cinemark, the picture gets my very highest recommendations as one of the top films of 2004. **EW**

Ned Kynaston (Billy Crudup), 17th century London stage beauty.

CLIVE COOTE. LIONS GATE FILMS, 2004.

Gender Identity

Shakespeare's in love again.

STAGE BEAUTY: Directed by Richard Eyre. Written by Jeffrey Hatcher, based on his play, *Compleat Female Stage Beauty*. Produced by Robert De Niro, Jane Rosenthal, Hardy Justice. Executive produced by Michael Kuhn, Amir Malin, Rachel Cohen, Richard Eyre, James D. Stern. Cinematography, Andrew Dunn. Editor, Tariq Anwar. Music, George Fenton. Production design, Jim Clay. Costume design, Tim Hatley. Starring Billy Crudup and Claire Danes. With Rupert Everett, Tom Wilkinson, Ben Chaplin, Hugh Bonneville, Richard Griffiths, Edward Fox and Zoë Tapper. Lions Gate Films, 2004. R. 105 minutes.

Stage and film director Richard Eyre (*Iris*) and playwright Jeffrey Hatcher have combined their talents to bring to the screen a play about English Restoration theater. When the movie opens, women's roles were played only by men. It was the law. Puritan Oliver Cromwell had closed all London theaters some years earlier. But with the return of Charles II to the throne, theaters reopened.

Edward Kynaston (Billy Crudup), is an actor who's made his reputation playing the great women's roles in Shakespeare's plays, notably the tragic Desdemona in *Othello*. The renowned diarist of the age, Samuel Pepys (Hugh Bonneville), whose name is pronounced "Peeps," noted that Kynaston was "the loveliest woman on the stage."

But by 1662, King Charlie's girlfriend, theater buff and aspiring "actress," Nell Gwynn (Zoë Tapper), has persuaded him to allow women onstage once more. This is very bad news for Kynaston.

And more bad news is on the way. The catalyst for the king's change of heart comes from accounts of a packed-house performance in a tavern by a Mrs. Margaret Hughes (Claire Danes) as Desdemona. Kynaston can barely bear the news that his dresser, Maria (Claire Danes), has betrayed him.

The set-up involves all this history, because the king, Nell, Kynaston, Pepys, Hughes and others are based on actual historical figures. This topsy-turvey world of theater is the stage where many of *Stage Beauty*'s pivotal moments occur, but not all. Some take place at court, where the king allows the unemployed Kynaston to show that he can act by playing a male role. Humiliating for Kynaston but satisfying for smug fops such as Sir Charles Sedley (Richard Griffiths), his enemy, the performance brings Maria to tears. Now a romance between Kynaston and his former employee ensues.

Surely you've noticed the predicament in *Stage Beauty* is the inverse of that *in Shakespeare in Love*. The love affair between Kynaston and Maria aka Mrs. Hughes is slower to catch fire than that of Will Shakespeare (Joseph Fiennes) and the high-born, cross-dressing stage beauty, Viola (Gwyneth Paltrow). While not such a masterful film, *Stage Beauty* is a thoughtful, delightful romp.

Crudup is one of my favorite actors, because he takes real risks in his roles. Here he allows Kynaston to have a stuffy, mannerly persona when he is dressing in gowns for the stage and to be a warm, human man when he is not. His face lends itself to being seen as female, and Crudup gives a relaxed but not camp impression of a woman.

Danes is excellent in every role she's played from TV's "My So Called Life" to Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo and Juliet* (1996). It's good to see her play a romantic lead again. Her intelligence, wit and natural beauty enhance the role of Maria.

The incidental character actors, such as theater manager Thomas Betterton (Tom Wilkinson) and George Villiars, the Duke of Buckingham and Kynaston's former lover (Ben Chaplin), as well as those already mentioned add immeasurably to the picture of the untidy life of the dilettantes, shallow titles and opportunists of 17th century London.

Opening Dec. 10 at the Bijou, *Stage Beauty* is an enjoyable feast you don't want to miss. Highest recommendations. **EW**