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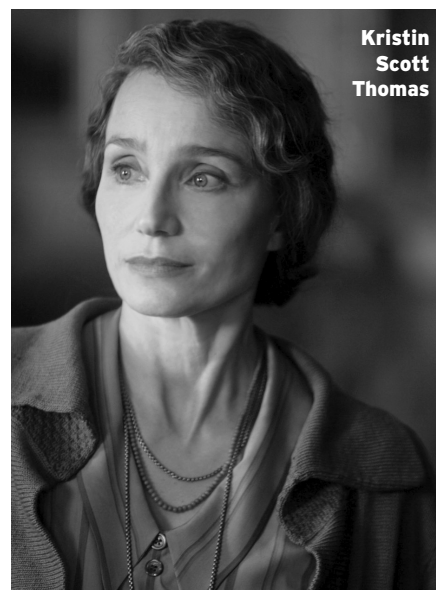
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movies BY SUZI STEFFEN

Bitch vs. Biel

Kristin Scott Thomas doesn't quite steal the gorgeous show

EASY VIRTUE: Adapted from a Noël Coward play by Stephan Elliott and Sheridan Jobbins. Directed by Elliott. Cinematography, Martin Kenzie. Starring Ben Barnes, Jessica Biel, Colin Firth, Kris Marshall and Jessica Biel. Sony Pictures Classics. PG-13. 93 minutes. ★★☆☆☆



Kristin Scott Thomas

Is there anything Kristin Scott Thomas cannot do, any role (for a white woman) she cannot play?

We wouldn't know it from the last couple of years, when *Tell No One* and *I've Loved You So Long*, both French movies, arrived in the U.S. and shot her status as a movie star back into the stratosphere. Last year, too, she won an Olivier (the British equivalent of a Tony) for her role as Arkadina in *The Seagull* in London, a role she reprised on Broadway.

Meanwhile, a film lover could be forgiven for wondering what the hell director Stephan Elliott has been doing since 1994's fabulous, in all senses of the world, *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*. Answer: He made a couple of movies no one saw — but now comes this splendidly shot, too-languorous adaptation of a Noël Coward play.

The movie opens with a long shot of an old-school movie screen, curtains and all, as a black-and-white movie begins with a car race. This framing device tells us that Elliott intends to recreate a glamorous world of movie stars and starlets, so it's not a real surprise when the movie turns to color and a blonde American (Jessica Biel) pops into view.

Her character, Larita, is decidedly out of place as a woman racing in the Grand Prix; Americans are, of course, out of place in England, no matter how the U.S. helped the Brits in WWI; and Biel might seem out of place in the company of Kristin Scott Thomas and Colin Firth. One of these issues is a battle that cannot be won, but Biel's brittle, bottled-blond beauty matches the icy control of Scott Thomas, made over to appear dowdy and prim. (Firth seems to be acting in an entirely different movie, so diffidently does his heavy-lidded gaze rest upon the scenery.)

It's the late 1920s, though probably pre-Depression, and in the cities of the

Western world, young women have turned to independence, cigarettes, flapper dresses, dancing ... even *driving*. But for the landed folk of England — personified in this case by Scott Thomas as Veronica Whittaker — time should never march on British tradition. When Larita and prodigal Whittaker son John (Ben Barnes of *Prince Caspian*, pretty but limp) return to the Whittaker estate after a whirlwind courtship and marriage, Veronica lobs the first grenade. Madcap scenes of American vs. British sensibilities ensue, but after a while, the charm wears off for everyone, audience and actors alike.

Biel (*I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry*, TV's *Seventh Heaven*) does a fine job as the poised but scrappy and gallant Larita outflanked by Scott Thomas' marvellously manipulative woman whose land, daughters and even furniture all conspire against the interloper. Yet energy leaks away from the movie when these two aren't going toe to toe, and the tradition vs. modernity theme builds to an unsatisfying anticlimax during a fox hunt.

Easy Virtue will elicit some laughs, some nods of recognition, some admiration for the elegance and acting skill of its two lead women. Near-constant tunes by Cole Porter and Coward himself add to the froth — with a bite — that pervades the movie. Plus, everything's really quite lovely. For a summer cinema choice, that's not so bad. **EW**

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