

A VERY MODERN PROMETHEUS

Fitzgerald's masterpiece reimagined

THE GREAT GATSBY: Directed by Baz Luhrmann. Screenplay by Baz Luhrmann and Craig Pearce, based on the novel by F. Scott Fitzgerald. Cinematography, Simon Duggan. Editors, Jason Ballantine, Jonathan Redmond, Matt Villa. Music, Craig Armstrong. Starring Leonardo DiCaprio, Carey Mulligan, Tobey Maguire, Isla Fisher, Joel Edgerton, Elizabeth Debicki. Warner Bros. Pictures, 2013. PG-13. 142 minutes. ★★☆☆

Director Baz Luhrmann's risky, gamboling *Romeo + Juliet* (1996) proved, once again, that Shakespeare's best stuff can withstand any infringement of time and run with it — including gang warfare, palm trees and the wowzers of an acid trip. Recall, if you dare, the raw but playful sexuality of this scene: Claire Danes as Juliet, spying through a massive fish tank and catching her first aquamarine glimpse of Romeo, as the gaunt, slightly extra-terrestrial face of a young Leonardo DiCaprio seems to swim through the coral. It's an exquisite moment.

Luhrmann, who so brilliantly amped up the camp throughout *Romeo + Juliet*, never once lost sight of the play's simple beating heart, which is the crazy, unhinged, fuck-it intensity of teenagers in love. None of us ever feel that way again. That's sort of the tragic part: surviving what we thought we'd die for when we were stupid, passionate and too young. And so, it's with a heavier heart that Luhrmann lunges, with his swinging chandeliers and flapper raps, into one of our (America's) greatest novels. Had he survived to watch, from afar but still madly in love, his Juliet marry some dunderheaded Capulet, Romeo might resemble a figure as ghostly and dreamy and full of fatal, striving hopefulness as Jay Gatsby.



Luhrmann's *The Great Gatsby* is a loud, lavish, unevenly paced but ultimately compelling adaptation of F. Scott Fitzgerald's celebrated novel about a man, the woman he yearns for and how, in yearning for what once was, he is destroyed by the past — that past into which we are all ceaselessly borne back. There are no second acts in American lives, Fitzgerald famously said, but here we have DiCaprio once again, a DiCaprio-Romeo redux, a bit thicker of face now but still quite comely: He is Gatsby, even more so than Robert Redford in Jack Clayton's gauzy 1974 version. And, to round out the excellent casting of principles, there is Tobey Maguire as our narrator, Nick Carraway, as well as Carey Mulligan as Daisy Buchanan and Joel Edgerton as her brutish husband Tom.

The film rushes into its story with all the headlong recklessness of the Coney Island Cyclone, and with all the attendant thrills and whiplash. Luhrmann, who along with Craig Pearce wrote the screenplay, opts to open with Nick in a psych ward that resembles the House of Usher, from where he narrates the whole story. I was okay with that gambit, as was I cool with the portrayal of Gatsby's notoriously roaring parties, which, as staged by Luhrmann and shot by cinematographer Simon Duggan (*The Mummy*, *Underworld: Evolution*), look like Busby Berkeley productions on digital amphetamines.

What's less palatable are the things Luhrmann plays down, blunts or sidesteps altogether. Not to be a Gatsby purist, but I missed the tepid romance between Nick and Jordan Baker (the gorgeous Elizabeth Debicki), which puts Gatsby's obsession in glaring relief. And doesn't Tom actually rather shatter Myrtle's (Isla Fisher) nose during that debauch in the city? The post-party scene at Gatsby's mansion, where "Owl Eyes" drunkenly tries to drive off in a car with a broken axle, might have done the work of a dozen voice-overs about the excesses of the rich. Luhrmann's movie is streamlined and breathless most of the time; his pacing works to capture the giddy dream of the Jazz Age, but it often fails to capture the nervous exhaustion and deep moral disgust that underlay Fitzgerald's vision.

There is, however, one passage of the film where Luhrmann does slow things down significantly, and that is where — upon reunited with Daisy during "tea" at Nick's cottage — Gatsby momentarily grasps all he's hoped for. Up until this point, DiCaprio plays Jay Gatsby as something of a pleasant cipher; but once he and Mulligan ease into familiarity and then romance, their characters blossom on the screen. The moment where DiCaprio, finally released from the anxiety of his ambitions, begins from the upper split-level of his bedroom flinging expensive dress shirts upon Mulligan, says it all. He is happy, she is happy and together they are doomed. ■

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2:30 The Company You Keep 5:00		TO THE WONDER from director Terrence Malick, starring Ben Affleck	4:10	4:10	4:10	4:10	4:10	4:10	4:10
8:00 ROOM 237 3:40		THE PLACE BEYOND THE PINES Ryan Gosling	1:10 6:40	6:40	1:10 6:40	6:40	6:40	6:40	6:40
9:30 AIN'T IT IN IT FOR MY HEALTH 7:30		UPSTREAM COLOR from Shane Carruth, director of <i>Primer</i>	9:30	1:45 9:30	9:30	9:30	9:30	9:30	9:30
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