



LOVE AND EMPIRE

Forbidden romance and imperial intrigue collide in Amma Asante's *A United Kingdom*

There shouldn't be anything more enjoyable than watching David Oyelowo and Rosamund Pike making their way through a biopic deftly directed by Amma Asante (*Belle*). Oyelowo has played compelling leaders before, with his should-have-been-Oscar-nominated performance as Martin Luther King Jr. in *Selma*; Pike's last role was an unexpected breakout, after a decade of work, as the scheming Amy Dunne in *Gone Girl*.

Pike's role here is nothing like Amy, and it's somewhat strange to watch her be so contained, her face set in a

constant expression of surprise. She plays Ruth Williams, who in 1947 London falls in love with Oyelowo's Seretse Khama, a law student with a nearly preternatural sense of calm about him. (Pike almost seems to flutter around him, and she is no flutterer.)

Their relationship suffers some sadly unsurprising bumps — racist jobs in the street, her father's disapproval — but the real challenge is something else: Seretse is the prince of Bechuanaland (now Botswana), and international forces would prefer the two stay apart.

When we first meet Seretse, he's talking about the impe-

rialist mind, which is key to the film. It's a romance, sure, but Asante and screenwriter Guy Hibbert rush through the courtship and marriage, eager to get to the meat of the story: Seretse's conflict with his regent uncle and gradual understanding of what his marriage means on the international stage.

If Hibbert skimps a bit on character, he does a solid job setting out the players (which include Tom Felton, looking like a lost Indiana Jones villain) and unspooling the intrigue that leads, inevitably, back to British interests. Seretse's uncle disapproves of his marriage, but so does the British government — and their reach is vast.

Asante's film is a study in contrasts: grey, rainy London and sunny Bechuanaland; Seretse's meetings with prim officials in the UK and the large gathering of his people back home; the genuine hurt and anger of his sister and the fussy disapproval of the British officials' wives.

Ruth, pale and sheltered, has no idea what she's getting into; Seretse has some, but underestimates the British need for control (and the power of neighboring South Africa). Reminders of colonialism are constant: You can't look at what the people of Bechuanaland are wearing and not see a British hand.

A United Kingdom rests lightly on its stars' shoulders. Oyelowo in particular is utterly at ease, a man born to leading roles. The film makes nothing of the fact that its principals are notably older than the people they were playing (Seretse was around 27 when he met Ruth; Oyelowo is 40), and it's a genuine treat to see a romance bloom on screen between two people long out of their 20s.

Still, despite all the pieces being in place, the film never quite achieves liftoff, instead staying a steady, earthbound reminder of how people — even royalty — live under the boot of empire. (*Bijou Art Cinemas*) ■

VISUAL ARTS

BY ESTER BARKAI

A LARGER WORLD

A change of art at the White Lotus Gallery: Japanese hanging scrolls

The White Lotus Gallery has put up a new show, replacing an exhibit of contemporary art with Japanese paintings from the 19th and 20th centuries. The beautiful paintings will be up until April 1, and then they will come down, about 20 works altogether, and another group of artworks will replace them.

Switching artworks on the walls is expected in galleries but not so much in private homes. The only person I've known who changed art on the walls at home was an art collector. He routinely switched his art so that he could enjoy it all. Everyone else I know, though, has just the amount of artwork that corresponds to their wall space.

Hue-Ping Lin, owner of the White Lotus, says the idea of changing what we have on the wall is foreign to Western culture. That was certainly true in the house in which I was raised. Once a framed picture went up on the wall, it stayed there.

That is not the case in traditional Japanese culture. Hanging scrolls, or *kakejiku*, such as those currently on view at the White Lotus, are designed to be easily rolled up for storage. They are made to be displayed temporarily depending on the season, special occasion or, in some cases, even the month.

A painting on one of the scrolls by Nakamura Fusetsu (1866-1943) features a set of mountains in the background. In the foreground are trees and rocks and a house by the water. Closest to the



viewer, but relatively small in size, is a person on a boat. On the upper left of the scroll this phrase is written in Japanese: *The Pleasure of Fishing in the Spring*. The painting, meant to be displayed in spring, has the immediate feel of a drawing. The brush strokes are bold and inspired by Chinese calligraphy. The marks have a "newness," is the way gallery manager Claudia Ponton described it when she showed me the scroll at the gallery.

Fusetsu was a multifaceted artist: a calligrapher, painter, book designer and illustrator. He studied calligraphy in China and Western-style painting in Paris. To celebrate 150th anniversary of his birth last year, the Nakamura Salon Museum of Art held a solo exhibit of his work.

Another scroll, signed Shugetsu, has its human subject practically filling the page. She is central to the composition with the landscape entirely in the background. The gallery doesn't know much about the artist, but the subject and style reference *Ukiyo-e*, a genre associated with woodblock prints and with beautiful women as subjects. Shapes are outlined precisely, filled in and built up with value and color.

The paintings on scrolls at White Lotus Gallery are by different artists and done in different styles, but the intention for their use reminds us that arranging things differently at home can energize and renew, keeping us aware that there's a larger world out there that's always changing.

