



FAIR IS FOUL, AND FOUL IS FAIR

Florence Pugh delivers a powerhouse performance in the period psycho-thriller *Lady Macbeth*

For my money, *Lady Macbeth* is second only to Iago among Shakespeare's depictions of pure Machiavellian evil. She is delicious — a monster of insidious intent and malevolent manipulation, fueled by bloody purpose by an ambition that turns obstacles to mincemeat. "Art thou afeard," she whispers in her husband's ear, "to be the same in thine own act and valour as thou art in desire?"

Translation: Kill 'em all, and take the throne.

Knowing what is conjured by the name of the unfair Lady in the Bard's classic potboiler, you might be a bit disoriented by the opening scenes of *Lady Macbeth*, a new film directed by William Oldroyd, based on the novel by Nikolai Leskov. From the get-go, Katharine (Florence Pugh) — our Lady Macbeth — is in a real pickle: It's 1865 England, and she's newly wed to a mean, bitter man-child (Paul Hilton) whose idea of conjugal completion is to have her stand naked in a corner while he grunts like a swine, joylessly masturbating.

Making matters worse is Katherine's father-in-law Bo-

ris (Christopher Fairbank), who also lives on the estate; a wizened old Calvinist creep, Boris demands that Katherine stay locked up indoors like an anaerobic piece of matrimonial veal whose only purpose to wait hand-and-foot on her miserable, sexless husband.

This is misogyny on steroids, synched perfectly to the drear gothic moors and amplified by the staid propriety of pinched Brits keeping up imperial appearances. The blood just boils, calling for justifiable homicide.

But, in a sense, all of this is a bit of a pig in a poke (no pun intended). Of course, homicide arrives, after Katherine couples up with a hunky groomsman (Cosmo Jarvis) in a desire-awakening encounter ripped right from *Lady Chatterley's Lover*.

When the men of the house discover their forbidden affair, all hell breaks loose, and the violence that ensues appears, at first, to be an act of liberation for Katherine. Indeed it is, but it doesn't end there. In fact, this is where things really take off, completely upending the expectations so devilishly set in the film's first act. From here on

out, the movie earns its title, in a manner that is at once disarming and disturbing.

Like the play from which it earns its title, *Lady Macbeth* is nasty, brutish and short, a kind of grotesque melodramatic thriller that revels in the unexpected depths of evil it reveals. The film is at once cartoonish and stark, a Hitchcockian collision of mythology and pulp fiction. It doesn't just confound our expectations; it demolishes them, by pushing past the place where desire awakens love, and moving straight through to lust, and to bloodlust.

At the center of it all stands Pugh, a fantastic actress relatively unknown to American audiences — until now. Her performance here is a master class in sociopathic seduction, reminiscent of the great Joan Crawford at her murderous best (oh, if looks could kill!). Pugh's transformation — or, perhaps, regression — on screen is riveting, and it leaves you wondering if you were fooled from the moment she appeared on screen. Is she a hero, an anti-hero or the living 19th century's anti-Christ? Sometimes, rebellion and damnation look a hell of a lot alike. (*Bijou Art Cinemas*) ■

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