

## Lady Macbeth [15] 2016|UK|89 min

UK release date **28<sup>th</sup> April 2017**

Director **William Oldroyd**

Screenplay **Alice Birch**

Cinematography **Ari Wegner**

Cast **Florence Pugh** (Katherine); **Cosmo Jarvis** (Sebastian); **Paul Hilton** (Alexander); **Naomi Ackie** (Anna); **Christopher Fairbank** (Boris)

Lady Macbeth might suggest a *recherché* spin on the Scottish play, but it's more like *Lady Chatterley gone ballistic* – a British, period-set chamber thriller with a star-making turn on one side of the camera, and one hell of a directing debut on the other. The source, *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, is a short novel by Nikolai Leskov, previously adapted by Shostakovich into his opera of the same name. Alice Birch's script deftly ferries it to our shores, and the cool eye of director William Oldroyd, a stage specialist until now, carefully sets a fuse.

Florence Pugh plays Katherine, a once-impoverished trophy bride in misty northern England in 1865, whose boredom begins to instil a ticklish idea of sexual rebellion. Katherine's husband, played by a lank-haired Paul Hilton, is bitter and impotent, demanding that she disrobe for him on their wedding night but doing nothing more than crawl into bed indifferently. Her father-in-law (Christopher Fairbank) is even worse, a nasty gremlin of a man constantly eating and grumbling.

Something erupts in the film when Katherine and sullen stable-hand Sebastian (Cosmo Jarvis) first lock eyes on each other. Though the upstairs-downstairs dalliances of DH Lawrence or Strindberg pop into your head, the tone, one of mounting fatalism, begins to suggest more noirish influences. This pair are like the desperate lovers in James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, with the same murderous ambition bonding them tight.

Oldroyd has his camera on lockdown to play up Katherine's confinement, even when her husband is called away on a work emergency. But once Sebastian bursts in on her, in a nonconsensual seduction that soon becomes hungrily mutual, the film's form shifts and destabilises. Anything goes. It gets very funny, quickly, how

indiscreetly they're going about things, even right under the father's nose. But no one's laughing by the end.

Pugh is mesmerising. Hoovering up her husband's entire supply of Fleurie, she drags herself down for an obligatory dinner and gives us a masterclass in drunk acting, irresistibly insolent and out-of-control. It's a great strategy to let her play the part in such a contemporary way. She's so vivid and relatable by this point that our sympathies feel glued on, making Katherine's later schemes and jaw-dropping amorality a wicked challenge for the audience to grapple with.

Shot with natural light seeping into its bluish interiors, with the Danish painter Vilhelm Hammershøi as a cited inspiration, the film is like a very cold oven which eventually blows a gasket. Naomi Ackie, as the household's black maid, can only quiver and watch, trapped in Katherine's machinations.

It reverberates with ideas about the power structures of Victorian England – the hierarchies of class, gender and, perhaps most unusually, race. But what's especially fascinating about Pugh's Katherine is how she is both mutineer and opportunist – fighting the power, but also claiming and using it, bending it to her will.

She's not a character you'll forget in a hurry, and Oldroyd's portrait, less watercolour-delicate than study in soot, leaves you chilled to the marrow.

**After: Tim Robey, The Telegraph, April 2017**

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