

The Handmaiden [18] 2016 | S Korea | 144 min

UK release date **14th April 2017**

Director **Chan-wook Park**

Screenplay **Seo-kyeong Jeong** and **Chan-wook Park**

Cinematographer **Chung-hoon Chung**

Cast **Kim Min-hee** (Lady Hideko); **Kim Tae-ri** (Sook-Hee); **Ha Jung-woo** (Count Fujiwara); **Jo Jin-woong** (Uncle Kouzuki)

Park is the veteran of extreme cinema, renowned for his brutal Vengeance trilogy: Sympathy for Mr Vengeance, Oldboy and Lady Vengeance. Now with co-writer Jeong Seo-kyeong he has adapted the novel Fingersmith by British author Sarah Waters – a humid story of crime, love and betrayal that he has transplanted from Victorian London to Japanese-ruled colonial Korea of the 1930s. From this source material, he creates a horribly delicious suspense thriller, a drama of double-cross and triple-cross, with some headspinning point-of-view shifts in which Park turns his camera into the most unreliable narrator possible. Halfway through the film there is a whiplash twist that flips everything on its head and restarts the story.

Park has three outstanding actors: Ha Jung-woo plays “Count” Fujiwara, a devilishly handsome career criminal and phoney nobleman who recruits pickpocket Sook-hee, played by Kim Tae-ri, to insinuate herself as a handmaiden in the household of a hideous plutocrat and book-dealer. This loathsome old man forces his heiress niece, Hideko, played by Kim Min-hee, to read pornography aloud to his dinner-jacketed guests to induce them to buy his forbidden rare volumes. Sook-hee’s job is to persuade Hideko to accept the Count’s secret marriage proposal and elope when the time is right: the handmaiden’s chaperone presence is vital for this plan. The fake Count explains that once he has emptied his new bride’s bank account, he plans to have Hideko banged up in a lunatic asylum, and Sook-hee can have some of her jewels. But Hideko and Sook-hee find themselves explosively attracted to each other. Who is seducing whom?

The film is drenched with eroticism: it permeates the surfaces and textures, the rituals of teacher and pupil – the preposterous pretext for the Count’s visits is that he is teaching her to paint – and of course in the secret theatre of sex that plays out in the world of mistress and maidservant. In the licensed intimacy of Hideko’s bedroom, Sook-hee is allowed to undress Hideko, who playfully pretends to be the servant by undressing her in turn. In the manner of classic Victorian erotica, the handmaiden demonstrates to her awestruck mistress in bed exactly what she can expect on her wedding night.

The Handmaiden is about pornography, albeit pornography of the high-minded connoisseur kind from the Gutenberg age: rare books. Hideko has to read aloud from sub-Sadean material and then – in a fantastically twisted scene – pose on a kind of porn trapeze with a male mannequin. And porn’s undertow of shame has a political dimension. It is a cousin to the mortification of submitting to colonial rule. But sex is the sanctuary from pornography in The Handmaiden, the sex that Hideko and Sook-hee enjoy is the refuge from porn and its furniture of abuse and control.

It is a brilliant adaptation of Sarah Waters’ original novel and a film about something that most other movies can only guess at: pleasure and rapture.

After: Peter Bradshaw, The Guardian, April 17

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