

Their Finest [12A] 2016|UK/Sweden|117 min

UK release date	21st April 2017
Director	Lone Scherfig
Screenplay	Gaby Chiappe
Cinematographer	Sebastian Blenkov
Cast	Gemma Arterton (Catrin Cole); Sam Claflin (Tom Buckley); Bill Nighy (Ambrose Hilliard); Jack Huston (Ellis Cole)

London, 1940. Catrin (Gemma Arterton) is scurrying home through the blitzed streets at dusk. Without warning, she is sideswiped by a bomb blast. Blinking grit from her eyes, she stumbles into a pile of broken bodies. Her initial horror tips into laughter when she realises that they are shop mannequins. Then she notices that one of them is bleeding – a salesgirl lies amid the wreckage of the window display. While the dust and death is still clearing from the air, Catrin vomits from shock, silhouetted in a yawning archway.

The scene elegantly combines twin themes in this bracing second world war romance from Lone Scherfig. It captures the savage uncertainty of life during wartime; and, in a nod to the film's movie industry backdrop, it deftly peels back layers of reality and artifice.

Arterton brings a grace and dignity to the role, which suggests reserves of courage in her character that the screenplay only hints at. Catrin left her home in the Welsh valleys for love. Her artist husband Ellis (Jack Huston) specialises in self-important daubs depicting industrial blight. His canvases are a tough sell. Which is why, when Catrin is offered a job at the Ministry of Information's film division, she jumps at the chance. Swiftly graduating from Mr Cholmondley-Warner-style informationals, she finds herself chipping in with the female angle on a propaganda film about twin girls who filched their father's boat to help with the evacuation of Dunkirk.

The film-within-a-film structure is a neat device, which mirrors the tea-swilling stoicism of the blitz spirit in the brisk pulled-together professionalism of the

movie set. It takes in the quiet revolution in wartime sexual politics – the key female characters are in their jobs because the chaps are otherwise engaged, but for the most part, the women have no intention of going “back into their boxes” once the war is over. It also acknowledges the dismissive, tweedy sexism of the era by having even the most sympathetic of the male characters, sarcastic bespectacled screenwriter Tom Buckley (Sam Claflin), blithely dismiss women’s dialogue in a movie as “slop”.

The humour is fortified by sterling work from Bill Nighy, deliciously vain as ageing star Ambrose Hilliard and gloriously hammy in character as boozy Uncle Frank. A handsome wintry palette of slate blue, charcoal grey and cream incorporates everything from Ambrose’s dapper wardrobe to Ellis’s glum paintings. Effective use of CGI carves a battle-scarred London backdrop. But even as it affectionately embraces the film-making cliches of the time, the picture falls victim to a few of its own. An awkwardly contrived second-act argument played out under a “bomber’s moon” on a beach uses up the film’s entire cheese ration in one go. Were it not for the unexpected turn of events shortly afterwards, the script could have torpedoed itself with predictability. Still, of the many second world war films poised for release this year, it’s hard to imagine any will match *Their Finest* for its big-hearted swell of warmth and its unstuffy empathy.

After: Wendy Ide, The Guardian, April 17

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