



Stockbridge Community Cinema

Programme Notes 19 July 2019

Can You Ever Forgive Me?

Director: Marielle Heller
Screenplay: Nicole Holofcener and Jeff Whitty
Starring: Melissa McCarthy, Richard E. Grant
Year: 2018

This article by Peter Bradshaw first appeared in The Guardian on 30 January 2019



The law about movie characters needing to be sympathetic is defied in this horribly fascinating true-crime black comedy about failed biographer and serial literary forger Lee Israel, co-written by Nicole Holofcener and Jeff Whitty, and directed by Marielle Heller. In the leading role, Melissa McCarthy has absolutely zero relatability. No one is rooting for her at any time. As they ponder the manky apartment in which she lives, with cat excrement piling up under the bed, audiences will not want to be her, or be with her.

McCarthy's character's passionate devotion to her cat is matched by an irritable contempt for the human beings who have variously let her down, or got too close, or impeded her literary career. And her promise to give up alcohol is succeeded by a scene in which she gets drunk in a bar and gigglingly fantasises about how funny it would be to trip up a fragile Aids patient. But there is pathos in the way her porcine grimace of scorn finally wobbles into tears of sadness. It is a brilliant performance by McCarthy, and Richard E Grant gives us something bleakly hilarious as her lounge-lizard drinking buddy and co-dependent loser, Jack Hock.

Desperate for money as all her contemporaries in 1990s New York seemed to be getting huge advances, Israel found a new vocation: forging letters from people such as Dorothy Parker and Noël Coward. She sold about 400 to credulous or cynical dealers before getting her collar felt by the FBI, and the banal shame of her criminal conviction becomes an exquisitely painful proof of her failure as a literary figure.

McCarthy is very good at showing how Lee's unpleasant bad temper and rudeness were not simply part of her psychological makeup – they were symptoms of existential panic. She had once been a successful best selling author. But literary careers have no guaranteed arc. You can have two or three hits, then in middle age step off into a crevasse of publishing indifference.

There are two grisly scenes in which Lee angrily confronts her agent, Marjorie (Jane Curtin), for failing to return her calls or rescue her from this abyss of nothingness. But the only project Lee has in mind is a biography of singer Fanny Brice that is considered to be hopelessly uncommercial.

Things turn around when Lee swipes some letters one day from a library where she is doing research, sells them, and then realises how they could be improved

with postscripts added with antique typewriters. She then starts producing fake letters of her own, and when the dealers get to know her by sight, she gets her drinking-partner-in-shame Jack (Grant) to hawk them about on her behalf.

There is, arguably, a forgery going on in the work of all biographers, who are required to have a good working knowledge of documentary evidence but must inevitably start conjecturing about what was going on in the subject's mind – and to some degree creatively ventriloquising his or her thoughts. Like many forgers, Lee delusionally considers her work to be an imaginative adventure, an unlicensed homage to the wit and style of those people she admired, but McCarthy shows how Lee cannot see the actual relationship between her and the big names she's ripping off. The caustic elegance of Dorothy Parker, with the success and talent subtracted, turn into the ugly rudeness of Lee Israel.

There is something very authentic in some of this film's incidental details. Lee grabs her TV, turns it on so it's showing fuzzy white noise and then flips it on its back so she can use it as a lightbox to trace Noël Coward's signature on one of her phoney typewritten screeds. That has the clumsy absurdity of real life.

The real-life Lee may have been an even more grimly isolated figure than she appears here, and the movie exaggerates the importance of Jack to make this a bittersweet odd-couple drama. It also invents a possible love interest for Lee in the form of a sweetly shy antiquarian-book dealer (Dolly Wells). But McCarthy and Grant have genuine chemistry, of a vinegary sort.

The title refers to a phrase often used by Parker, with airy effrontery, after having crushed someone with some acid putdown at a party. There is something amusingly inappropriate in it being applied to the bleakly impenitent Lee Israel who has a desolate need for forgiveness at some deeper level: forgiveness for being lonely, angry and incapable of love.

Peter Bradshaw