



Stockbridge Community Cinema

Programme Notes 19 March 2022

Mothering Sunday

UK | 2021 | 104 min | Cert 15

Director: Eva Husson

Screenplay: Alice Birch(screenplay),
Graham Swift(novel)

Starring: Odessa Young, Josh O'Connor,
Colin Firth, Olivia Colman



This review by Mark Kermode first appeared in The Guardian on 14 November 2021

Posters for this sensuously photographed and affectingly scored drama suggest a rather glum combination of *Gosford Park* and *Upstairs, Downstairs*. Yet the film itself is nothing of the sort, dealing instead with altogether more intriguing themes of love, lust, grief and doubt, lacing its central portrait of an artist in the making with an air of unresolved intrigue, lingering guilt and transformative creativity.

Adapted from a 2016 novella by Graham Swift, *Mothering Sunday* flits dextrously back and forth between distinct periods in the life of Jane Fairchild, a natural-born writer, vibrantly played by rising Australian star Odessa Young, and portrayed fleetingly in her dotage by Glenda Jackson. Jane's story takes us back via her midlife relationship with philosopher Donald (the brilliant *Sopé Dirisù*) to her formative awakenings in the 1920s.

Here, we find her as a maid ("an occupational observer of life" who grew up in an orphanage) working for Mr and Mrs Niven, over whose Beechwood estate the great war has laid a blanket of parental bereavement, a silent shriek of grief that seems particularly piercing on the titular festival day. While the once vivacious Mrs Clarrie Niven (Olivia Colman) appears flinty and broken, her husband, Godfrey (Colin Firth), does his best to put on a brave face, although his vacant smiles suggest a stunned retreat from, rather than an acceptance of, recent horrors.

The Nivens' closest friends are the Sheringhams, with whose son Paul (Josh O'Connor) Jane has been having an explorative affair, the boundaries of which (financial, emotional, sexual) remain tantalisingly fluid. The Nivens seem to treat Paul, who lost brothers in the trenches, as a substitute son and politely applaud his dutiful but loveless betrothal to social equal Emma (Emma D'Arcy), something Jane overhears while dutifully serving dinner for the wealthy families. Thus it is that on Mother's Day, 30 March 1924, the lovers enjoy what seems to be their final tryst, leaving Jane (whom Mrs Niven calls "lucky" to have been "comprehensively bereaved at birth", with

"absolutely nothing to lose") wandering naked among Paul's rooms and bookshelves while he drives off towards another life and she discovers her own new horizons.

French director Eva Husson, who made a splash with her 2015 Toronto hit *Bang Gang* (*A Modern Love Story*) and was Palme d'Or-nominated for *Girls of the Sun* (2018), describes *Mothering Sunday* as "a culmination of everything that I am passionate about in life: writing, sex, and pure cinema". Sure enough, Husson, who reunites with versatile composer Morgan Kibby, brings a sense of candid energy to the production, particularly in the scenes between O'Connor and Young that sidestep the coy Brit-pic naffness of heritage dramas and period romances – there's no squeamishness about body fluids here. O'Connor may have captured the uptight solipsism of Prince Charles in *The Crown*, but as he demonstrated in films such as *God's Own Country* and *Only You*, it's his peerless ability to register close-contact intimacy that marks him out as a genuinely remarkable screen presence.

Alice Birch's finely wrought script does an impressive job of capturing Jane's emergent literary powers, allowing her creative abilities to grow organically on screen across disparate time periods. Having done sterling work on projects as diverse as the feature film *Lady Macbeth* and the TV series *Normal People*, Birch inventively shuffles the cards of Swift's source in a manner that, at its best, makes the film feel more like an emotional memory than an unfolding narrative.

Not all of it works. The brief wraparound scenes featuring Jackson as the now-venerated author strike an oddly contrived note, despite a crowd-pleasing Doris Lessing-style dismissal of glittering prizes. Instead, it's the more deceptively restrained and poetic elements that strike home, not least an eerie overhead shot of a burning vehicle that seems to encapsulate the film's warring elements of fiery passion and traumatic loss, dead-end stasis and phoenix-like rebirth

