



**BIG SCREEN CLASSICS**

# The Handmaiden

## (Ah-ga-ssi)

**SPOILER WARNING** The following notes give away some of the plot.

Park Chan-wook's last film, the US-made *Stoker* (2013), seemed at the time like a blind alley for the South Korean king of the baroque thriller, an uncharacteristically demure step away from the Artaudian extremity of his so-called revenge trilogy (*Sympathy for Mr Vengeance*, 2002; *Oldboy*, 2003; *Lady Vengeance*, 2005). Promoting *Stoker*, Park quoted Ang Lee's comment that 'in Asia and Europe the director is king and in the United States he's president' – in other words, he must win producers' approval rather than being free to implement decisions spontaneously.

In *The Handmaiden*, however, Park visibly rules his cinematic kingdom with imperial autonomy, cooking up a hyper-elaborate plot (based, in slightly simplified terms, on Sarah Waters's 2002 neo-Victorian novel *Fingersmith*) and mounting it on spectacular sets, designed by Ryu Seong-hee, of extraordinary beauty and intricacy. The sprawling, oppressive dwelling of wicked uncle Kouzuki is a Wellesian Xanadu, and creating it on screen in all its palatial complexity is in itself a statement of triumphantly unrestrained auteurial power. The exteriors are magnificent, too, both in the labyrinthine depths of Kouzuki's garden – at one point, his niece and intended bride Hideko is glimpsed through dense thickets of branches – and in DP Chung Chung-hoon's 'Scope vistas of exaggeratedly green rolling landscapes.

But the house is also a metaphor for the narrative's constantly shifting construction of surface appearances and shock reveals, in which the criminals prove to be the dupes and the seemingly gauche victim is the canniest manipulator of all. Handmaiden Tamako has been sent by the Japanese 'Count' Fujiwara to prepare his seduction of Hideko, whose fortune he intends to steal, but her work as an undercover agent is far outdone by Hideko herself, who reveals layer after layer of duplicity from the moment we discover that her neurotic ingénue persona is in fact an elaborate performance. All this is cleverly developed in the film's arrangement in chapters, with section two repeating scenes from section one, with entirely different inflexions.

By the same token, Kouzuki's house constantly reveals new wings and corridors. Its design combines English Victoriana with Korean and Japanese elements (Korean himself, Kouzuki despises what he sees as Korean ugliness, while fetishising the aesthetics of the occupying Japanese culture). The pastiche-laden design also alludes to Hollywood gothic, to the shadow-steeped manorial piles of films such as *The Spiral Staircase* or *Rebecca* (the film even has its own Mrs Danvers, in the shape of Kouzuki's forbidding housekeeper Sasaki). The layers of the narrative, constantly elaborating on and correcting each other, are duplicated in the sliding screen doors of the house's Japanese wing. This is altogether a palace of the cinematic imagination, transcending the realism of space and time, and concealing a further sinister level in its cellar – the realm of modern nightmare horror, where a classically Parkian act of revenge-fuelled cruelty takes place, with a massive octopus (an echo of the iconic shock image of *Oldboy*) squirming in the background.

*The Handmaiden*, then, is a vastly successful advance on the gothicry of *Stoker*, transplanting that film's decorative intricacies on to a huger scale. But where *Fingersmith*'s tale of illicit lesbian passion might be read unequivocally as a feminist fable of liberation, it is hard not to see *The Handmaiden* partly as a generically Sapphic-styled arthouse teaser that objectifies female stars Kim Tae-ri and Kim Min-hee, just as the erotic tales recited by Hideko – like her suicidal aunt before her – exploit their heroines' sexuality for the pleasure of a club of male libertines. However, despite the delicate coyness of the two women's first tentative erotic encounter, with Tamako filing down a rough edge on Hideko's tooth, overall there is little that is coyly softcore about their liaisons, which gradually expand into full-on naked clinches – although one close-up of Tamako, as if shot from between Hideko's thighs, betrays a certain gloating crassness.

*The Handmaiden*'s play on innocence and evil is profoundly textual, not least when it comes to the *grand guignol* ending (to which there's a rather Greenaway-esque flavour, from the recitation of a list of arcane Japanese pornographic texts to the aberrant use of bookmaking tools). The literary eroticism is underpinned by allusions to the Marquis de Sade's novel about a female libertine, Juliette – recited here by proxy, it seems, in an Asian pastiche version – which inescapably implies the presence of Juliette's virtuous counterpart, eternal victim Justine. At different points in this hall-of-mirrors narrative, the ostensibly wicked Tamako and the supposedly virginal Hideko occupy both positions – taking 'positions' to mean narrative functions as well as sexual postures. The latter meaning comes to mind in the repeated image of Hideko surprised in the woods with Fujiwara: witnessed both times by Tamako, Hideko's position straddling the fake count has two entirely different significations depending on whether we understand her to be accidentally glimpsed by her handmaiden or whether the scene is laid on expressly for the gullible Tamako to stumble on.

Hideko is also seen performing a grotesque airborne sexual ballet with a wooden puppet for her uncle and his friends: a truly Sadeian image that, for western viewers, may carry resonances of Hans Bellmer's sexualised doll figures. But it also foregrounds the theme of puppetry that runs throughout, with Hideko, Tamako and Fujiwara at different points manipulating each other, while director Park pulls the strings of all of them – and of the audience.

In this hyper-intricate construction of false leads and surprise reversals, the ultimate dupe – and a very willing one – is the viewer. Depending on how active an interpreter she feels, and which of the narrative roles she feels most inclined to identify with, the viewer will either play detective, unpicking the mesh of deceit, or will lap up this byzantine intrigue as helplessly, and with as much erotic pleasure, as Kouzuki's assembled male connoisseurs.

The overall shape of *The Handmaiden* is something like a narratological equivalent to the 'folding of Paris' sequence in Christopher Nolan's *Inception* (2010), with every character not only mirroring several others but also having multiple incarnations that interlock, in a form of narrative tessellation. This is also a film, not unlike *Inception*, in which the viewer is required to follow symbolically laden objects, their roles no less important than those of the characters: notably, a butterfly hairpin that performs different functions throughout, and a set of metal balls that begin as instruments of punishment and end as toys for mutual female fulfilment. Arguably, the two heroines themselves become fixed as objects at the end of the film, at the very moment when they seem to achieve their full erotic fusion and liberation from male domination: framed together in a perfectly symmetrical embrace, they become above all a mirror image, an emblem of female resemblance rather than two autonomous beings.

In the film’s object-based doll’s-house construction, it might be hard to imagine human actors having a great deal of agency, yet remarkably they do, with Ha Jung-woo’s duplicitous Fujiwara channelling the manipulative cads of English melodrama, while Kim Tae-ri touchingly reveals new emotional reserves, as Tamako shifts from hard-nosed adventurer to born-again innocent, discovering a new self through her ordeal. Most mesmerising, however, is the mercurial Kim Min-hee, putting her Hideko through multiple changes, from trembling neurasthenic gamine to sexually manipulative vamp – and all in a selection of designer Cho Sang-kyung’s extremely elaborate costumes, ranging from quasi-geisha to Victorian-style heroine in anachronistic wedding-cake frocks and vast hats. Anyone who has seen Kim as the decidedly modern Korean woman of recent Hong Sang-soo films (*Right Now, Wrong Then, On the Beach at Night Alone*) may be surprised – but perhaps not that surprised, given how protean Hong Sang-soo requires her to be in even such relatively stable roles.

Jonathan Romney, *Sight and Sound*, May 2017

THE HANDMAIDEN (AH-GA-SSI)

Directed by: Park Chan-wook  
©: CJ E&M Corporation, Moho Film, Yong Film  
Production Companies: Moho Film, Yong Film  
Presented by: CJ Entertainment  
In association with: Korea Post, Idea Bridge Asset Management, KDB Bank, Meritz Insurance, Seoul Guarantee Insurance, Shinhan Life Insurance Co. Ltd, Hyundai Marine & Fire Insurance, Solaireinvestments Co., Interpark Corporation, kth, Ltd ISU Venture Capital Co., Pan Entertainment  
Executive Producer: Miky Lee  
Co-executive Producer: Jeong Tae-sung  
Produced by: Park Chan-wook, Syd Lim  
Co-production: Kim Tae-eun  
Co-producers: Yoon Suk-chan, Kim Jong-dae, Wonjo Jeong  
Associate Producer: Jay Lee  
Screenplay by: Chung Seo-kyung, Park Chan-wook  
Inspired by the novel Fingersmith by: Sarah Waters  
Director of Photography: Chung Chung-hoon  
Gaffer: Bae Il-hyuck  
Visual Effects Supervisor: Lee Jeon-hyoung

Visual Effects by: 4th Creative Party  
Edited by: Kim Sang-bum, Kim Jae-bum  
Production Designer: Ryu Seong-hee  
Costume Designer: Cho Sang-kyung  
Make-up and Hair Designer: Song Jong-hee  
Music by: Cho Young-wuk  
Orchestra: Kammersolisten der Deutschen Oper Berlin  
Sound Design by: Kim Suk-won  
Production Sound Mixer: Jung Gun

Cast  
Kim Min-hee (Lady Hideko)  
Kim Tae-ri (Nam Sookhee, ‘Tamako’)  
Ha Jung-woo (Fujiwara, ‘count’)  
Cho Jin-woong (Kouzuki)  
Kim Hae-sook (Mrs Sasaki)  
Moon So-ri (Hideko’s aunt)

South Korea 2016©  
144 mins

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Rent Sat 5 Feb 12:30; Sun 20 Feb 18:10  
Maurice Sun 6 Feb 15:20; Mon 14 Feb 18:00  
The Watermelon Woman Mon 7 Feb 20:45; Sat 26 Feb 20:30  
Happy Together (Chun gwong cha sit) Tue 8 Feb 18:15 (+ intro by Yi Wang, Queer East); Sun 13 Feb 15:20  
My Own Private Idaho Tue 8 Feb 20:45; Wed 23 Feb 18:00 (+ intro by BFI Race Equality Lead Rico Johnson-Sinclair)  
Brokeback Mountain Wed 9 Feb 17:45 (+ intro by BFI Race Equality Lead Rico Johnson-Sinclair); Mon 21 Feb 20:25  
Go Fish Wed 9 Feb 20:40; Sat 26 Feb 18:20  
Rope Thu 10 Feb 18:30; Tue 22 Feb 14:30  
Victim Thu 10 Feb 20:40; Sun 13 Feb 13:00; Mon 21 Feb 18:00  
Desert Hearts Fri 11 Feb 20:40; Wed 16 Feb 18:20 (+ intro by BFI Head Librarian Emma Smart)  
My Beautiful Laundrette Sat 12 Feb 18:20; Tue 15 Feb 20:45; Sat 19 Feb 20:45  
The Handmaiden (Ah-ga-ssi) Sat 12 Feb 20:10; Sun 27 Feb 17:50  
A Fantastic Woman (Una mujer fantástica) Sun 13 Feb 18:40; Tue 22 Feb 20:50  
Beautiful Thing Mon 14 Feb 20:30  
All About My Mother (Todo sobre mi madre) Wed 16 Feb 21:00  
Young Soul Rebels Thu 17 Feb 20:45  
Mädchen in Uniform Fri 18 Feb 20:30; Sat 26 Feb 16:00  
Moonlight Thu 24 Feb 14:30; Mon 28 Feb 20:45  
To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar Fri 25 Feb 20:45

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