



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

The Portrait of a Lady

The Portrait of a Lady

Director: Jane Campion
Production Companies:
PolyGram Filmed Entertainment, Propaganda Films
Producers: Monty Montgomery, Steve Golin
Co-producer: Ann Wingate
Associate Producer: Mark Turnbull
Executive in Charge of Production: Tim Clawson
Production Supervisor: Joel Hatch
Production Co-ordinator: Judi Bunn
Italy Production Co-ordinator:
Maria G. (Mona) Bernal
Italy Production Manager: Marco Valerio Pugini
Unit Production Manager: Nigel Goldsack
Location Manager: Nick Daubeny
Italy Location Manager: Riccardo Neri
Italy Location Production Manager: Giles Johnson
Executive in Charge of Post-production:
Glenn Kiser
Post-production Supervisors: Rosemary Dority,
Linda Shamest
2nd Unit Director: Colin Englert
1st Assistant Director: Mark Turnbull
2nd Assistant Director: Paul Taylor
3rd Assistant Director: Simon Emmanuel
Assistant Director (Italy): Ida Corti
3rd Assistant Director (Italy): Piero Frescobaldi
Script Supervisor: Lynn-Maree Danzey
UK Casting: Beth Charkham
Associate Casting: Elaine J. Huzzar
Italy Casting: Shaila Rubin
ADR Voice Casting: Brendan Donnison
Screenplay: Laura Jones
Original Novel: Henry James
Script Consultant: Jan Chapman
Director of Photography: Stuart Dryburgh
Camera Operator: Nigel Willoughby
2nd Unit Camera Operators: Kate Robinson,
Marco Cristiani
2nd Unit Cameraman: Julian Court
Steadicam Operator: Marco Pieroni
Digital/Optical Effects: Peerless Camera Company
Visual Effects Supervisor: Kent Houston
Co-ordinator Visual Effects: Susi Ropoer
Digital Effects: Ditch Doy, Paddy Eason,
Mark Nelmes, Tim Ollive, Manfred Dean Yurke
Optical Effects: Martin Body, David Smith
Motion Control: Chris Lovegrove, Charlie Tyler
Special Effects: Snow Business Effects Associates,
First Effects
Italy Chief Special Effects: Fabio Traversari
Editor: Veronika Jenet
Production Designer: Janet Patterson
Supervising Art Director: Martin Childs
Art Director: Mark Raggett
Italy Art Director: Stefano Ortolani
Supervising Set Decorator: Jill Quertier
Italy Set Decorator: Bruno Cesari
Italy Scenic Artist: Domenico Sica
Costume Designer: Peter Owen
Wardrobe Supervisor: Patrick Wheatley
Wardrobe Mistress: Ros Ward
Make-up: Amanda Knight, Ken Lintott
Hair/Make-up Designers: Peter Owen,
Magdalen Gaffney, Peter King
Hairdresser: Campbell Young
Title Design: Peter Long, Kate Ellis
Music: Wojciech Kilar
Music Conductors: Stepán Koníček, Nic Raine
Score Orchestrations: Wojciech Kilar
Music Supervisor: Dawn Solér
Music Editor: Veronika Jenet
Music Engineer/Mixer: John Timperley

The Portrait of a Lady bestows on the world one of the greatest heroines in fiction. As read by Campion's film, Isabel Archer (Nicole Kidman) is a gauche and difficult young American on the brink of womanhood, whose uneasy metamorphosis – emotional, moral or spiritual – takes place as she ventures through a Europe that is both glittering palace and cold, forbidding mausoleum. In the talk of those around her (and this is a film about talk, rather than the silence of *The Piano*, with the often brutal admissions of the protagonists delivered in a smartingly clipped style), she is subjected to scrutiny, dissection and ultimately terrible deception, as she befriends the intriguing sophisticate Madame Merle (Barbara Hershey) and the decadent artefact collector Gilbert Osmond (John Malkovich), two mendacious Americans with an affected – and infected – sense of their 'European-ness'. Isabel's tale, as she inherits a legacy and consequently becomes a woman of means, with seemingly more freedom to choose what to do with her life, is not just one of female individuation, but of the defining of one culture in the face of another.

In this sense it is revealing that at the press conference held before shooting started, Campion explained how when she first read the novel, she identified with the naive young Isabel – that to be from the Antipodes in the twentieth century was akin to the American experience in the nineteenth century. Now Campion journeys to Europe (and Hollywood) for this film, and may at last shake the label 'best woman director from New Zealand' (she is so obviously in the world league, period). *The Portrait of a Lady* is a tale about women on the verge of journeys in many ways.

The contemporary prologue, which frames the film, succinctly conveys what kind of literary adaptation this is. Campion and screenwriter Laura Jones (who previously worked with her on *An Angel at My Table*) offer a reading that seems to hark back to the first youthful exploration of the novel, and then to elaborate on it. To purloin James' own metaphor, Campion has returned to the cold Jamesian House of Fiction that she once built in her head, has dusted down the rooms of her choosing and installed the audience.

With the type of visceral sting she executes so well, Campion launches the unsuspecting viewer slap into the tale (boldly skipping the novel's first 100-odd pages), with us party to Isabel's early days in England, fresh off the boat from America, and fending off one of her suitors, the solemn Lord Warburton (not presented as a buffoon or prig, but just plain decent), as he makes a desperate proposal to her. The film's almost suffocatingly intense pace allows little respite as it takes its grand two-plus hour tour (even Wojciech Kilar's restrained score, quivering with repressed emotions, is sparingly used). There is no polite build-up, and no establishing long-shot introductions: rather we come immediately face-to-face with the heroine and her dilemmas, as she looks for a way out of a tight corner. Isabel is faced with the proposal in the garden (here full of snarly trees) which so many romances build up to for example, in the present Jane Austen vogue, Austen's novels have been read as so much bumbling pre-prandial to the jolly betrothals. Campion's film, by contrast, starts with a refusal which is mixed with a nostalgia for another time, when there could have been a simpler response, as Isabel states: 'There was one moment when I would have given my little finger to say yes.' (Though Jones' succinct script tinkers only slightly with James' own interlocution, here it seems deliberately to recall *The Piano*'s Ada, who did give her index finger to do a version of this.) This is a gruelling, hard scene, accentuated in the close-up: Nicole Kidman's scrubbed white skin fills the screen, her unruly auburn hair swept wispily on top of her head, her eyes full of trepidation, tears proudly clinging to the lower lids, not uncouth enough to fall. And having taken us up the garden path with this opening, we are snapped straight into a claustrophobic, dimly lit world, where Isabel's face often appears as luminous as an opal in the shadows around her.

Music Consultant: Andrew Kotatko
Choreography: Flavia Sparapani
Sound Design: Lee Smith
Sound Mixer: Peter Glossop
Re-recording Mixers: Gethin Creagh, Martin Oswin
Dialogue Editors: Karin Whittington, Andrew Plain
Sound Effects Editor: Peter Townend
ADR Supervisor: Annabelle Sheehan
ADR Mixers: Julie Pearce, Robert Deschaine, Paul Zydell, David Humphries
ADR Editor: Tim Jordan
Foley Walker: John Simpson
Foley Mixer: Julie Pearce
Etiquette Adviser: Stephen Calloway
Piano Instructor: Maggie Balter
Cast:
Nicole Kidman (*Isabel Archer*)
John Malkovich (*Gilbert Osmond*)
Barbara Hershey (*Madame Serena Merle*)
Mary Louise Parker (*Henrietta Stackpole*)
Martin Donovan (*Ralph Touchett*)
Shelley Winters (*Mrs Touchett*)
Richard E. Grant (*Lord Warburton*)
Shelley Duvall (*Countess Gemini*)
Christian Bale (*Edward Rosier*)
Viggo Mortensen (*Caspar Goodwood*)
Valentina Cervi (*Pansy Osmond*)
John Gielgud (*Mr Touchett*)
Roger Ashton-Griffiths (*Bob Bantling*)
Catherine Zago (*Mother Superior*)
Alessandra Vanzani (*2nd nun*)
Katie Campbell (*1st Miss Molyneux*)
Katherine Anne Porter (*2nd Miss Molyneux*)
Eddy Seager (*Strongman's spruiker*)
Pat Roach (*Strongman*)
Emanuelle Carucci Viterbi (*Roccanera butler*)
Francesca Bartellini (*Isabel's maid*)
Achille Brugnini (*footman at ballroom*)
United Kingdom/USA 1996©
144 mins

BECOME A BFI MEMBER

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at bfi.org.uk/join

SIGHT AND SOUND

Never miss an issue with **Sight and Sound**, the BFI's internationally renowned film magazine. Subscribe from just £25*

* Price based on a 6-month print subscription (UK only). More info: sightandsoundsubs.bfi.org.uk



BFI PLAYER

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on player.bfi.org.uk

Join the BFI mailing list for regular programme updates. Not yet registered? Create a new account at www.bfi.org.uk/signup

Most striking about the garden sequence is the degree to which Kidman reminds us of her Antipodean sister Judy Davis, bracing herself for her future at the opening of Gillian Armstrong's *My Brilliant Career* (1979). Like Davis' boisterous Sybylla, Isabel is at first depicted as an awkward sort, with a determined stride that would have horrified the deportment tutors of the day. Worse still, she's the kind of girl wont to probe her walking boots with a hearty sniff, obviously with little regard for the niceties of 'lady-like' etiquette. No, Isabel is a cerebral type, who collects words ('nihilism', for instance, is written out in neat scroll and pegged to her wardrobe): an intelligent woman, though without Sybylla's obvious vocational aspirations, or those of her journalist compatriot Harriet Stackpole in *Portrait*.

From *A Girl's Own Story*, through *Two Friends*, *Sweetie*, *An Angel at My Table* and *The Piano*, Campion's heroines have been truculent individuals, tripped up by their desires (and one may sweepingly suggest her films can be measured by how they keep their footing among all the treading of water and land). Her work has been so deliriously uncensored that she taps into the most perverse parts of the female psyche, unafraid to deal with women who are the undoing of themselves. At the troubled and therefore fascinating centre of her work is the exploration of female masochism, the match to Scorsese's excursions into the male equivalent. Patently there in *The Piano*, this is no less present in *Portrait*, where Isabel allows herself to be ensnared by Osmond into the most emotionally sado-masochistic of relationships. Malkovich, at first apparently revamping his Valmont from *Dangerous Liaisons*, proves terrifyingly persuasive as the spiteful and contemptuous Osmond. Her path is beset by things for her perhaps to stumble on, bringing her down to the primordial moral level of some of those around her. But (as she claims), 'I will not crawl.' The film follows this, the camera obsessed with the trailing of her skirt-train, to which new flourishes are added as her financial and marital status increases.

And half Isabel's battle is for herself not to become a beautiful thing, an ornate bauble in Osmond's collection. Campion traces her journey, from *ingénue* to a woman caught up in an elaborate style (at times she wears a net-like lace veil that seems to emphasise just how snared she is). Tightly shot, this film deals mostly in close-ups: it is, after all, about portraits. And what is most striking is just how many portraits there are – with Kidman's own metamorphosing (even at one point taking on the mask-like appearance of the starkly attractive Madame Merle). In a tightly wound performance, Kidman gives very little away. But we can see her looking, her blue eyes, so proudly loath to shed tears, soaking up everything around her. And if we peer at the portraits long enough, we may discern what is going on in the headstrong head at their centre, as she peers at her reflection and finally comes to recognise herself – though such self-recognition rarely provides easy answers. In a film haunted by Eros and Thanatos, caught up in their dry embrace (snatches of Schubert's *Death and the Maiden* are heard on the soundtrack) the path to love seems one of psychotic self-destruction.

For Campion does not like easy endings – after the choppy finale of *The Piano*, *The Portrait of a Lady* is no less bracing. The white lightning of the final scene seems to spring as swiftly as the opening, as Campion catches the perilous ambiguity of Isabel's destiny. It is an astounding moment: a sudden cold flash in which whole audiences of presumptuous girls may find existential truths. Then, with the door of this House of Fiction closed securely behind, Campion leaves us asking of ourselves what other paths are there to be followed.

Lizzie Francke, *Sight and Sound*, November 1996