



PREVIEW

Poor Things

Poor Things

Directed by: Yorgos Lanthimos

©: 20th Century Studios,

TSG Entertainment Finance LLC

Production Company: Element Pictures

Presented by: Searchlight Pictures

In association with: Film4, TSG Entertainment

Produced in association with: Limp, Fruit Tree

Produced with the support of: The British Film

Commission, UK Government Film Tax Relief

Executive Producers: Ollie Madden, Daniel Battsek

Produced by: Ed Guiney, Andrew Lowe,

Yorgos Lanthimos, Emma Stone

Co-producers: Kasia Malipan, Ildikó Kemény,

David Minkowski

Line Producer: Mónika Nagy

Financial Controller: Nikki Chamberlin

Post-production Supervisor: Deborah Harding

Castling by: Dixie Chassay

1st Assistant Director: Hayley Williams

2nd Assistant Director: Edoardo Petti

Screenplay by: Tony McNamara

Based upon the novel by: Alasdair Gray

Director of Photography: Robbie Ryan

Editor: Yorgos Mavropsaridis

Production Design: James Price, Shona Heath

Set Decorator: Zsuzsa Mihalek

Costume Designer: Holly Waddington

Hair, Make-up & Prosthetics Designer:

Nadia Stacey

Music by: Jerskin Fendrix

Sound Designer: Johnnie Burn

Cast:

Emma Stone (*Bella Baxter*)

Mark Ruffalo (*Duncan Wedderburn*)

Willem Dafoe (*Godwin Baxter*)

Ramy Youssef (*Max McCandless*)

Christopher Abbot (*Alfie Blessington*)

Suzu Bemba (*Toinette*)

Jerrold Carmichael (*Harry Astley*)

Kathryn Hunter (*Swiney*)

Vicki Pepperdine (*Mrs Prim*)

Margaret Qualley (*Felicity*)

Hanna Schygulla (*Martha Von Kurtzroc*)

Ireland-UK-USA 2023

141 mins

Courtesy of Searchlight Pictures

Unfortunately Yorgos Lanthimos has fallen ill and is no longer able to introduce this preview. However we are delighted to announce that Willem Dafoe will now join us to introduce the screening.

Faraway a bell is ringing, maybe a cruise-ship bell or a cathedral chime or a cornershop ding, because there's a new, lovely thing alive in the world and it is Yorgos Lanthimos's *Poor Things*. A film (based on the novel by Alasdair Gray) that gives pleasure in every fantastical frame – pleasure to the eye, pleasure to the soul – this dazzling suite of dirty minded delights is set in not-quite-reality during an era of never-quite-was. But particularly for women, and particularly for men, the poor things, its accuracy about the here and now gives its macaroon swirls an acidic sting – in both senses: formaldehyde and LSD. Few are the films that make you think and feel and laugh this much; even fewer are the ones that send you skidding out with your whole demeanour reset to remember just what a splendid, absurd thing it is to have a body and a mind, and a big, dumb, glorious world on which to set them loose.

On the verge of discovering body, mind and world, Bella Baxter (an extraordinary, physically ingenious Emma Stone) lives in an eccentric London mansion with her adoptive father Godwin Baxter (Willem Dafoe), a famous surgeon with a scarred, misshapen face. His medical students – except Max McCandless (Ramy Youssef) whom Baxter takes on as an assistant – call him 'Monster'. Bella calls him 'God'.

Bella is God's beloved experiment. Unbeknownst to her, she is the brain of a baby put into the body of its mother, the crowning achievement in God's macabre menagerie, that also includes a dog with a goose-head and a pig that's been spliced with a chicken. God hires McCandless to observe her development; McCandless, like most of the men she meets, is instantly entranced. Bella punches him on the nose, and giggles.

But Bella is learning fast, her expanding consciousness pouncing on concepts like a cat pounces on mice. Her staggering, coltish walk, the gait of a puppet suddenly made real, becomes steadier. Her language skills improve. Then one day she discovers how good it feels to rub herself down there, and McCandless has to explain that in 'polite society' such behaviour is not appropriate. In almost the same moment, Bella has discovered sex and shame, and decided instinctively to get as much as she can of the one, and never to bother with the other. Though she's been confined her whole life to God's rambling, architectural mish-mash of a home, now her questing, curious mind and newly voracious sexual appetite compel her to escape.

Escape comes in the hilariously puffed and pomaded form of Duncan Wedderburn (a fantastic Mark Ruffalo, giving some of the film's most memorable reactions) a caddish lawyer who intends to spirit Bella away, shag her senseless and then cast her aside once he's tired of her. But somewhere on their grand adventure, maybe under the dangling tramcars of Lisbon, or on the steamship to Alexandria, or beneath a purple Parisian sky in the bordello where Bella goes to work, Wedderburn falls in love. Bella's lack of reciprocity drives him mad.

But by now, awakened by encounters with a host of brilliantly cast cameos (Kathryn Hunter as a tattooed brothel madam, Jerrod Carmichael as a

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

SIGHT AND SOUND

IN PERSON & PREVIEWS

The Crown – Final Episode + Q&A

Sun 17 Dec 15:45

Mark Kermode Live in 3D at the BFI

Mon 18 Dec 18:30; Mon 15 Jan 18:20

Preview: The End We Start From

+ Q&A with guests tbc

Mon 15 Jan 20:30

Preview: All of Us Strangers

+ Q&A with Andrew Haigh

Wed 17 Jan 18:10

Rock 'n' Roll Cinema

Thu 18 Jan 18:15

In Conversation: Cartoon Saloon's Tomm

Moore, Nora Twomey and Paul Young

Sun 21 Jan 15:15

Woman with a Movie Camera Preview:

Your Fat Friend + Q&A with director Jeanie

Finlay and Aubrey Gordon

Sat 27 Jan 17:50

Shooting the Past 25th Anniversary + Q&A with

writer-director Stephen Poliakoff and actors

Lindsay Duncan and Timothy Spall

Sun 28 Jan 15:00

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

BFI SOUTHBANK

Welcome to the home of great film and TV, with three cinemas and a studio, a world-class library, regular exhibitions and a pioneering Mediatheque with 1000s of free titles for you to explore. Browse special-edition merchandise in the BFI Shop. We're also pleased to offer you a unique new space, the BFI Riverfront – with unrivalled riverside views of Waterloo Bridge and beyond, a delicious seasonal menu, plus a stylish balcony bar for cocktails or special events. Come and enjoy a pre-cinema dinner or a drink on the balcony as the sun goes down.

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

voyaging cynic, Hanna Schygulla as a redoubtable intellectual with fabulous hair, Suzy Bemba as a socialist prostitute, Christopher Abbott as a nasty piece of work with a G.O.A.T. comeuppance) the genie of Bella's mercurial, fascinating personhood cannot be put back in the bottle. Well, maybe Godwin could do it with a scalpel and a bone saw, but far away in London he is dying and missing his daughter-creation, whose mark II replacement, Felicity (Margaret Qualley) has none of Bella's spirit.

It is impossible not to be on a similar journey to Bella's when every scene is so crammed with inventive, baroque detail to discover. Just as her eyes widen and her nostrils flare at the tumult of the world outside the mansion, so does Lanthimos's luscious visual imagination give us so much to feast on; it's practically gluttonous. Striking black and white gives way to vivid colour and, captured in pinholes, vignettes and warping wides alike – after *The Favourite* (2018), also shot by DP Robbie Ryan, Lanthimos really is the foremost filmmaker of the fisheye – the photography alone stuns and soothes, caresses and cracks jokes.

And what material it has to frame: backdropped by pungent electronic skies, surrounded by hyperreal CG seas, the set-built imaginary cities are places both tangibly real and deliberately artificial. Having two production designers, James Price and Shona Heath, apparently doubles the production design, and no matter how vast the vista, you are never in doubt that behind each door there's a room, in every room a person dressed in one of costumier Holly Waddington's exquisite era-collapsing creations, and beneath every starched collar or structured blouse, a heart that beats and bursts and breaks.

And not that you'd ever want to, but if you shut your eyes, the score – the first from experimental musician Jerskin Fendrix – tells the story all on its own. Scraping, naive single instruments initially struggle to stay in tune, before combining into a swelling, symphonic whole at the end, mapping onto Bella's rapid-order experience of: kippers (disgusting), masturbation, manners, fucking (aka furious jumping), Portuguese custard tarts, dancing, oysters, reading, booze, class injustice, companionship, socialism, cruelty, kippers (delicious), forgiveness, grief, ambition and revenge – the best kind, the kind kind, the life-lived-well kind.

Wedderburn and Godwin are very different men, and they love Bella in very different ways, but they share a desire to keep her dependent and childlike, full of potential that will never be realised except on terms they dictate and control. But Bella has other ideas, even when she barely knows what an idea is or how to have one, and bursts out of their cages the way *Poor Things* bursts out of the screen: with ravenous, ravishing, furious-jumping joy.

Jessica Kiang, *Sight and Sound*, Winter 2023-24