



Nick Prescott's Reviews

Venus

Talent: Peter O'Toole, Leslie Phillips, Jodie Whittaker, Vanessa Redgrave, Richard Griffiths.

Date of review: Thursday the 15th of February, 2007

Director: Roger Mitchell

Duration: 92 minutes

Classification: MA (15+)

We rate it: 4 stars.

Actors who might for one reason or another be termed “iconic” come in a number of importantly different categories. Some screen icons are memorable primarily because they’re extraordinarily good looking: Catherine Zeta-Jones and Pierce Brosnan, for example, are arguably about as smashing-looking as human beings have any right to be, yet, fine actors though they certainly are, their work hasn’t really stopped the medium in its tracks. There are some screen actors who become icons of a particular generation (James Dean is an obvious example), and some who become iconic for more confronting reasons (Linda Lovelace, perhaps). Beyond all of these memorable personalities, however, are the unassailable, engrave-their-names-in-marble-at-the-parthenon-door types, screen legends whose incandescence will almost certainly last forever. I believe Peter O’Toole is such a performer. From his career-making turn as Lawrence of Arabia (which was filmed, astonishingly, 45 years ago) through effortlessly wonderful work in a career that has spanned over seventy films including *The Lion in Winter* (1968) *The Stunt Man* (1980) and *The Last Emperor* (1987), not to mention a stage pedigree to goggle at, O’Toole has proven consistently that he has the smarts, the gravitas, the comic timing, the vocal control, the performative deftness and the indefinable magnetism to absolutely command the screen in any circumstance. With *Venus* he shows us that he can still do this, brilliantly, at 76 years of age.

O’Toole more or less plays himself in *Venus*. His character is Maurice, an elderly actor living in London and spending time with a very small circle of close friends whose numbers seem to have dwindled since their glory days of forty years ago. He has an ex-wife (played beautifully by another screen legend, Vanessa Redgrave), an absent family and a group of loyal colleagues who call upon him to play bit-parts in the odd film. The catalyst for the film’s drama comes when Maurice’s best chum, Ian, played by the wonderful Leslie Phillips, decides to combat his own nagging health problems by offering a room to his great-niece, Jessie, a woman in her early twenties. She’s looking for work in London, and she will (Ian hopes) also act as a kind of

carer/housekeeper. Little does Ian predict that the moment Maurice sets eyes upon Jessie, things will change forever.

One might be forgiven for thinking that *Venus* was to be O'Toole's swansong, because, for all the wonderfully raucous humour and in-your-face swearing and pratfalling of the first half, the film's second half becomes a deeply moving meditation upon aging and death. Lost loves, abandoned wives, glory days gone by and bodies falling apart all take their places in the portrait of people facing the ends of their lives; this element of *Venus* is terribly moving. As actors, too, O'Toole, Redgrave and Leslie Phillips all bring such a wealth of experience to the screen that the sense of a real, shared history between them is palpable. When O'Toole and Redgrave share dinner in her crumbling flat, and especially when O'Toole and Phillips dance an elegaic waltz around the Actor's Church, there will be very few dry eyes in the stalls.

Hanif Kureishi has written a wise and beautiful script here, and the canny director Roger Mitchell controls the film effortlessly, letting his superb actors work with the material as fluently as anyone could hope for. Beautiful, touching and immensely human, *Venus* is a deeply moving and bracingly funny experience.

Nick Prescott