

Women on the verge

Streep, Moore and Kidman unleash a torrent of emotion in 'The Hours'

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In her famous short story "Kew Gardens," Virginia Woolf deftly moves from the life of one character to the next, giving equal importance to each to make a broader point about modern human existence. "The Hours," the new film based on Michael Cunningham's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, sifts three women's stories nearly as successfully. As Woolf, Nicole Kidman and her prosthetic nose in portrayal of Woolf are going to get all the glory (and likely an Oscar nomination), but really the most astonishing thing about "The Hours" is how well an intricate, internal novel has been adapted to the screen. The novel follows three women: Woolf, as she begins writing "Mrs. Dalloway"; Laura Brown (Julianne Moore), a disconsolate pregnant '50s housewife reading Woolf's book; and Clarissa Vaughan (Meryl Streep), a contemporary editor who has been nicknamed "Mrs. Dalloway" by her dying gay ex-lover. The film's transition from one story to the next is extremely deft -- flowers arranged in a vase morph into other flowers arranged in a vase, for example -- and the novel's internal thoughts made external by fierce performances (how I love to watch Moore think).

It's an exceptional adaptation of an unfilmable, though very good, novel. But it is also hard to watch. Women drown. Women contemplate drowning. Women burst into tears and gasp for air as if the world were water. The film, like the book, is relentless. These are women despairing. Woolf eventually kills herself because she feels the onset of madness returning and cannot bear it. Brown dreams of suicide in her perfect '50s home and Vaughan is worn, frayed and coming apart at the seams.

At times the movie is so fraught with significance (will this be the thing that drives this woman over the edge?) that it is difficult to track what is actually significant (a flaw in the book as well). And Stephen Daldry, who handled "Billy Elliot" so lightly, occasionally applies a sledgehammer to "The Hours." The movie is already portentous; soft-lit shots of delicate, cracked eggs are overkill. As is the whirling score by Philip Glass; too many heavy things can be too much. But perhaps that is really how madness and despair feel.

And we have an idea of how madness feels because Kidman walks to the edge of a cliff and holds herself precariously on the brink. She may not be, as a scholarly colleague remarked, smart enough to play the impossibly bright Woolf, but she's discerning enough to unravel the edge of despair, to cling to life, and finally, to convince us suicide is her only sensible option. She's also not alone in giving a ferocious performance. Moore, so very good at playing the despairing beauty, takes the most stereotypical role, the dissatisfied housewife, and infuses it with an intellectual hunger and isolation that are breaking; at the end of the film, she has some of the most difficult lines ("I chose life"). Her skill alone prevents them from falling into sentimentality. And Streep is pivotal to the emotional center of the film; she's the one who breaches the distance and allows us a moment of identification. When she sinks to the kitchen floor, bursts into tears and recovers herself, she humanizes the film in a way that no one else does.

Alison Janney (playing Streep's lover) and Claire Danes (as Streep's daughter) are understandably and affectionately irritated by Streep's intensity and provide some naturalness and relief to the unrelenting despair. Ed Harris alone is weak; his portrayal of a poet dying of AIDS is a one-note harangue, though physically he's perfect. There are moments of brilliance in the film -- the handling of a dead bird, the rush of water in a hotel room -- and the performances are all exceptional. There are missteps too, mostly one that mirrors flaws in the book: the

importance of the female kiss, so clear in "Mrs. Dalloway," is never clear enough in either Cunningham's book or this film.

As literary critic Elaine Showalter (among others) has pointed out, drowning is the traditionally literary feminine death, the female body being "prone to wetness, blood, milk, tears, and amniotic fluid, so in drowning the woman is immersed in the feminine organic element." Despite the opening sequence, in which Woolf drowns herself in the river, "The Hours" is ultimately less about women and death and loss than it is about women as water -- mutable, moving, poured out across the screen.

'The Hours'

Starring: Meryl Streep, Julianne Moore, Nicole Kidman. Director: Stephen Daldry. Screenwriter: David Hare. MPAA rating: PG-13 for thematic elements, some disturbing elements and brief language. Running time: 1 hour, 50 minutes. Theaters: Tinseltown Pflugerville, Dobie, Westgate, Metropolitan, Gateway.