

Period piece has Ivory lush touch

THE WHITE COUNTESS

Starring Natasha Richardson, Ralph Fiennes, Vanessa Redgrave, Lynn Redgrave and John Wood
Directed by James Ivory



Anne Brodie

On Movies

The James Ivory lush touch saturates his latest work. The master of English and European period dramas directs this piece set in 1932 Shanghai, in a squalid apartment of a family of expatriot Russian royals.

Thrown out of their homeland with nothing, the prince, princess and countess Belinsky live in darkness and meanness, a far cry from their glory days. Five sleep in one bed, usually with empty stomachs.

Countess Sofia (Ms Richardson) is reduced to prostitution to make money so her family can eat. The prince (Mr. Wood) and Princess (Vanessa Redgrave) are resigned to their fate and spend dreary days sewing, cleaning, lying in bed and planning ways to survive.

Princess Olga (Lynn Redgrave) is the disciplinarian whose attitude of defeat does little to lighten the family burden. They do not discuss their earlier life as White Russians.

Sofia is the only family member who ventures out of the house, a hovel in the bustling Shanghai marketplace, to go to the brothel.

She hands over all her earnings to the family, grudgingly buying a new gown to preserve

the aura of refinement her boss requires in his establishment. Sofia is neither shamed nor resigned. She just does what she does, no emotion attached.

At that time, Russians in Shanghai are lucky to get work emptying gutters, let alone entertaining wealthy men. Russians are despised because they have nothing, if not despised, then they are just invisible. Sofia is one of the lucky ones.

One night in the dance hall, a

bus boy notices her and calls out. In Russia, they were childhood who played tennis in blindingly white silk clothes, in similarly bright sunny fields. The tension and nostalgia is palpable. They feel the pain all over again.

Another night, a blind and wealthy American statesman called Todd (Mr. Fiennes) comes in. She helps him out of a sticky situation and they start to talk.

He's something of a wastrel who whiles his days and nights away in seedy bars, regretting political mistakes he made. One day he hopes to open his own establishment for dancing.

Mr. Fiennes character is a tragic figure and he plays it with great sensitivity and passion, an unforgettable character.

This film is gritty and unrepentant, but also aims at the highest elements of hope and dreams, the things that lift our days and make us human.

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