

ARTS

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'Atonement', the film adaptation of Ian McEwan's novel, is classy but not terribly brave. Saoirse Ronan, above, steals the show as 13-year-old Briony

Let's see some real bravery, Joe



Atonement

15 CERT, 130 MINS

Let me be quite clear: *Atonement* is a good film. It would be mealy-mouthed to begin with any other sentiment. It is a highly classy adaptation of a great novel – moody, very lovely to look at, rich and sophisticated. I would happily watch it a second time, which is a rare feeling.

However, despite the rising clamour of excitement since its opening at the Venice Film Festival last week, I do not think it is a great film. I do not think Joe Wright has yet been proven to be a great director, and I do not think Keira Knightley has been proven to be a great actress.

It tells the story of a precocious young girl with an active imagination who, one hot English summer's evening in 1935, tells a lie which affects many people's lives. Briony Tallis, played aged 13 by Saoirse Ronan, misunderstands some intimate moments between her older sister Cecilia (Knightley) and the cook's son

Robbie (James McAvoy). When a crime is committed she accuses Robbie and the story follows the terrible consequences of that decision through the Second World War and down the decades, as Briony (later Romola Garai and Vanessa Redgrave) tries to find a way to atone for her sin.

The first 40 minutes, up until the accusation of the crime, are very good indeed. The feeling of tension in the English country house is immediately palpable, heightened by a surging piano score that cleverly incorporates the sound of a typewriter into its beat.

Briony wanders the corridors, ghostly but determined, and Christopher Hampton's script adeptly covers the incidents from a number of different perspectives. Much goes unsaid, and you are utterly seduced by the stylised atmosphere of the piece; the sense of foreboding gathers like an electric storm.

Later, as is often the way with adaptations that span entire lifetimes, it becomes more fragmented and loses some of that intensity. Not all of Robbie's war scenes in France are successful and the final coda, which is so crucial to the story, struggles to fit in aesthetically with the rest. There is a willing sense of sadness, but Briony's need to expiate her guilt waits in and out rather than being the central anchor of it all.

Atonement is an ensemble piece and I was keenly aware of the varying standards of acting. Irish actress Saoirse Ronan as the young Briony simply steals the show – she is the best thing in the movie and Garai, her older replace-

ment, seems weak in comparison. Of the two leads, McAvoy is better, seeming more mature (although still a little young for the part) and offering some magnificent moments. Knightley puts in a good performance, certainly, but I wonder how much of the critical rapture is just surprise that this funny-looking beauty can act at all. I still find her looks distracting, and she is definitely too young – she is so serious, trying so hard. I felt a bizarre reminiscence of the kind of embarrassment that I felt at David Cameron's famous

I wonder how much of the critical rapture over Keira Knightley is just surprise that she can act at all

conference speech when he didn't use any notes. Look mummy, no hands!

I feel rather the same about director Joe Wright. Much is being made of his greatness, on only his second feature film, but in truth both *Pride and Prejudice* and *Atonement* bear the hallmarks of precociousness. When the edgy first-time director was offered the major Working Title film *Pride and Prejudice*, I had hoped for some subversion, some true bravery; but the result, although utterly professional, was disappointingly orthodox. It was as if he was a little nervous, aware of his youth, and keen to show off his ability to play with the grown-ups and achieve the kind of

luscious big-budget smoothness that makes for a blockbuster.

His mystery of these trappings is even more on display in *Atonement*. It is classy – posh beyond belief, in fact – and brimming with confidence. But the gambles he takes are technical rather than truly brave. Most obviously, there is an incredible scene on the beach at Dunkirk, about which much fuss has already been made: because of budgetary constraints, it is all filmed in one long Steadicam shot. But I found it ostentatious and distracting, drawing attention away from the dramatic moment and towards congratulating the director instead. Dramatically, there are few real experiments, nothing that might have failed.

The producers of Working Title must be thanking their lucky stars: here they have a director who, while technically an edgy young prodigy (with all the newspaper column inches that that entails), in fact reliably punches out glossy, big-budget pics that ooze with maturity and gravitas. Wright's surprising area of expertise – clipped British accents, lipstick, dresses, beautiful country houses – suits Working Title's catalogue of commercialising Englishness to a T. Even his much vaunted artistic decision to cultivate 1940s style accented from his start – more talked about than evidenced in the movie – manages to sound edgy and experimental while actually lending the thing an aura of traditional grandeur. You have proved you can deliver posh movies, Joe – now let's see you dig deep and dare to bare.

Headache inducing, often in a good way



Mackerras Beethoven Cycle

HYPERION

Earlier this year, classical music had its 9/11 moment. The earth rocked, the ear trembled. Connoisseurs of serious music could no longer feel safe.

The recordings of Joyce Hatto, predilect to the stars by star praisers, were found to be fakes.

Recordings by less well-known pianists had been passed off as the works of the even less well-known Hatto. The industry bought the fraud hook, line and sinker.

The real fun was going to come with a second wave of discoveries.

A sifting of the critical columns would almost certainly reveal maven's who had said one thing when a CD had first come out and then quite another when the same recording was "re-released" by Hatto. This was going to be fun.

Last month the relevant scraps were finally unearthed.

Bryce Morrison, the world's most eminent piano critic, found the world's largest egg on his face.

The Yefim Bronfman recording of Rachmaninov's Second Piano Concerto, which, according to Morrison in 1992, lacked angst and urgency, became, by 2006, one of the "finest on record".

This week I was given the opportunity to join Bryce's ignominious

I received Charles Mackerras's latest Beethoven Cycle with the Scottish Chamber Orchestra, which I had heard recorded live for Hyperion at the Edinburgh Festival last summer.

Would I tumble too? Would I praise something I had initially thought flabby, or think flabby that which I had initially praised? Oh Lord, was I brave enough, morally upright enough, to write a review of the CDs without even so much as a peek at my concert notes?

Of course, things do change in the recording process. The sound emitted from the live concert will be different from the digitalised copy. But not much; not these days.

So, I did the best my moral fibre allowed. A fresh listen followed by a quick snoop.

Thankfully the differences were not egregious. In a way my job wasn't too difficult. Mackerras's account was as idiosyncratic as you

could get: fast, furious and headache inducing – often in a good way. I no longer feel that the timpani are stupidly loud, even though their beligerence does make me wonder if there is, perhaps, a confused Iraqi militiaman out there with two pretty kettle drums instead of a Katana.

I still feel the excitement. So much of the ninth spins vertiginously out of sonic control.

But also I feel a hollowness to that excitement. The sort of excitement you get from watching a mugging. Much of the power is unsympathetically aggressive: the tone, when forte, is so often left to the gods of brute force that phrasing goes out the window.

My impression of the slow sections has changed rather more. Unaccompanied by the orchestra's snazzy wry faces I can appreciate the music detail. The delicacy and airiness of the string playing allows the first symphony to become the perfect classical meringue.

The brass has a back-seat role in this early symphony. From the third on, they are ever-present and in this set they sound off like a dodgy car. These fallen heralds deliver a raspy noise, and soon you're begging them to leave off a little. The fourth sounded like Mackerras flicking through a book, and here he is having another quiet skin. Though in the seventh it makes the symphony febrile and bony, working on the dance elements like anorexia on a schoolgirl.

Perhaps inevitably, these clippers go at record speeds, often undermining the "slow" in "slow movement".

I previously said that the fourth sounded like Mackerras flicking through a book, and here he is having another quiet skin. Though in the seventh it makes the symphony febrile and bony, working on the dance elements like anorexia on a schoolgirl.

Accompanying the break-neck pace are casualties – duff intonation and a general untidiness, particularly in the woodwinds, but also surprises and revelations.

The dotted rhythms in the middle of the slow movement of the ninth, for example, blabby or thin rather than I've ever heard before in Mackerras's warm greenhouse.

Overall, this is a disappointing set. Lean, abrasive, explosive, fast. You wouldn't want to replace any of the recent or older classics – the Zimman, Karajan or even radio sets – but you might want to make some shelf space for it or buy individually.

Not bad but not brilliant". I wrote last summer. Well, if you allow me to do a Morrison and shift that statement around slightly, I would say that this set is not brilliant but, all too often, simply not bad.



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Refreshingly reverent

THEATRE REVIEW
St Catherine of Siena: Saint for Our Times
EDINBURGH

The Edinburgh Fringe festival has for so long been a bastion of cutting-edge comedy and ground-breaking theatre.

However, the years have aged this institution and the comedy, it is fair to say, has suffered. These days it's no longer about making people laugh. No, in order to shift tickets one must "push back the barriers of taste", be "menacingly funny" and "uncompromising". Put simply: the cruder the better.

But what this means is that the festival is taken over by a lot of unfunny acts. And this year a number of "cutting-edge" comedies have decided to turn their wits to mocking religion. On the menu, for example, was "Cash for Christ", a comedy about how evangelical mega-churches take your money (pushing the barriers of originality), "Jihad the musical" (which was so offensively unfunny that for so long been condemned it) and "Bigger than Jesus" – simply the blasphemous ratings a rapeseed Catholic performing his own "Mass" on stage (I confess to leaving half way out of pure boredom). And lest I forget the best of the bunch: the former *Pop Idol* winner Michelle MacManus played Mary in a Nativity play set in Mexico.

Entertaining, it was not. So, needless to say, my heart was gladdened when I heard that a relation of a genuinely funny man, Bill Murray, the star of *Groundhog Day*, was performing. However, his sister, Sister Nancy Murray, was not giving us comedy.

The 50-something Dominican nun – dressed in full habit – gave a one-woman performance of the life of St Catherine of Siena: *Saint for Our Times*. At times it was amusing, but most of all it was full of energy and a refreshing change from the Fringe's usual diet of smut and irreverence. Her stage was the 19th-century Anglo-Catholic Old St Paul's Church – the heart of Scottish Episcopalianism. Her only prop was a table with candle and crucifix set just below the neo-Norman high altar.

Sister Murray relied almost solely on her enthusiasm to re-tell the life of this hermit, mystic and heroic female saint. She stepped into the person of St Catherine and, in the acting tradition of Stanislavski, becomes the part. This was achieved, not just through the wearing of the full Dominican habit, but in a rather over-the-top Italian accent.

The performance starts with Sister Nancy striding through the church, vigorously shaking members of the audience by the hand: "Buona sera, buona sera, how good to see you all here tonight. Let me introduce myself, my name is Catherine Benincasa."

Let's be clear – this isn't a performance of a professional actor. Sister Murray has spent much of her life as a teacher and her audience, at times, were made up of like school children – "now, let's press rewind on the time machine and go back to the 14th century, come on, 21, 20, 19, 18..."

But apart from the Joyce Grenville moments there was a charm to her performance – to the arguments St Catherine had with her mother, her trips to see Pope Gregory when the papacy had been re-located to Avignon, and the struggle to live up to her ideals.

Sister Murray showed how St Catherine, with her simple yet strong faith, managed to change the world: through her letters to the Pope urging for Church unity, her letters to world leaders calling for peace and her untiring help for the sick.

She also demonstrated how the problems St Catherine faced were not dissimilar to our own. There is disease, a divided Church (although at least we don't have two papacies) and "leaders who start wars with little thought of the consequences".

The show was remarkably counter-cultural to the current Fringe trends – "counter-cultural" is a term, ironically, what the Fringe tries to be. Rather than dressing up hackneyed old jokes at Christianity as cutting edge theatre, Sister Murray gave her audience a message of hope.

Christopher Lamb

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