

ARTS

A monster we know to be real



Notes on a Scandal

15 CERT, 91 MINS

The baroque relish with which the two main characters of *Notes on a Scandal* are drawn is revealed already by their names. The aging spinster (Judi Dench), envious and infuriated by her younger colleague, is called Barbara Covett; the married object of Barbara's desires (Cate Blanchett), on whom she works a complex strategy of seduction, is called – remember the story of King David? – Bathsheba Hart.

The evolving relationship between these two women (as gradually revealed through Barbara's diaries) and our evolving moral assessment of each of them is the whole fun and terror of this piece. It is a film that appears to be a thriller, with some of the extravagance of a Restoration comedy, but it will remain with you, tugging away at you, not letting you rest, with the persistence of a medieval morality play.

Barbara Covett is an old battle-axe of a teacher at a state secondary school in London, and we join her for the arrival of new art teacher Sheba Hart. Sheba is everything Barbara is not – beautiful, young, married, a mother, wealthy, open, girlish – and Barbara views her with wry interest. It is only when she discovers that Sheba has been having an affair with 15-year-old pupil Steven Connolly that it becomes clear how obsessive that interest has become. She tries to leverage this knowledge to "liberate" Sheba from her family and allow her to become her own

FILM REVIEW
Freddie Sayers



Judi Dench and Cate Blanchett: battle axe and beauty

lover and life-partner, revealing just how creepy she really is in the process. Judi Dench is spectacularly good. She looks terrifying, her thinning chestnut wash giving way to white roots and no make up, big naked varicose legs in bathings, gnarly old hands. We start off loving her as we usually love Judi: fierce, witty and wonderfully authoritarian. When she

imagines "hubby's pruny old mouth at Sheba's breast" (of husband Bill Nighy), we laugh and are only slightly surprised; she is clearly an old lesbian, but a benevolent one at that point. Suddenly, with the revelation of Sheba's affair with the pupil, the monster Machiaveli is revealed: "I could gain everything by doing nothing." At every point, when we think Barbara

could not be any more miserably, deluded, obsessive or freaky, we are proved wrong. We get, oddly, we still feel sorry for Barbara. This is not just the story of a monster. It is about loneliness, and old age, and the persistent taboo of lesbianism. Particularly, it is about the isolation of people whose desires have been forbidden (by themselves as well as others) and whose solitude is coloured by self-loathing. Barbara's sweet sister, who at Christmas gently asks if there has been "anyone special since Jennifer", is cut down pompously – "I don't know what you mean."

It is also a story about class. Sheba's world in her Primrose Hill mansion, with children running around and light and beauty, is a different world to Barbara's Archway basement. When invited to lunch, Barbara's impeccable accent and manners are let down by her overly smart dress, and awkward bunch of flowers – the elegant bohemian class is impossible to emulate. Both Barbara's fetish for Sheba, and Sheba's fetish for young Irish boy Steven, are class obsessions; as Barbara herself says, Steven was basically attractive because he was poor and still liked art, "like a monkey who'd stepped out of the forest and asked for a gin and tonic."

Sheba, meanwhile, is as extravagantly naïve as Barbara is wicked. Achingly vulnerable, she is wooed and dumped by Steven as easily as he might have been. There is something about Cate Blanchett's face that, as well as being beautiful, is very grand, and, coupled with her slightly too polished English accent, she seems like a young princess let out of the palace too early. "It is incredibly important we keep this secret," she pines to Steven. "The point," he responds acutely, "you're afraid."

There is no one really to like in this story, and yet there is no one fully to hate. It is over the top and yet eerily convincing. Sarah Lamb, as the amoral Sylphide who lures a hapless Scottish farmer from his fiancée, perfectly captured the character's naïveté and irresistible charm. She skipped, hopped, and slid across the stage, her hair flying, in this instance with nary the faintest whisper from her feet. The target of her affection, James, has never been a sympathetic character, but his ecstasy at their wedding night seems even more pathetic in the egalitarian 21st century. Viacheslav Samouilov didn't try to make James likeable. With the exception of Sylphide, whom he punished with single-minded lust, James was nasty or imperious to everyone else in the drama.

For the first time I was struck by the utter unfairness of Sylphide's death: I'd already have put the poisoned scarf around James's neck.

MEDIA MATTER

When the crossword compulsion takes me

The other day a colleague caught me reaching the bottom of the "down" escalator from our office in the middle of the afternoon, my newspaper under my arm, and immediately getting on the one back up again, looking for all the world as though I had nothing better to do than ride these conveyances to pass the working day. I explained that I'd left my pen behind and, quick as a flash, he asked why I didn't do it in my head. I told him I was popping out for a break to make some notes, to work, actually, not to do the crossword, and he was suitably abashed.

In fact, I often do the crossword in my head, or at least a good proportion of it, before filling it in. This is because I try not to clutter my home with discarded paper, preferring to take the *Telegraph* to the pub and leave it there when I've finished with it for someone else to pick up, so that my good taste and civilised values might begin a journey round the world; and the last thing I want is for some stranger to conclude that the *Tel* is read by dunderheads who can't see that "Train not prosaic" is an anagram of "Procrastination." Better that I write, think its readers consider such games beneath their notice, although I hence the mental penicillin in.

Actually I'm sure some *Telegraph* readers do disdain the crossword, because it's a great deal easier than those in the *Times* or the *Guardian*, which is also why it's one of the paper's broader selling points. Many people who like something together will buy one of the other two for that reason alone. Silly, I know, but true, and it does no harm for backs to be humbled by the knowledge that their copy is competing with a

colleague for the attention even of someone who has already paid for it. But why are these things so popular? It's a very English phenomenon, the cryptic crossword, and one that never caught on in America, where they prefer simple general knowledge questions, with the letters established in one axis providing helpful clues to the answers in the other. Puns and anagrams seem to bore or mystify Americans, alien as they are to a proud tradition of straight talking and often wearying literal-mindedness. We are naturally devious of habit and thought, we English. No wonder the Yanks don't trust us.

Not all crossword solvers are the same, mind. Some, like my fiancée, who is a smart-pants literate accountant, do the crossword and the sudoku, whereas mere numbers have never held any charm for me. Then again I know people who can't work, or sleep, or hold a conversation until they've finished the day's puzzle, whereas if I'm not in the mood, or a compiler's brain clearly grinds in a radically different way from mine, I will toss it aside and do something else, like ride the office escalators. On the other hand, if the muse is on me, simply completing the grid is not enough. I notice alighting remarks, like the answers I consider cleverer, more elegant and economical than those provided. Then I go to a tangent, and compose crossword clues for random words that catch my notice in the street. The next thing I know I'm pulling words out of the midnight news and inventing clues for them into the small hours. The following morning I text them to people, and feel my glee mount with each passing minute it takes them to respond. Sometimes the return message reads simply "you need help", which might be true but is also an admission of failure.

I happen to be going through one of those phases just now, so I'll leave you with a teaser of my own composition, and try to remember to supply the answer next week: Excuse me for not finishing crossword well: Being late? (3,6,4,2)

Nick Thomas

Beguiled by the fluttering wings of a moth

BALLET REVIEW
Dennis Chang

Who would have guessed that the genteel world of ballet would fall victim to two of the biggest headlines of the New Year? Television cameras and paparazzi photographers have hovered around the English National Ballet ever since a principal dancer was "outed" as a fee-paying member of the British National Party. To compound the PR nightmare, Britain's whiz-kid choreographer Christopher Wheeldon announced that he would be starting a new neoclassical ballet company, putting the ENB under more pressure than ever

to prove its raison d'être. What a glorious redemption, then, that the company was able to triumph in Mary Skeaping's *Giselle*, a production unique to the company. Hailing from Paris in 1841, *Giselle* is one of the earliest works in today's performing repertoire, predating Tchaikovsky and Petipa's *The Sleeping Beauty* by nearly half a century.

In contrast to the fabled queens and princesses of imperial Russia, *Giselle* is a guileless country bumpkin often saddled with a pastel peasant outfit. She falls for the handsome Albrecht, who is a count in disguise, but then dies from heartbreak upon discovering he is already betrothed to someone else. Albrecht, shaken by guilt and compelled by love, visits *Giselle*'s grave one evening, only to be attacked by the vengeful ghosts of spurned women, led by Myrtha, the Queen of the Wilis. But *Giselle*, as a new member of the group, shields Albrecht from her sisters until daylight separates the magic realm from her repentant lover's solitude. Agnes Oaks was refreshingly under-

stood in both her dancing and acting. When courted by Thomas Edur's noble Albrecht her initial embarrassment at his advances seemed genuine – not the mere teasing of a coyly sweet debutante, which one often sees. As a Willy, Oaks's weightless feet were the wings of a night moth in a cemetery – fluttering with the last flicker of life.

The Royal Ballet was also staging an early 19th-century ballet involving a feckless male chasing after the ghost of a woman in a long white skirt. *La Sylphide*, a Scottish story adapted by an Italian choreographer for the Paris Opera Ballet, is now best known in Danish choreographer August Bournonville's 1836 version. *La Sylphide* has survived well, in contrast to the historical bastardisation inflicted upon *Giselle*, thanks to the Royal Danish Ballet's militant guardianship. The current Royal Ballet production from 2006 is staged by principal dancer Johann Koborg, whose pristine Danish training is evident in his weightless jumps, quick steps, and graceful bearing.

As with last year, those unique "Bournonville" qualities remained more evident in the male corps de ballet than in the female, which had greater trouble adapting to the speed of the choreography.

Sarah Lamb, as the amoral Sylphide who lures a hapless Scottish farmer from his fiancée, perfectly captured the character's naïveté and irresistible charm. She skipped, hopped, and slid across the stage, her hair flying, in this instance with nary the faintest whisper from her feet. The target of her affection, James, has never been a sympathetic character, but his ecstasy at their wedding night seems even more pathetic in the egalitarian 21st century. Viacheslav Samouilov didn't try to make James likeable. With the exception of Sylphide, whom he punished with single-minded lust, James was nasty or imperious to everyone else in the drama.

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A sweet restorative

THEATRE REVIEW
PETER PEGNALL

Samuel Beckett narrowed himself down until, like the rest of the human race, he entered the silence. His writing evolved from the grand pyrotechnics of *More Pricks than Kicks* and *Whoroscope* to the mathematical white space of *Lessness* and the indignant, gaping shriek of *No! I*. His genius is a triumph of restraint or delivery of tone. I still wince from her grotesquely melodramatic reading of T S Eliot's "Waste Land", delivered without a hint of irony, tenderness or the still, sad music of humanity. Think of Peggy Ashcroft and weep, said my unfair, inner voice.

Within minutes, I relented: this was a mélange of charm, tact, sinuey anguish and exquisitely self-deprecating humour. The audience fell in love with her, as she loved the text. Her performance made the play feel too short, a true refuge even as it realised a circle of hell. How on earth a woman buried up to her neck can be sexy is beyond me. But she was, even as she stepped out of her hole and wincingly acknowledged the sadness of applause. In a touch of delightful humility, she patted the mound in which she'd been planted, a tribute to the theatrical splendour of the dead, but oh-so-living master.

My favourite moments were probably when Winnie half-recalled lines from great poetry and drama, possibly because I'd own up to similar inept enthusiasm and dependence. "That is what I find wonderful, a part remains, of one's classics, to help one through the day."

But the frail, incisive repetition of the title phrase "this day" will have been another happy day "comes close to perfection. In any event, to cherry pick is to be ungrateful, since

waited to witness Fiona Shaw's performance at the National's Lyttelton Theatre. She is an actor of verve, fire and energy, but scarcely noted for restraint or delivery of tone. I still wince from her grotesquely melodramatic reading of T S Eliot's "Waste Land", delivered without a hint of irony, tenderness or the still, sad music of humanity. Think of Peggy Ashcroft and weep, said my unfair, inner voice.

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But the frail, incisive repetition of the title phrase "this day" will have been another happy day "comes close to perfection. In any event, to cherry pick is to be ungrateful, since

there was not a syllable or sound or facial or ocular muscle, reaches communion in the best way possible: an act of imagination. Willie's devotion brings us to the utterly unpredictable final tableau. Willie, dressed to kill, strains every current of himself towards his estranged wife. And she responds by singing a musical box tune.

Every touch of fingers Tells me what I know, Says for you, It's true, it's true, You love me so!

The sentimentality of the song conveys and enchants largely because the play has been so unremotely real, so firmly located in life's minutiae. This vulnerable, solitary woman, who cannot sleep, make love, or move, except through facial and ocular muscles, reaches communion in the best way possible: an act of imagination. Willie's devotion brings us to the utterly unpredictable final tableau. Willie, dressed to kill, strains every current of himself towards his estranged wife. And she responds by singing a musical box tune.

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