



CHESTER FILM SOCIETY PRESENTS:

AFTER THE WEDDING

2006 DENMARK 124 MINUTES

Directed by Susanne Bier

Starring Mads Mikkelsen

On the one hand, it's high-end soap opera. We don't come into the film expecting as much, since *After the Wedding* is helmed by a director with Dogme creds and promises Danish gloom. But like Susanne Bier's previous *Open Hearts* and *Brothers*, *Wedding* works up the suds with an over-the-moon high concept. At the same time, the film generates such visceral heat, the whole notion of genre becomes irrelevant.

The Danish Jacob (Mads Mikkelsen) has found his niche in life working in an orphanage in India. As always, the orphanage lacks funds, and he's contacted about a large donation from a Danish benefactor. But to claim the money, Jacob must travel to Denmark and sign the papers in person, a journey he bitterly resists, claiming to hate the values of that wealthier part of the globe.

Well, it turns out Jorgen, his benefactor (Rolf Lassgård), has more than just a professional transaction in mind: He draws the wary Jacob into his family circle, inviting him to lunch, then the wedding of his daughter Anna (Stine Fischer Christensen). At the wedding Jacob recognizes Helene, Jorgen's wife (Sidse Babett Knudsen), who, as it happens, was the love of his youth--and yes, it's no spoiler to reveal that Anna is in fact Jacob's daughter. Tension gathers around the mystery of Jorgen's grand design, which only stands revealed after we learn that he's mortally sick.

What almost masks the contrivances of the plot is the magnificent acting the fearless Biers has pulled from her cast. Jorgen first comes across as a blowhard tyrant and drunk, lord of all he surveys. Then, as his health fails, he howls a harrowing aria that places him in a league with Tolstoy's Ivan Ilych, his Slavic

soul mate. Anna is suitably teary, finding a father and losing a cheatin' new husband almost on the same day. Helene remains intriguingly inscrutable, as she mentally contrasts the Jacob of her youth--hard-drinking, womanising, an ineffectual dreamer--with this more impressive, über-manly incarnation.

Forming a kind of still centre at the emotional hurricane is astonishing Mads Mikkelsen. Here is a presence that seems created for the screen. The Asiatic eyes, jutting cheekbones, faintly cruel, everted lips--an ancient golden Inuit face--mesmerize at every moment. In his very stillness Mikkelsen is heart-stopping; he need only exist for the camera to caress and devour the planes of his face like a '40s Hollywood goddess. And a good thing, too, since the character of Jacob is more acted upon than acting; it's Jorgen who gets the big dramatic arc.

Shot in Denmark and India, the film is visually sumptuous, contrasting teeming, sweaty scenes in Jacob's Indian village, first with a high-tech hotel in Copenhagen equipped with two of everything, then Jorgen's obscenely luxurious chateau and estate.

The wedding and Jorgen's birthday fete make for big set-pieces echoing Thomas Vinterberg's *The Celebration*; extreme, truncated close-ups heat up the drama. The question is left hanging: Will Anna and Jacob come back together? More interesting, perhaps, is how Biers and screenwriting partner Anders Thomas Jensen re-jigger the cliché of the wicked rich man, suggesting possibilities for goodness where it's least expected.

Erica Abeel, *Film Journal International*

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