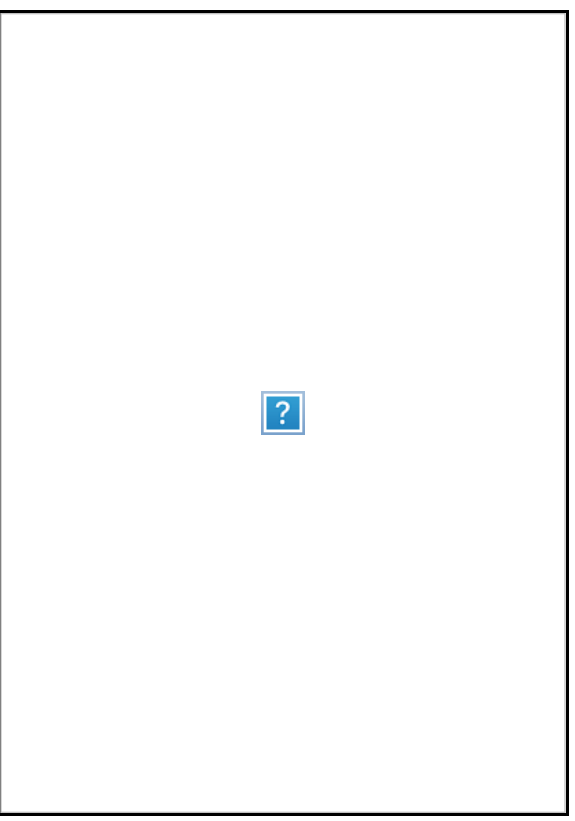




Dissecting the Miniseries: A little “Pride and Prejudice” makes the heart grow fonder

PUBLISHED ON FEBRUARY 10, 2012 BY **TOPE** IN **DISSECTING THE MINISERIES**

TAGGED: **DISSECTING THE MINISERIES, PRIDE AND PREJUDICE, SIMON LANGTON**



Pride and Prejudice

(300 minutes, 6 parts)

Directed by Simon Langton

Written by Andrew Davies

1995, UK, BBC

For someone unfamiliar with Jane Austen, it may be impossible to imagine a better advertisement for her best-known work than this 1995 BBC adaptation of that 1813 novel. In the world of literary adaptations, *Pride and Prejudice* is one hell of a flogged horse. Forgetting the more obvious screen translations dating

back to 1940, such as the 2009 Keira Knightley vehicle, films like *Bridget Jones's Diary* and even those constituting the *Twilight* series are indebted to Austen's text and have re-popularised the appeal of the 'smouldering romance'. Yet having seen this 6-part miniseries, perhaps this horse took its last great breath in the mid-90s.

Pride and Prejudice explores 19th century English society as exemplified by the callous game of love, romance and marriage. When a wealthy aristocrat, Mr Bingley, acquires a countryside property and relocates there with a small posse of friends and family, the Bennets who live nearby see this as an opportunity to start the ball rolling on marrying-off their five daughters of whom Elizabeth "Lizzie", the protagonist, is the second oldest. At a ball held in the Bingley residence Jane Bennet, the eldest of the daughters, embarks upon a darling romance with Mr Bingley himself. Lizzie becomes acquainted with the aloof and arrogant Mr Darcy, of whom she greatly disapproves and who, she learns, is even wealthier than his friend Bingley. From here on in Lizzie and her family are embroiled, for better *and* for worse, in the aforementioned game.

While much is made – in popular culture – of the heady, brooding love affair between Lizzie Bennet and the ubiquitous Mr Darcy, there is more to the tale than two lovers kept apart by haughty repression. It is a tale about *society* and those on the verge of being inducted into it, those well within it, and those clinging dearly to it. It is about gender and class and the perils of challenging one's role and position in both. But most importantly it seems to be about the battle between the irrational and the "commonsensical", the desire for love versus the desire for a respectable place in society. Accordingly, Lizzie and Darcy's disdain for the fickleness of love will be challenged by their realising the fickleness of the social mores they try so hard to respect and observe.

Considering period pieces have a disappointing tendency to be overly mannered and overly pretty in the name of accuracy or believability, there is something very refreshing about the dynamism of this series' sense of tone, credit to director Simon Langton. While it is often faithful to prevailing impressions of the conservatism and affectedness of the time, scenes which require energy are invested with energy. Ballroom scenes are seldom livelier and vibrant than they are here. Banter is appropriately engaging, and *fun*. Mood navigates deftly between the light and the heavy whilst maintaining the lightly satiric touch fans of Austen often cite as being appealing to modern tastes. Andrew Davies' dialogue, which likely paraphrases source text, is relentlessly proper, relentlessly witty, and spoken with a stagey naturalism by the wonderful cast. Refreshing, too, is this miniseries' embrace of the cinematic. Being a critique of behaviour, airs and manners, a great deal is told visually though there are moments of quasi-soliloquy that seem a little odd. *Pride* has none of the stuffiness of unambitious television, the rigid boxy images and the low-rent aesthetics – this is a richly-told drama, shot largely on location, unobtrusively scored, expertly costumed. Pretty but not excessively so.

Jennifer Ehle as Lizzie is a charming protagonist. Opinionated, headstrong and somewhat free-spirited, it is clear why Mr Darcy would find her fascinating. A dapper Colin Firth, in a much fantasised-over role, imbues Darcy with a certain ambiguity. It is not clear whether he is aloof or shy, whether he is arrogant or overly modest, and one cannot be entirely certain the exact moment his feelings for Lizzie are ignited. Alison Steadman might at times overdo the hysterics of Mrs Bennet, a devotee of social ascent and prestige, but her mania is moderated by Benjamin Whithrow's gently mocking Mr Bennet. And while the romance between Bingley and Jane is sweet and tenderly portrayed, it pales in comparison to the non-romance between Lizzie and Darcy, perhaps by intention. Julia Sawalha as Lydia the youngest Bennet is disturbingly apt as a boisterous nymphette, as is Adrian Lukis, who plays the unassumingly amoral soldier Wickham.

There must be something about slow-burn passion and undulant desire that excites the viscera timelessly. What mode of motion picture would hence be better suited to portraying the turbulent voyage of reluctant love than a 5 hour miniseries, considering a 1.5 hour adaptation by Rainer Werner Fassbinder will never happen. Part of the success of this adaptation is undeniably linked to its length, which allows for a patiently visual approach and the freedom to indulge in the richness and breadth of the narrative without coming across as overstuffed. Thankfully, social study needs not take a backseat to romance, seeing as the power of the romance lies in our study of the social.

- Tope



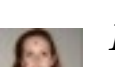
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Tope says:

February 11, 2012 at 10:45 pm

Thanks, Kate. I agree, I want Ehle to be my voice coach. I was actually very close to leaving this off my list; have never been a fan of so-called costume dramas/period pieces. But when I rewatched Barry Lyndon I changed my mind and decided to see this amazing piece of work (so Stainedslaved, don't feel too bad. But do see it if you can dig up those 5 hours)

Reply



Kate Kulzick says:

February 11, 2012 at 2:45 pm

Nice review! I love this miniseries and have watched it more than I care to admit (though usually in a "Good Parts" viewing- I skip Wickham entirely! And most of Lydia. Also significant chunks of Caroline Bingley. They're written and played perhaps too well- they drive me freaking nuts!). Ehle and Firth are the standouts, like you said. Firth manages to make Darcy both aloof and disdainful while simultaneously utterly awkward and nervous. He captures the contradiction of the character that is at the heart of the entire novel. As for Ehle, she's a wonderful Lizzie and my sister and I to this day use her inflection whenever describing something/one as "tolerable". Great pick!

Reply



Stainedslaved says:

February 11, 2012 at 2:07 pm

Haha, oh man I knew you were going to start with this. I've seen quite a bit of mini-series in my day but "Pride" is easily the most well known and highly regarded one that I, for whatever reason, have not gotten around to watching yet. Perhaps if I find 5 hours needing to be killed this weekend I'll correct that.

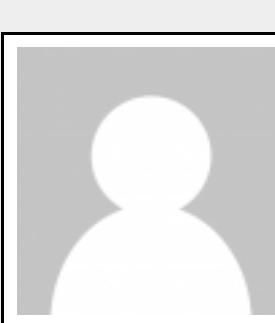
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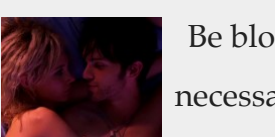
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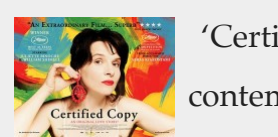


Nigerian-Australian Sydney-based med student, film enthusiast and fledgling writer. Also a soccer fan and filmmaker in-utero.

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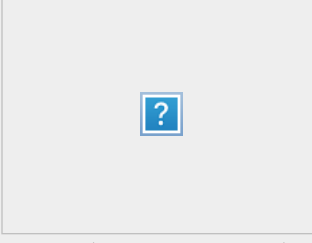
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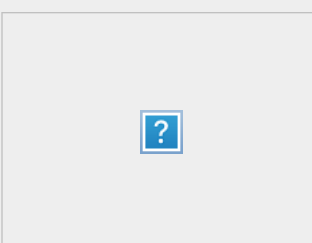
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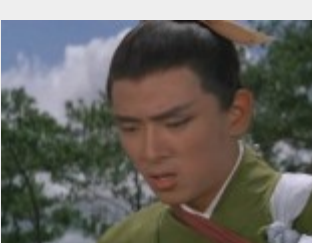
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