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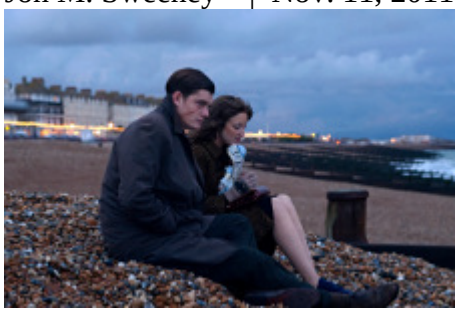
ëBrighton Rockí remake takes on Greeneís study of evil

Jon M. Sweeney | Nov. 11, 2011



Sam Riley and Andrea Riseborough star with Helen Mirren in "Brighton Rock." (IFC Films)

From the ominous, opening foghorn, ?Brighton Rock? is dark and foreboding. It is supposed to be. Rowan Joffe directs his own script, adapted from the Graham Greene novel of the same name, in this remake of the classic noir crime film.

The story centers around the character of Pinkie Brown (Sam Riley), a rail-thin gangster who doesn?t just happen to be Catholic; being Catholic is central to his understanding and perpetrating of evil. He?s a menacing thug who has lost his father figure, the leader of his gang, murdered by a member of a rival gang. Pinkie is coping with this but also with the ramifications of his revenge murder of the murderer.

Pinkie?s facial expressions are a mix of the vacancy one associates with sociopaths and a sneer. Once the revenge murder is done, the three other members of the gang insist that Pinkie obtain the only evidence that could link them to it: a photograph taken on the boardwalk by an innocent vendor, given to an innocent girl. Pinkie befriends the girl, Rose (Andrea Riseborough), and obtains the photo, only to realize she already knows too much. So, he woos her. He courts her. The audience can plainly and painfully see that Pinkie despises her, is only using her, but Rose, innocent as she is, believes him.

?I love you, Pinkie. I would do anything for you,? she writes to him one day on a postcard -- to his disguised disgust. He almost tears the card in two and tosses it into the waves of the roaring sea, until he realizes that the sentiment might later be of some use.

They are both Catholics. ?I?m a Roman, too,? Pinkie tells Rose on their first date. ?I used to be in the choir.?

?Do you go to Mass?? she asks him.

He shakes his head.

?But you believe?? she asks.

?Course I do,? he says. ?It?s the only thing that makes any sense.? And then he tells her that hell and damnation are what makes the most sense to him of all.

Ida (Helen Mirren) is a waitress in the novel but a manager of waitresses in the film, and dedicates herself to punishing Pinkie for the murder. The man Pinkie murdered was a friend of hers. Ida is far more promiscuous in the novel than in this film; Joffe has made her secularly respectable whereas Greene made her only spiritually so. And Ida?s secular religious view, central to the original story, is lost here. The narrator of the novel tells us that Ida and Pinkie have different views of death and life: ?Death shocked her, life was so important. She wasn?t religious. She didn?t believe in heaven or hell. ? Let Papists treat death with flippancy: life wasn?t so important perhaps to them as what came after; but to her death was the end of everything.? Pinkie, the killer, was just such a Papist. He committed a mortal sin and knew it. Ida knows it, too, but there seems to be nothing she can do about it.

In his efforts to keep Rose quiet, Pinkie is soon negotiating with her father, a despicable man, to marry her. He ends up paying the old man 150 quid. At least her father looks shamed as he counts the dough as Rose looks from the hallway. Pinkie and Rose marry, but not sacramentally. No priest, no Mass.

?I was late because I went to church,? she tells him as she rushes into the courthouse, ?to ask forgiveness.?

Pinkie takes Rose aside -- with kindness or menace, it is tough to tell -- and says, ?You?ve got to understand: This isn?t a real ceremony. This is sin, Rose, mortal sin. There?ll be no good going to a church ever again.? As they wed, Rose stands before a window with a ray of light upon her; Pinkie is all in the shadows.

The screenplay follows the plot of the novel fairly closely, and it resembles the legendary 1947 film (cowritten by Greene himself). Joffe, however, decided to change the setting to 1964, rather than the years between the wars. This allows him to bring hippies and 1960s craziness into the story, as well as a toss-off line from Ida to Rose about hoping that Rose is on ?the pill.? Greene would have liked that.

Ultimately, there?s little religion in Joffe?s film, far less than in the novel. What for Greene was a story about the possibility of love coexisting with evil becomes, for Joffe, an anti-love story. A moment when Pinkie attempts to pray while being hunted by members of the rival gang is shortchanged to the point of being confusing, and other religious elements are only hinted at, never explored. But in the hands of John Mathieson (?Gladiator,? ?The Phantom of the Opera?), the cinematography is gorgeous. And the soundtrack, created by Martin Phipps (?Harry Brown?), will remind some of ?The Da Vinci Code? or ?Angels & Demons,? with its alternating silences followed by soaring voices and strings.

I regretted the absence of religious themes in the film and urge you to read the novel before watching it. The first and most important theme is evil -- its real existence, and the notion that only those who believe are able to truly perpetuate it. A Catholic can perpetrate evil far more effectively than a non-Catholic, so clear is the teaching of the church on the subject of sin. So accountability is conjoined with evil.

The second religious theme is the notion that there is some goodness -- what a theologian might call evidence of the Imago Dei -- in all of us. Even in Pinkie? Joffe mostly loses this theme; perhaps he was attempting to create a less Catholic picture.

You may remember the most quotable line from the novel, spoken by the priest who hears Rose?s confession (although she claims that she didn?t come to confess anything). She claims not to be worried about damnation or the future. He nevertheless offers her hope: ?You can?t conceive, my child -- nor can I or anyone -- the appalling strangeness of the mercy of God.? The line is here in the film, as well, only without much of the context that gives it sense.

I shouldn?t tell you how it all ends, but let it suffice to say that this excellent remake ends just as the 1947

version did, with a final scene that famously alters the ending of the novel. As the camera affixes upon a crucifix hanging on the wall, Rose plays a recording of Pinkie?s voice, a recording that he made in a private booth along the boardwalk, after Rose urged him to ?tell her something.? She wanted to know that Pinkie loved her but what he really recorded was something awful. As Rose plays it back after his death, something happens -- a fluke, really -- that leaves her with hope that there is good in her love. Indeed, there is good in all of us, and forgiveness is possible, even (or especially?) for those who seem most willing to be damned.

[Jon M. Sweeney is a frequent contributor to *America* and the author of many books, including *The Pope Who Quit: A True Medieval Tale of Mystery, Death, and Salvation*, forthcoming from Image Books in March 2012.]

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