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Lone Scherfig in Chicago (10/11/09)

The real title of this post is: “When Bad Marketing Happens to Good Movies...”

I saw *An Education* for the first time at a Chicago critics screening on Friday August 28 from 1 to 3 PM. Typically (for me), I went in knowing very little about it. I knew it was directed by Lone Scherfig, and I knew I had greatly enjoyed *Italian for Beginners* (one of her earlier films), although I thought her next film, *Wilbur Wants to Kill Himself*, was just OK. I knew Nick Hornby had written the screenplay, but he hadn't written a screenplay since *Fever Pitch* in 1997. Most important, though, I knew absolutely nothing about Lynn Barber; I didn't even recognize the name.

But I was immediately entranced by *An Education*, and by the second hour, I was totally in love with it. There is a little coda at the very end, but the last substantive scene has “Jenny” (Carey Mulligan) making a visit to her teacher “Miss Stubbs” (Olivia Williams). I'm going to be oblique here because it's quite possible you haven't seen *An Education* yet, but suffice it to say that by the time Miss Stubbs had said her final line of dialogue, tears were streaming down my cheeks.

Since most Chicago film critics are guys, the Ladies Room adjacent to the Lake Street Screening Room is typically a very lonely place. But on 8/28, another woman (the spouse of one of my colleagues) walked in and caught me trying to put my face back together. She smiled knowingly and said: “I'll be very interested to read what women film critics have to say about this film.” I kinda sorta blubbered “I loved it!,” and then we both went our separate ways.

Three Cheers for An Education!!!

I knew Lone Scherfig was on her way to Chicago in October to screen *An Education* at our 45th annual Chicago International Film Festival, so I immediately contacted the appropriate publicist and began planning a reception for her. She arrived on Sunday October 11. The reception was lovely, and afterwards our whole group went to the screening. So that was the second time I saw *An Education*, and I loved it even more the second time.

The next morning, I met with Lone for a private one-on-one interview at the Park Hyatt Hotel. By that time I'd read Lynn Barber's brief memoir and several of her more recent articles, and I'd also acquired a copy of Hornby's screenplay. So I felt totally prepared, and even though we only had 30 minutes together, we were able to dig right in. I told Lone when I left that I was absolutely certain that *An Education* would receive at least two Oscar nominations: Carey Mulligan would be nominated for Best Actress and Nick Hornby would be nominated for Best Adapted Screenplay. She made a dismissive gesture, we shook hands, I left, and she did her next interview.

I'd actually said the very same thing at the reception to Producer Jim Stern (CEO of Endgame Entertainment). "Two for sure," I'd insisted. "And maybe you'll even get more!" Jim's reply was a "From your mouth to God's ear" gesture. And yesterday it happened: *An Education* received three nominations for Best Actress, Best Adapted Screenplay, and, oh wow, Best Picture too!

But I'm writing now to say two things. First, the past few months have been filled with anxiety because box office has been abysmal (in fact, at \$8.8 million, *An Education* is at the very bottom of the list of ten contenders). Second, *An Education* now has a chance at one win, but only if distributors immediately change their marketing strategy. As Scott Bowles said in today's *USA Today*: "Not many have seen the film... Oscar voters like to know they have some public support."

OK, cards on the table: Carey Mulligan has no chance of an Oscar for Best Actress and *An Education* has no chance of an Oscar for Best Picture, but Best Adapted Screenplay is actually a pretty wide open race and I for one sincerely believe that *An Education* is, in fact, the best candidate in this category. Am I dreaming? Read on.

The assumption is that Jason Reitman's *Up In The Air* screenplay already has a lock, but there's actually an untapped well of female resistance. Just like the African American community was galvanized once Barack Obama became a serious candidate for President, I believe women are now galvanized by the fact that Kathryn Bigelow is suddenly the front runner in the Best Director race. But the fact that *The Hurt Locker* has been categorized as "a guy's movie," means that there's female energy to spare.

So I urge the distributors to do a 180 degree turn while there's still time. They made the mistake of marketing *An Education* as a romance, with pretty pictures of Jenny and "David" (Peter Sarsgaard), but all that did was make most women queasy. Most women today simply refuse to believe that a man in his late 30s should be allowed to "romance"

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a 16 year old girl, and it didn't help that *An Education* was actually released into theatres at the peak of the Roman Polanski brouhaha.

Hornby's brilliant screenplay opens with Miss Stubbs, closes with Miss Stubbs, and has Miss Stubbs mention the name "Mr. Rochester" (of *Jane Eyre* fame) **THREE TIMES** in between, so shame on anyone who's surprised to learn that David "has secrets" in Act Three!!! Put your faith in Miss Stubbs, as Jenny learns to do, and you just might have a happy ending!

And oh by the way, win or lose, these three nominations should start everyone thinking about a sequel. Lynn Barber has recently published an expanded version of her original *Granta* piece, so there's more than enough source material for *An Education Part Two: Jenny's Profession*.

Believe me, folks, I am totally serious about this. Strike while the iron is hot. Nothing ventured, nothing gained ☺

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PS: Yes, I am the same person who took flack when I nominated *Up In The Air* for the Women Film Critics Circle's "Hall of Shame Award," but you don't have to take my word for this. Here are two sample comments from Jill Dolan's Blog *The Feminist Spectator* (<http://feministspectator.blogspot.com>):

"Our reaction was to feel that the film had done a disservice to Alex (Vera Farmiga)... It felt false, as if something in her character were being sacrificed in order for his to be perfectly stranded in its alienation in the end. The film may not judge Alex, but it doesn't quite do right by her either, does it?"

"Re Alex... The more I think about her character, the more it seems she's been sold out, or conceived really only as a foil for the Bingham character... It's a shame that *Up In The Air* couldn't take its intriguing ideas further, and had to capitulate to convention and sell out a really interesting female character, in the bargain."

Here is the link to my review of *An Education* on the WomenArts website:

<http://www.womenarts.org/reviews/AnEducation.htm>

Here is the link to my chat with Director Lone Scherfig on *Films for Two*:

<http://www.films42.com/chats/LoneScherfig.asp>