

A ROOM WITH A VIEW

Origin: Great Britain

Released: 1986

Released in U.S.: 1986

Production: Ismail Merchant for Goldcrest Films; released by Cinecom International

Direction: James Ivory

Screenplay: Ruth Praver Jhabvala (AA); based on the novel of the same name by E. M. Forster

Cinematography: Tony Pierce-Roberts

Editing: Humphrey Dixon

Art direction: Gianni Quaranta and Brian Ackland-Snow (AA)

Costume design: Jenny Beavan and John Bright (AA)

Music: Richard Robbins

MPAA rating: no listing

Running time: 110 minutes

Principal characters:

Charlotte Bartlett	Maggie Smith
Lucy Honeychurch	Helena Bonham Carter
Mr. Emerson	Denholm Elliott
George Emerson	Julian Sands
Cecil Vyse	Daniel Day-Lewis
The Reverend Beebe	Simon Callow
Miss Lavish	Judi Dench
Mrs. Honeychurch	Rosemary Leach
Freddy Honeychurch	Rupert Graves
Mr. Eager	Patrick Godfrey
Catherine Alan	Joan Henley
Mrs. Vyse	Maria Britneva
Cockney signora	Amanda Walker
Sir Harry Otway	Peter Cellier

A Room with a View follows *A Passage to India* (1985) as the second of E. M. Forster's novels to be adapted for the screen in as many years. The book draws on Forster's keen observations of the behavior of Englishmen abroad—knowledge gathered during his own travels on the Continent as a young man and put to good use in his deliciously ironic portrait of his fellow countrymen setting out warily in pursuit of local color with their guidebooks clutched firmly in their hands.

Happily, the novel's translation to the screen has been overseen by the skilled team of director James Ivory, producer Ismail Merchant, and writer

Ruth Praver Jhabvala, a trio whose combined talents seem uniquely suited to the task. Since the 1960's, the three have collaborated on a number of exquisitely crafted films (*Shakespeare Wallah*, 1965; *The Europeans*, 1979; *Heat and Dust*, 1982; *The Bostonians*, 1984) which deal with the subtle shadings of cultural and ideological conflicts—the heart and soul of Forster's story and a theme easily mangled by less experienced hands. *A Room with a View* has enjoyed a degree of popularity unequaled by any of the trio's earlier films, and its enthusiastic reception was highlighted by its eight Academy Award nominations. In addition to its three Oscars for Screenplay Adaptation, Art Direction, and Costume Design, the film was nominated for Best Picture, Best Director, Best Cinematography, and Best Supporting Actor (Denholm Elliott) and Actress (Maggie Smith).

Ultimately, *A Room with a View* is a love story, but one in which the obstacles standing in the way of the heroine's happiness are largely those she places there herself. The film opens in Florence as Lucy Honeychurch (Helena Bonham Carter) and her spinsterish cousin and chaperon, Charlotte Bartlett (Maggie Smith), arrive at a pensione and are disappointed to discover that their rooms do not have the promised view of the city. At dinner that evening, an eccentric Englishman, Mr. Emerson (Denholm Elliott), and his son, George (Julian Sands), offer to trade rooms with the two women—a proposition which horrifies Charlotte until she is persuaded to accept by the Reverend Beebe (Simon Callow).

Charlotte strikes up a friendship with another of the pensione's guests, Miss Lavish (Judi Dench), a novelist who sets off in search of the local sights with Charlotte in tow, leaving Lucy to explore Florence on her own. Lucy's wanderings bring her to the site of a violent street fight, where she faints and is assisted by George Emerson. The experience is cataclysmic for both of them, and, during a picnic the following day, George impulsively kisses Lucy in a field of tall grass. Charlotte witnesses the embrace and promptly nips the romance in the bud.

Safely back in England with her mother (Rosemary Leach) and her lively younger brother, Freddy (Rupert Graves), Lucy becomes engaged to the stuffy Cecil Vyse (Daniel-Day Lewis), a man as prim and pompous as George Emerson was open and spontaneous. Unbeknown to Lucy, however, Cecil has made the acquaintance of Mr. Emerson and George and, knowing nothing of his fiancée's encounter with them in Italy, has arranged for them to rent a local house. George and Freddy quickly become friends, and Lucy finds herself once again thrown into George's company.

It is soon clear that George's feelings remain unchanged—a situation made more difficult for Lucy by the arrival of Charlotte and the revelation that her cousin has described the kiss in the field to Miss Lavish, who has included the incident in her latest novel. When George confronts Lucy with his feelings (this time in Charlotte's presence), telling her that Cecil neither

loves nor understands her, she orders him away. That night, however, she breaks off her engagement with Cecil and decides that she must leave England before word of the rift becomes widely known.

The Emersons, too, are planning to leave now that George's hopes regarding Lucy are gone. Charlotte realizes, however, that her earlier meddling has been a mistake, and she arranges for Lucy to meet with Mr. Emerson, who is distraught over his son's unhappiness. The older man's simplicity and honesty force Lucy to face the truth, and she at last admits to her love for George, the depth of her feelings written clearly on her radiant face. The film ends with George and Lucy—now husband and wife—back at the pensione in Florence, embracing at the window of their room with a view.

The premise for *A Room with a View* is set forth early in the film by the Reverend Beebe, who, as he listens to Lucy's passionate interpretation of a piece by Ludwig van Beethoven on the piano, comments, "If Miss Honeychurch ever takes to live as she plays, it will be very exciting . . . both for us and for her." The question of whether Lucy will indeed ever live as she plays—that is, trust to her emotions and instincts—becomes the film's central dramatic conflict, with George Emerson representing the possibilities of that choice and Cecil Vyse the barrenness of a life without passion or depth of feeling. Lucy is at her most engaging in the presence of George Emerson, drawn to him by inclination yet driven toward Cecil by social convention and her own sense of panic. There is a sulky, impatient side to her personality that is partly residual adolescent discontentment and partly the frustrated yearnings of a young woman whose potential is as yet unrealized. As the film progresses, she becomes more and more deceitful (a fact amusingly emphasized by descriptive title cards introducing various segments of the story) the further she moves from accepting George and, hence, herself.

In sharp contrast to Lucy's confusion and avoidance of the truth are the Emersons themselves, a father and son wholly unconcerned with social façades and interested solely in finding truth in their lives. For George, who has shaped the food on his plate into a giant question mark when Lucy first meets him, life is meaningless until his encounter with her. Mr. Emerson has taught his son to trust to the power of love, and this George does, without regard for Lucy's disavowal of her own feelings or her engagement to Cecil. The uncomplicated nature of his love for Lucy both baffles and frustrates her, admitting as it does none of the barriers she has erected between them. Like his son, Mr. Emerson is open and straightforward by nature, good-hearted, wise, and incapable of deception. It is his honesty that finally breaches Lucy's defenses and shows her a picture of herself that shatters her view of her own actions. Upon hearing Lucy's unhappy argument that she cannot possibly tell her family that she has always secretly loved George because they trust her, Mr. Emerson responds, "Why should they when you've

deceived everyone?" It is a statement which shakes her perceptions to their core and frees her at last to follow her heart.

Cecil Vyse, too, is uncomplicated, but in quite another fashion. He is the epitome of bourgeois convention, regarding Lucy as an ornament with which to decorate his life, and his air of fussy self-satisfaction annoys her even before George's reappearance. Yet Cecil is a figure of amusement, not a villain, and his thoughtful, stricken reaction to Lucy's decision not to marry him brings out a finer side to his nature than he has hitherto seemed to possess. Day-Lewis' performance is one of the film's best, and a comparison of his work here with his portrayal of a homosexual street punk in another of the year's most intriguing films, *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985; reviewed in this volume), shows him to be a young actor of exceptional versatility.

The central cast of characters is rounded out by Charlotte Bartlett, or "poor Charlotte," as Mrs. Honeychurch often calls her. Unmarried and spinsterish in her manner, Charlotte represents the repression of all the joys that life with George holds for Lucy, and Smith's performance captures each nuance of Charlotte's flustered, slightly martyred air. Yet Charlotte is also well meaning and capable, finally, of helping the young couple, an action that earns for her a friendly letter from Lucy when she and George arrive in Florence near the story's conclusion. The resulting scene is one of the film's most poignant, as Charlotte reads the letter alone in bed and muses on their happiness with an expression of wistful longing.

Lucy Honeychurch's story is that of a young woman's gradual awakening to the joys of a life lived in harmony with one's own nature, and it is Italy which first stirs that knowledge in her. There is a voluptuous beauty to the country as it is depicted in the film, and a sense of passions given free rein, which affect the sensibilities of the British guests at the pensione in very individual ways. For Charlotte, the atmosphere of the country is unsettling and vaguely dangerous—an invitation to relax the standards of behavior that govern one's life at home. Lucy, however, hears an answering chord in her own character and has her life changed by her stay.

Ivory's films excel at conveying atmosphere and mood, and *A Room with a View* is beautifully photographed with an eye to details which serve to evoke a stunning portrait of a very particular place and time. The film's lush depiction of Florence and the surrounding countryside helps to create a palpable sense of the culture shock experienced by the story's characters—a crucial step in understanding the forces at work in Lucy's life. The depiction of England is no less lovely, but the element of passion is lacking, and the languorous beauty and spontaneous violence which first draw George and Lucy together would seem out of place in its gardens and country lanes. It is these details which give the film its depth and subtlety, presented as they are as part of the story's fabric and never spelled out or overemphasized.

A Room with a View is a film of wit and intelligence, and it is one which refuses to underestimate the intelligence of its audience as well. From the ironic humor of its title cards to its carefully shaded performances, the film allows the comedy innate in human foibles to unfold in an unforced, unhurried manner. Humor which grows naturally from character and character interaction is a refreshing alternative to the broadside style of many current comedies, and *A Room with a View* emerges as one of the year's unexpected cinematic delights: a splendid, sophisticated film and a remarkable achievement among literary adaptations.

Janet E. Lorenz

Reviews

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