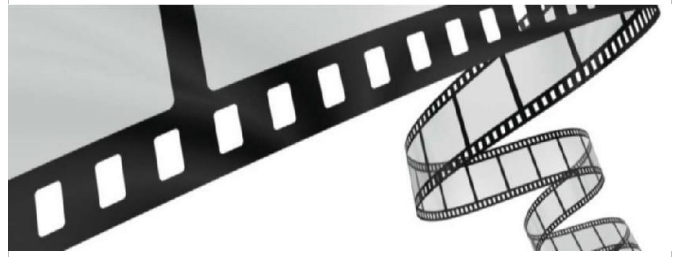


CHELMSFORD FILM CLUB

An Independent film society based in Chelmsford

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THE THIRD WIFE

(Monday 3 February 2020 - 97 mins.)

Dir: Ash Mayfair

This film invites us into a broken world of arranged marriage and patriarchy in 19th-century Vietnam. In her impressive feature film debut, writer/director Ash Mayfair doesn't parade us with profound tragedy and hardship: rather she takes difficult subject matters and embellishes them with tranquil shots and dialogue, creating a paradoxical world that is worth immersing in.

Maybe Ash gets a bit too poetical? But she manages to create a harrowing tale of a teenager who learns of the very few options and possibilities available in her life: of gender roles, suppressed emotions and strict rules, which permeate the characters with a sense of grief. A small world, but one resonating with us as it conveys issues that still exist today.

The film opens with a shot of May (Nguyen Phong Tra My), a 14 -years-old girl on her way to marry a wealthy landowner, Hung (Long Le Vu). She will be his third wife. The two senior wives, Ha (Tran Nu Yen The) and Xuan (Mai The Huong Maya) welcome her and school and guide her with sisterly affection. The hope is that May will be able to provide a son for the family - something that will create a solid status for herself. It's really the only thing that will define her and her fate. Xuan, who has three daughters, holds lower status than Ha, who has a son. As May watches how status is manifested in the dynamics that run through their household, she quickly hopes and prays for a boy when she becomes pregnant herself.

As her social life primarily revolves around the women in the house, May witnesses an affair, loss, and her own sexual awakening. There's solidarity along with quiet rivalry among the wives: through them May learns the searing consequences of being a woman in her society. She observes a woman who is subjected to higher ramifications when she and her partner are punished for an extramarital pregnancy. As May is about to give birth, she also witnesses a new bride being punished for an unconsummated marriage for which the groom was responsible.

Surrounded by beautiful nature, May's marriage and home lie by the valley. Mayfair takes full advantage of this, crafting a beautiful world full of wealth and productivity, suffocated by patriarchal rules and systems. We often see May basking in her privileged life, but ultimately, we are forced to realise that it is a very small world with little or no options. Mayfair does this without melodrama or trauma, but by the end of the film we can realise the gravity of the situation facing the women involved, and all against the backdrop of ravishing cinematography.

(Based on a review by Janet Lee. More can be found on the 'Film Inquiry' website)

Our next screening: CAPERNAUM (121 mins.) on Tuesday 25 February. We hope to hold a second 'Discussion Evening' after the film on 20 May: members and guests attending will be most welcome to stay behind to join in.