

‘The Peasants’ Review: A Painterly Polish Tale

This visually stunning film, animated using oil paintings, adapts Nobel-winner Władysław Reymont’s novel about a young woman in 19th-century Poland and the feuding men who desire her.

By Kyle Smith

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A scene from ‘The Peasants’ PHOTO: SONY PICTURES CLASSICS

In 19th-century Poland, the custom when proposing marriage is to seal the deal with a toast: Vodka is sent to the lady whose hand is being sought and her family. In the extraordinary animated feature for adults “The Peasants,” the most enchanting girl in the village is Jagna, who attracts the attention of the most prosperous farmer around. When he has the mayor bring vodka to her, however, she takes a sip, then spills the glass. What’s Polish for “Uh-oh”?

This gorgeous film is based on a novel published in parts between 1904 and 1909 by Władysław Reymont, who was later awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature largely for this gargantuan book. It was written and directed by a husband-and-wife pair, Hugh (who is British) and DK (who is Polish) Welchman. They created a mesmerizing and unusual style by photographing the actors in live action and then presiding over a team that fashioned several oil paintings per second to

correspond to the images. They have partially filled in the gaps between paintings digitally but have also left the completed product a bit jumpy, like stop-motion, to draw attention to the artifice. The effect is stunning: Virtually every frame of the film looks like an exquisitely rendered tableau, sometimes seemingly alluding to great artists such as Jean-François Millet or Vincent van Gogh (the subject of the Welchmans' previous film "Loving Vincent," which featured the same style of animation). The picture immerses viewers in traditional Polish cultural activities alien to most of us—charming wedding rituals, raucous dances, a funeral, and a night of revelry in which men frolic while wearing gigantic simulated animal heads.



A scene from the film PHOTO: SONY PICTURES CLASSICS

The story centers on a love triangle involving the comely Jagna (voiced in Polish by Kamila Urzędowska) and the feuding men who lust after her: the domineering, cruel Boryna (Miroslaw Baka) and his headstrong, bitter adult son Antek (Robert Gulaczyk). Jagna has her pick of men around town, and being so beautiful that she makes all of the other women envious may be why she has developed a reputation for being a “hussy,” as someone calls her. Yet she doesn’t do herself any favors by having an affair with Antek, who is married, incurring the wrath of his wife, Hanka (Sonia Mietielica). Still, to please her mother, who negotiates a deal that wins the girl six acres of prime land, she lets herself be nudged into a loveless marriage to Boryna, a widower who is elderly by the standards of the time and perhaps won’t live much longer. “God did not create you to be poor,” her mother tells her.

The match doesn't change anything for her; she still longs for Antek. "You are like holy soil that brings life," he tells her. Perhaps not every girl wants to be compared to dirt, yet in context the remark is high praise. Land is the most valuable asset in these parts, and Jagna represents vigorous, blossoming fertility. Over the course of the movie she gets compared to soil several times, and even finds herself wearing it on occasion. At a moment when his affection for her is at a low ebb, Antek says, "I care for her as much as I care for dirt." But he cares a great deal for dirt; all of the men want to possess her as surely as they want to control the ground they live on. And like dirt she strikes them as something they can tread upon.



Antek (voiced by Robert Gulaczyk) PHOTO: SONY PICTURES CLASSICS

The film is divided into the four seasons, whose rhythms seem partly to guide the actions of the villagers. Yet the most overpowering force of nature is Jagna's allure. Her looks seem to activate the least attractive and craziest impulses in the men and women around her. Only by acting with perfect decorum can she hope to thrive, but she too is helpless to deny her own essence. Before you know it she's taking part in a robustly sensuous dance with Antek in front of the greedy eyes of the village. Boryna witnesses this as well, seethingly.

"The Peasants" is both a magnificent visual achievement and unusually bleak for an animated feature, depicting brutality and even rape. Such were the times, and so limited were the possibilities, that even the richest man in the area is seen having nothing but potatoes for dinner, and even the most desirable young woman had few options other than to be sold "like a heifer," as Jagna's

engagement is described. With its feel for both beauty and ugliness, the film transports us to this unfamiliar milieu with a richness rarely attempted in the cinema anymore.

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