

On “The Comfort of Strangers”

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They really had it going with the film “The Comfort of Strangers,” but didn’t complete the job. Great ride until the big finish—which I won’t specify but maybe you know about--and then it was as if director Paul Schrader, screenwriter Harold Pinter, and cinematographer Dante Spinelli gave it over to some film students who had been hanging around the set and went home. In any case, it was a perfunctory, artless, seemingly tossed-off last few minutes of what up to then had been a very fine film. And what a nice surprise that had been for me. I’m not a fan of Schrader’s work, which is typified by the recent sophomoric, preachy “First Reformed.” Perhaps unfairly, I’ve concluded that “The Comfort of Strangers” was good despite Schrader rather than because of him.

Watching “The Comfort of Strangers” in 2021, it hit me that art depends on the capability of its consumer to take it in. I saw the film when it was first released in 1990. Watching it in 2021, I realized how much I missed the first time around. Like the marvelous Pinter dialogue, the complex sexual subtext, the wonderful performances of Natasha Richardson and Rupert Everett (yes, Rupert Everett), and the superb cinematography of Dante Spinelli. On the other side of it, this time archetypal New Yorker Christopher Walken playing an elegant Italian gentleman--where did he get that accent?—bordered on silly, but not enough to detract from the quality of the other elements in the film.

But there is that ending that pulled the rug out from under me. The action at the center of it—I’m trying to stay away from spoilers—makes sense. The problem is in its rendering--suddenly, out of the blue, for some reason shot from the last row of the balcony, quick, get it done. And then not knowing when to end the movie. What should have been the end, a very brief exchange in that same

location in which a protagonist says a line that is in the current version, “We were going to get married,” is instead a long, wordy, anticlimactic, completely unnecessary scene in a different place. My conjecture is that only someone as insensitive as I consider Schrader to be would have thought it served the film.

But with that on the record, the point here is that despite the deflating-balloon ending, “The Comfort of Strangers” is well worth the time of serious film buffs.

Addendum: After I wrote the above comments, I read the Ian McEwan book with the same title the film was based on, and I think I understand my problem with the ending better, and why the film was fine but not *really* fine. The novel made it clear that this is a story about dark dimensions of sexuality. It was there in Pinter’s screenplay, but the actors wouldn’t or couldn’t get there, and/or they weren’t pushed in this direction enough by director Schrader. Richardson and Everett were attractive but manikin-like. Walken was menacing in a quirky but not sexual way. I don’t remember him as much as unbuttoning his suitcoat, which as the movie went on seemed to be increasingly tight around his expanding waistline. Mirren’s physical presence was sexually benign. There should have been palpable, building, sexual energy, tension, foreboding, which would have made the explosive ending a culmination, a climax if you will, rather than an add-on. One last point, the book didn’t end on time either. but that doesn’t excuse Schrader from knowing when to stop his film.