

Miss Jean Brodie

Film review

Dennis Raymond

1969

"The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie" is not a great movie, but it's an unusually good one, and maybe Maggie Smith's performance should really be called great. Her characterization is in the grand manner as modulated and controlled, and yet as flamboyant, as anything you could ever see on stage.

Miss Smith plays Jean Brodie with a relish and force and tenderness that makes her Miss Brodie ours.

And it's a tribute to Miss Smith's talent and beauty that, after many years in the movies and on stage, she has finally reached her prime as an actress of great stature and a star. She's more exciting than ever.

One of the fascinating and Unresolveable aspects of acting is the relationship between the persons of the actor and his art.

Occasionally, a role comes along that is so well suited to the personality and even the physical qualities of a particular actor that the actor becomes that role. The performer and the characterization merge as one, and each compliments the other.

And if and when this happens at some point in a career, the performer rises to public recognition and maybe even achieves "stardom."

Jeanne Moreau reached international film fame as the free, amoral Catherine of "Jules et Jim." The life of Fanny Brice became the vehicle for Barbra Streisand's talents in "Funny Girl." The cool, distant presence of Catherine Deneuve was perfectly attuned to her part in Bunuel's "Belle de Jour."

Maggie Smith is and always has been a superb film actress—limpid, lucid, compassionate, intelligent, and attractively dignified. She has generally been equal in talent and technique to what she has been asked to do.

Properly frail and delicate in "Young Cassidy," she became a strong and willful Desdemona in Laurence Olivier's film of "Othello." And, most recently, she demonstrated a delightful flair for sophisticated comedy in "Hot Millions."

But her performance in "The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie" is better than her sheer ability could make it because her person is so right for the part. After she has done all she can do with knowledge and talent, her physical presence speaks for itself.

All actresses capitalize on their looks, whether they rely as heavily on their charms as Catherine Deneuve must or whether, like Moreau and Streisand, the good looks simply serve as a charming setting for their talents.

But the effect in this film is extraordinary because of the uniquely appropriate quality of Miss Smith's beauty her sharp, distinct features; her shrill, limp voice; the easy languid way she carries herself—and the remarkable way these personal idiosyncrasies illuminate her role.

I cannot, in fact, locate the point at which her pure physical qualities take over from her conscious acting skills, but there are certain moments in this movie when the mere line of her cheek or the composure of her brow is effective for her part as Jean Brodie. It's as if Maggie Smith has been preparing for this role all her life, and everything else she's done before this has been nothing more than rehearsal.

Of course, she has been given such fine material to work with. Based upon Jay Presson Allen's stage play which was, in turn, an adaptation of the novel by Muriel Spark, Jean Brodie stands as one of the most emotionally complex and dramatically rich of all characters in contemporary literature.

An eccentric, feline spinster at Marcia Blaine School for Young Girls in Edinburgh during the 1930's, Miss Brodie inscribes her prejudices on her impressionable pupils. "I am in the business," she loftily announces, "of putting old heads on young bodies."

Her taste becomes their only guideline: "Who was the greatest Italian painter?" she asked her class.

"Leonardo da Vinci, Miss Brodie." "That is incorrect. The answer is Giotto. He is my favorite."

Her politics become their only truth: Mussolini and his fascisti offer humanity's greatest hope because "he cleaned the garbage off the Italian streets."

The real difficulty in portraying such a self-deceiving character is to make her basically likable, and Maggie Smith goes a step further by making her completely lovable. Like her adoring pupils, we look up to her with a curious mixture of awe and fascination; she is so unlike anything we have ever seen—awkwardly elegant and refined, yet so vibrant and exhilarating. And it is this love for life that Miss Smith brings with her to the screen that makes her Jean Brodie so admirable.

Directed with marvelous ease and subtlety by Ronald Neame, the movie begins somewhat shakily at first. It seems like the actors are playing to an audience, not to themselves. The stage origin of the screenplay may be the cause of this. But once underway, everything works beautifully and we can relax.

We know that these people know what they're doing and it's going to be all right. There may be mistakes, but they won't be vulgar or stupid mistakes. "The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie" is a movie with the pleasures of elegance and literacy...and a great performance.

Maggie Smith's Jean Brodie is the result of complete realization—vivacious, stylized, and so full of surprises. She is able to communicate to us through seemingly minimal effort the inner workings and tensions of her Miss Brodie.

I had forgotten just how enjoyable this kind of understanding of a character can be in a motion picture. Indeed, one of the prime pleasures of movie-going is to sample what is being offered in the art of acting.

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