

FILMS/ Robert Hatch

I don't know when the notion of bringing *The Great Gatsby* to the screen got under way, but it has arrived in the theatres on the crest of nostalgia for America of the 1920s and it will do exceedingly well. Thousands upon thousands of people who have not read the book will now see the movie and never know what they have missed. It is a meticulous job of adaptation, as such things go, the plot and indeed much of the dialogue having been lifted intact from Fitzgerald's story, the surroundings having been re-created at God knows what cost, and the cast having been coached by the director, Jack Clayton, into a credible impersonation of rich and desperate people back in those Calvin Coolidge days of Prohibition. It is respectful work and appalling.

Perhaps the quickest way to explain what is wrong with the picture is to say that it is unnecessary. When it sticks close to the original, it adds nothing; when it deviates, it puts a heavy foot into Fitzgerald's magic. Overall, its most conspicuous weakness is that it cannot handle

vulgarity or ostentation without becoming vulgar or ostentatious. A couple of examples: when Nick Carraway goes over to East Egg to renew a friendship with his cousin, Daisy Buchanan, Tom, her husband, greets him by riding up on a polo pony. In the book, Tom is in riding clothes, but Fitzgerald didn't think it necessary to supply a horse. In the film, Nick goes for the first time to one of Gatsby's parties, is tapped on the shoulder by a grim-faced bodyguard, taken upstairs in a private elevator and thrust into an Abercrombie & Fitch gent's study to meet his host. In the book, Nick, talking with a stranger at a table in the garden, says: "This is an unusual party for me. I haven't even seen the host." And the other replies: "I'm Gatsby. . . . I thought you knew, old sport." Why spoil that with the gangster flummery? Because in fact we only think we know that Gatsby was a gangster—the whole dreamlike, terrifying and infinitely sad tone of the book hangs precisely on the point that we don't really know anything about Gatsby, and yet he is by far the most real presence in the story. Gatsby imposes himself unforgettably because he is as much a symbol of those postwar years of elaborate masquerade and unjustified gaiety as are the empty eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg, staring out on the purgatory of auto junkyards and burning garbage that one had to cross to get from Manhattan to the strip of wealthy playground that once edged the North Shore of Long Island.

Fitzgerald wrote an aquatint of a story, very light, very deft, a little indistinct, leaving a good deal to the reader's understanding of the several levels of Hell, but with details that leap from the page and haunt you forever. The movie people have turned this into a mammoth painting in oils, making every Fitzgerald allusion into a fact, helping the author by filling in any areas that he did not cover with his pencil, proving point by point that theirs is the authentic, permanent record of a work which, despite its delicacy, shows no sign of fading. *The Great Gatsby* is a short book—astonishingly short and unassuming, when you think what it has meant to us these fifty years. You can read it in less time than you will spend in the theatre, watching a pastel threnody turned into acetate.

Where the picture excels is in the casting. Mia Farrow and Bruce Dern as Daisy and Tom, Sam Waterston as Nick, Karen Black as Myrtle Wilson bear extraordinary resemblances to what I had imagined these people to be like.

THAT WOMAN

*Smudgers of moonlight, black
Streaks and streaks and streaks
All night the dogs run
In circles under my eyelids.*

*Into the cool well of sleep I drown
Beautifully, but coming up for air
Keep seeing her, that woman
Frozen beside the fountain.*

*O most innocent shape,
Husband swimming beside me, slow
Peaceful beneath the hill*

What was it brought her between us?

*Fish of my heart, your feathers
Tangle like chains in my hair.
I may not leave, though I taste bitterly
The poisoned waters of the past—*

I have given you all my questions.

*That woman your former wife is here
The dogs tell me,
And the owl sitting on my shoulder.*

Patricia Goedicke

Indeed Waterston, whose role in the book is the somewhat recessive one of narrator, threatens to steal the picture, so vivid is he as the reasonably decent man forced by the accident of proximity to witness an almost unendurable sequence of cruelty and suffering. Dern's cold good manners, physical authority and mean eyes are also strikingly accurate, though I wish he hadn't been made to run through the public rooms of the Plaza, screaming threats and insults at Gatsby. Tom Buchanan was a bully, but he staged his scenes in private. Gatsby, naturally enough, is the figure in the book who has never come clear to me. He never comes clear to Nick and almost all we know of him is Nick's attempt to get down on paper his wild romanticism and faintly sinister reticence, his shockingly accurate understanding of what America means by success and his pathetically immature infatuation with what lyric writers mean by love. Robert Redford doesn't seem right in the part—he is at once too handsome and too dull (Gatsby was awkward, but hardly dull). However, Redford probably does as well as anyone could—Gatsby is an impossible figure, an illusion in a pink suit who somehow sums up all that was endearing, outrageous and fatally optimistic about the 1920s. When they first thought about making this picture, they should have asked themselves, "How will we handle Gatsby?" realized that it couldn't be done and taken their hands off Fitzgerald's fragile masterpiece. □

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