Steve Jacobs’ adaptation of J.M. Coetzee’s acclaimed novel sticks closely to its source while emerging as a powerful and affecting work in its own right, writes BRIAN MCFARLANE.

IT IS JUST POSSIBLE that there are finer novelists than J.M. Coetzee writing at present. It is, though, very unlikely that many have written anything as masterly as his South African-set Disgrace (1999). Virtually everything Coetzee does commands the highest critical respect – think Life & Times of Michael K, Youth, the irresistibly daring Elizabeth Costello (whose eponymous character turns up audaciously in his next novel, Slow Man) – but arguably the Booker-winning Disgrace is his most fully realised novel.
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Australian director Steve Jacobs and screenwriter Anna-Maria Monticelli, also two of the film’s producers, have accepted the daunting challenges offered by Coetzee’s novel. While making something very much their own, they have not simplified the novel’s dense thematic texture. Coetzee’s story of a South African academic whose life unravels when he conducts an affair with a student weaves together a number of reflective strands: not only professor/student relations, but also the implications of such relations between an older man and a much younger woman, of a white man living in a community that still distrusts and patronises the black majority, and of the tensions created between the fact of desire and the notion of restraint.

I don’t mean that the novel’s tone is either didactic or hortatory. All these issues are subtly integrated into its powerfully structured narrative where they arise, and they are dramatised through the lives of, primarily, David Lurie, the Cape Town professor of literature; his student Melanie; his daughter, Lucy; and Petrus, ‘the gardener and dog-man’ who lives in a shack on Lucy’s farm and will later establish himself more solidly there. And all these lives, and others, quietly populate a novel in which some terrible events take place, the more terrible for being articulated throughout in remarkably spare prose.

In David’s profession he is concerned with matters of literature and life, with writers like Wordsworth and Byron. David uses his entwinement with them as a means of insinuating himself into Melanie’s life. He draws attention in class to Wordsworth’s phrase ‘usurp upon’ after he has made his first move on Melanie, defining it as ‘intrude or encroach upon’. Film, having less time to establish its emphases, draws on this locution in the first glimpse we are given of the somewhat bored class of which Melanie is a member. Inviting her back to his flat in both the film and the book, he turns to Byron to support his seduction—a woman’s beauty ‘is part of the bounty she brings into the world’—and the profligate Romantic Byron will thread his way through both novel and film.

Spending more time on the novel than might be usual in reviewing a film can (I hope) be justified here because the film takes on so many of the novel’s perceptions, and its virtues, and makes them its own without ever resorting to that sort of slavish ‘faithfulness’ to which a certain kind of Sunday-night television literary adaptation is prone. Here, from the film’s very opening, with the title in stark red letters on a white screen, it is as though Jacobs and Monticelli have been as excited by the stylistic strategies of Coetzee’s novel as by its thematic preoccupations and narrative events, or, at least, by the way those preoccupations and events might be rendered in a cinematic style of comparable but distinctive spareness.

A very obvious starting point in talking about the film is the contrast struck early on between the stunningly beautiful landscape and the ugliness of so much of the life that is lived in it. In the early sequences set in Cape Town, the sombre grace of Table Mountain overhangs David Lurie’s (John Malkovich) unlovely liaisons, first with the part-time prostitute Soraya (Natalie Becker) and then with Melanie (Antoinette Engel). The first post-credits shot is a close-up of David’s eye peering through the slats of a Venetian blind, before turning back to Soraya. Their lovemaking, a brief montage of limbs interlocked, is a polite transaction at the end of which David leaves some notes and a small gift on the chest of drawers. When he makes love to Melanie, her impassivity and his lethal smile seem like the filmmaker’s version of the novel’s sentence: ‘Not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core.’ There is nothing beautiful in either of these ‘affairs’, but the human ugliness takes on a still more brutal guise when David, dismissed from his university post following a complaint from Melanie’s father—a complaint David does nothing to refute—drives to the country to his daughter Lucy’s (Jessica Haines) farm.

The film can render this kind of contrast with an immediacy that goes beyond what even Coetzee’s chiselled prose can suggest. The sheer grandeur of the landscape through which David drives (heightened by Steve Arnold’s majestic camera-work) seems to ‘place’ the meagre shoddiness of his pecadillos, just as it will place the fragility of Lucy’s farmhouse—offering so little protection against the appalling crimes that will be perpetrated there. I kept comparing the meaninglessness of the vast sweeping vistas in Baz Luhrmann’s Australia (2008) with the combined sense of threat and detachment that imbues the landscape in Disgrace, its beauty notwithstanding. The kind of life that is lived here is dangerous to human and beast alike. And yet, this is not an ultimately negative film, as its last sequence makes plain. There is a sense of resilience in the face of the dreadful: in Lucy’s pregnancy, in her replanting in difficult soil, in Petrus’ (Eriq Ebouaney) new house and in David’s walking up a dusty road to Lucy’s house in a spirit of reconciliation. All this is captured in a series of shots that culminate in the camera’s confident lifting to take in the farm with its signs of replenishment in the cradle of this incomparably eloquent landscape, now perhaps seen as nurturing that which it had once seemed to hold aloof.

If the contrast between human activity and the landscape is one obvious starting point in considering the film, another is in coming to terms with its title. Disgrace? Whose disgrace? Is there moral disgrace in David’s notion that unacted-upon desire is always wrong, that to act on impulse is necessarily bad? He has lived according to the dictates of his sexual needs, and his prioritisation of them leads to his clear public disgrace. Is there another sort of ‘disgrace’ for Lucy in the terrible violation of her body?

When David loses Soraya, who is taking time off to look after her sick mother, he is quickly drawn to the student Melanie, whom he helps up when she trips on campus. This in turn leads to his ‘disgraceful’ action in soliciting her company and all but forcing himself on her sexually, and thence
to his being called before a board of inquiry, where with a certain arrogance he refuses to exonerate himself, and to the ‘disgrace’ that is compounded by reporters and photographers pursuing him for prurient detail. Though there is little doubt that he has acted reprehensibly, and though at the inquiry he seems almost to be inviting his dismissal, David doesn’t emerge, in Malkovich’s performance and in the guileful screenplay, as an unequivocal monster, a subject for unqualified disgrace. He maintains a curious sort of integrity along with the spuriousness of his ‘Byronic’ reasoning (the madness of the heart preferred to that of the head) and the imperviousness of his demeanour, so that the film doesn’t entirely deny us a vestigial solidarity with him.

When David is dismissed, he drives from Cape Town to live with daughter Lucy on her farm, where they make stunted efforts to live in harmony. There is nothing equivocal about the disgracefulness of the acts to which she is subjected. Three young blacks pretend to have been involved in an accident and ask to use her phone. They each rape her, shoot the dogs, shut David in the toilet, cover him with methylated spirits and set fire on byron’s life in Italy, with a possible aria derived from the poet’s famous lyric ‘She Walks in Beauty’. In this film, no one walks in beauty: women’s bodies are there to be used. The filmmakers are aware of the discrepancy between this cultural aspiration of David’s and the unseemly facts of his life, just as the discrepancy might also be allowed between the serial-seducer poet and the exquisite lyric poem – which will be heard on the soundtrack at the film’s end.

Above all, though, the film finds a visual style that is as impressive and compelling in its way as Coetzee’s novelistic style is in his. The production design (by Anne Beauchamp and Michael Berg) discriminates with precision among the living quarters, whether flats or farmhouse, and workplaces (David’s neatly sterile office, the casual comfort of Lucy’s kitchen or the comparative middle-class affluence of Melanie’s parents’ home). In the sequence in which David is interrogated by the university board of inquiry, the staging in the austere chamber reinforces the sense of a man at odds with the moment. A recurring use of graceful dissolves subtly does its job of suggesting the sorts of inter-connectedness we need to note, and the many shots that start with a close-up of the back of David’s head confirm the observer status that sums up so much of his approach to life.

Those who want from the film adaptation of a novel an experience as near as possible to the one they had in reading the novel will probably not be disappointed with Steve Jacobs’ film. And one should remember that there is nothing intrinsically wrong with achieving such a congruence of response. However, those who have not read the novel, or who are in any case ready to take a film on its own terms, may well feel Disgrace is a film of unusual power. Coetzee wrote a tough, complex book, and Jacobs has made a tough, complex film.

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