

# H-Net Reviews

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*Restoration*. Miramax.

Reviewed by Suzanne Broderick

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This historical drama, based on the 1991 novel by Rose Tremain, is set during Restoration England and tells the story of a gifted—but not always dedicated—young physician who is summoned by King Charles II in order to treat one of the monarch’s most beloved companions. With the patient’s recovery, a royal invitation is issued for the healer to remain at court. While living “royally” amidst the decadence (and taking part in all of those Restoration-era goings-on), Dr. Merivel’s moral standards—not too high to begin with—rapidly deteriorate. The plot sounds interesting, especially to those of us who prick up our ears at the sound of the word historical; however, just like the story’s would-be hero, the film itself lacks substance and fails to elicit empathy. <p>The really sad thing about <cite>Restoration</cite> is that it could have been a good movie. Robert Downey Jr. (who plays Merivel, the not-always-good doctor) is a talented actor, as evidenced by his performance in <cite>Chaplin</cite>. However, in this film, Downey seemed to be completely out of place—a Hollywood Yankee in the court of King Charles. Not only does he look misplaced; he appears at times dazed and bewildered—all of this in addition to the shallow, debauched, and degenerate expressions the director obviously instructed him to affect throughout a good portion of the film. <p>The overall “look” of the film is authentic. Apparently, no expense was spared in recreating Restoration England. The costumes, the settings, the characters are all as opulent, extravagant, and overdone as the period from which the film takes its name, and some of the scenes are strikingly beautiful. The film’s problems, however, lie with unsympathetic characters and a story which fails to involve the

audience. The romance between Meg Ryan’s character, the disturbed young Irish woman named Katharine, and Doctor Merivel had the potential for getting the audience emotionally involved, but their love story ends abruptly. The most engaging character in the movie is King Charles II (regally played by Sam Neel). Also, the recently-notorious Hugh Grant makes a too-brief comic appearance as an artist/fop. His small role in the story enables Merivel’s reversal of fortune, so necessary for the doctor’s eventual “restoration.” Despite heavy seventeenth-century-style make-up (including a beauty mark!), Grant’s trademark grin is still recognizable. The popular actor appears to be enjoying his romp through a distant century. <p>Of some historical interest is the grim reenactment of the plague ravishing London and the Great Fire of 1666 which destroyed much of that city. In the face of all of this death and destruction, the now “restored” good doctor saves lives and ministers unselfishly to the stricken. The audience might take note of the consistently positive portrayal of the Quakers of the period. In all of Dr. Merivel’s dealings with these early members of the Society of Friends, they are shown behaving admirably—demonstrating their brotherly love, loyalty, forgiveness, and compassion. <p>Sadly, this potentially good film does not deliver. I enjoy historical dramas, and I genuinely wanted to like this film, but I could not. Perhaps this movie was so disappointing because I could not help but compare it to another historical epic I had seen recently, <cite>Braveheart</cite>. (See review elsewhere in this issue.) <cite>Restoration</cite> suffers greatly by comparison. <p>

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