

Liaisons a story for all times

Dangerous Liaisons ★★★★★
Cineplex-Odeon Westmount

review by Alexandra Parr

Under the disguise of immaculate wigs and makeup, elaborate clothing and hats, and perfectly cultured manners lurk two imaginations so wicked and corrupt that one wonders whether the age of the eighties — supposedly a liberal era — is quite tame in

comparison to the decadence of France in the eighteenth century. There is full dedication to the pursuit of pleasure in *Dangerous Liaisons*, a film based on a novel and play written in 1782 (*Les Liaisons Dangereuses*) by Choderlos de Laclos.

The movie concerns the antics of two members of the French aristocracy, the evil Marquise de Merteuil (Glenn Close) and her former lover Vicomte de Valmont (John Malkovich). As there is apparently

little else to do in these pre-Revolutionary days, the two spend their time plotting sexual pursuit of seemingly-unattainable acquaintances. Initially, the Marquise wants Valmont to help her obtain revenge on her former lover by seducing the man's intended bride, the beautiful, young and naive Cecile de Volanges (Uma Thurman). Valmont refuses to take the challenge at first, insisting it is too easy, and instead sets his sights on the lovely (married) Madame de Tourvel (Michelle Pfeiffer). What follows is a sometimes hilarious, always interesting story of flirtation and desire, love and lust, and above all, morality.

The casting of this movie is impeccable. I sincerely hope that Glenn Close *never* plays another sweet Earth Mother role, because she is decidedly superior as a bitch (who will ever forget her fantastic performance as Alex in *Fatal Attraction*?) Malkovich as the shameless Valmont is also superb. He possesses a strange appeal: you can't help liking him and admiring his style, even while you abhor his ruthless insensitivity. This works in his favour, eventually, for in the end we pity him for making the crucial mistake of actually falling in love with Madame de Tourvel.

Christopher Hampton, who wrote the play (based on the book of 1782) and also wrote the screenplay, calls *Dangerous Liaisons* "one of the most profound analyses ever made of love and sex... and the difference between them." Perhaps this is what makes the movie so interesting: this sort of topic transcends time, and even though the setting is far from what we know and live in today, we relate to the story. Director Stephen Frears (*My Beautiful Laundrette*) has obvious experience directing films about such subjects, and says *Dangerous Liaisons* is "very modern

in its treatment of romance. People behaving badly is quite familiar." Indeed. While one might consider the subject of the movie to be frivolous and contrived, there are many scenes where the dialogue delivers some hard truths about the sexes. You do *not* think you've just been to a silly comedy after the final scene, even if you dislike the destructive seduction plots.

Winning performances are delivered by the supporting cast, although the exemplary acting of Close and Malkovich tends to overshadow them somewhat. Michelle

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Pfeiffer is so beautiful she really does not need to do much else, but she plays the moralistic Madame de Tourvel convincingly. Canadian Keanu Reeves (*The River's Edge*) shows a lot of talent as the young music teacher who falls for Cecile and is then used by Merteuil as a tool of revenge against Valmont. Uma Thurman, playing Cecile, succeeds in quite a humorous role and will likely be offered others following the almost certain success of *Dangerous Liaisons*.

It seems odd that I can't think of one negative thing to say about the movie, but I felt it was deserving of four-star status since it (if nothing else), will surely strike a familiar chord in certain people — probably those who need to see it most.



Dangerous Liaisons

Left to right, Glenn Close, John Malkovich and Michelle Pfeiffer: all turn in excellent performances in *Dangerous Liaisons*, an 18th century story that belies the popular belief that the sexual revolution occurred in the last 30 years. It's our first four-star movie in 1989.

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