Why Are They Being So Mean to 'The Great Gatsby'?

By FOSTER HIRSCH

VICTIM of its own publicity overkill, "The Great Gatsby" has become the movie to hate. Slaughtered by the critics, the film is also being insulted in the subways: "this movie stinks," and less flattering evaluations, are scribbled on many of the ads. The picture has been dismissed as a desecration of a great American novel; it's been damned as insensitive, numbingly reverential, ludicrously miscast, stultifyingly dull.

Some critics have even speculated that the project was doomed from the start. Fitzgerald's novel, they claim, is unfilmable, and besides, since no movie could ever be as full and as satisfying as the original, why bother? Even if then material were made to work as a movie, the scoffers insist, it would inevitably be a short-cut for those who don't want to read and a bargain basement version of the story for those who do.

The truth of the matter is that "The Great Gatsby," with its strong melodramatic narrative, its lavish backdrops and its solid evocation of time and place, is eminently congenial to the kind of world that movies can create. Further, for all its rich verbal texture, Fitzgerald's book is not a high-toned "classic," of use only to scholars and graduate students. It is wonderfully accessible. An "important" and "serious" novel with broad popular appeal, "Gatsby," in short, is best-seller material of distinction, just the sort of property that movies are equipped to handle.

Jack Clayton's film does not accomplish the (probably) impossible: it is not as rounded, as finely etched, as unfailingly trenchant, as its source, but it is nonetheless a rich and elegant piece of work, and it is obedient without being obsequious to the spirit of its legendary author. As in the book, it's atmosphere, tone, and sensibility that count most.

The drapes billow gracefully in the afternoon breeze. Two women in white recline languidly on white couches. "Nick, is it you?" one of the women asks lazily, in a high, nasal, flute-like voice, as a bumbling young man enters the bewitching living room. "Oh, Nick," the hostess coos archly, "I'm paralyzed with happiness!" This is our introduction, early in the film, to the high society world that Fitzgerald had a life-long crush on, and the scene has just the right high-strung pitch as it eases us into a long-ago golden New York summer among hot and temperamental people who are very rich and very careless. Like so much of the rest of the movie, the atmosphere of this early scene is thick with money and heat.

The film is filled with images of rich people idling away an overripe summer. There are teas on the polo grounds and in a summer garden, to the accompaniment of the buzz of flies and the hum of birds. There are, of course, Gatsby's big foolish parties at which the guests cavort in a madcap frenzy that yet has elegiac underpinnings. Best of all, there is an afternoon at the Plaza, on a day in high summer when the town is empty and the air vibrates with tension among the sorry characters.

The palatial rooms of East Egg and West Egg, the brilliant tea service, the long cool drinks served in cut-glass crystal, the natty suits and colorful dresses, the sporty cars, the silks and linens—these tokens of Fitzgerald's

Robert Redford and Mia Farrow, as the tryst-ing Jay and Daisy, in "The Great Gatsby."

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traction to wealth are all generously re-created. And yet the movie is not mindlessly sumptuous—the filmmakers haven't lost sight of the fact that what matters in "Gatsby" are the characters' *attitudes* to wealth and class.

Fitzgerald thought that the very rich were different from the rest of us, and "Gatsby" acknowledges some unpopular truths. Faithful to its source, the movie suggests that we are a class-divided and class-conscious society; that great wealth is not the same as pedigree; that social position often defines social conduct. Indisputably well-born, Daisy and Tom play with other people's lives; almost without flinching, they destroy the garage mechanic George Wilson and his unfaithful wife, Myrtle, and they are ultimately responsible for Gatsby's death. They know the rules, just how far they can go and what they can get away with; Gatsby and the working-class Wilsons do not.

Fitzgerald's snobbishness is softened by his wry, likable narrator, Nick Carraway, who serves as our moral anchor among the untouchable Long Island set. Nick knows how to respond to people regardless of dollar signs. Beneath the masquerade, he sees Gatsby's real worth, he understands the nagging sense of inadequacy that motivates Gatsby and that underlies the character's diseased conception of the American Dream. And beneath their charm, beneath their seductive trappings, Nick also sees the hollowness of his beautiful cousin Daisy and her polo-playing husband, their capacity for casual cruelty.

The movie keeps the novel's sensible perspective on the very rich; we're not asked to gawk at the parade of wealth but to see, through Nick's eyes, the pomp, the frenzied partying, and the soul-denying class conventions for what they really are. Nick is beautifully played by Sam Waterston, who has just the correct mixture of compassion and detachment. He's a severe yet humane judge of human follies. And he reads Fitzgerald's cadenced sentences with becoming naturalness. As if they hadn't been forewarned that the movie is a dud, audiences are responding warmly to Waterston's kindly, wide-eyed hero. Confounding the skeptics, Waterston makes it all work.

Fittingly, since we see them from a distance, filtered through Nick's consciousness, most of the other actors perform in a quietly stylized manner. Consider Mia Farrow as Daisy. She's received some most uncharitable reviews and yet hers is immense, courageous work. She's not afraid to make Daisy unlikable. Pampered, useless, bored, a neurotic privileged plaything, her Daisy yet has feeling and dignity. Farrow plays a rich woman not from the outside, as a comedy of manners caricature, but from the character's own point of view.

As Tom, Bruce Dern is not ideally cast (perhaps he and Robert Redford should have switched roles), but Dern is a good solid actor, and he makes the character work despite the odds. Unlike Farrow, whose voice drips money, Dern does not convince us that he is to the manner born. His bearing does not immediately connote class; his diction, and his chunkiness around the middle, violate upper crust decorum. But, by sheer strength of personality, the actor gets Tom's condescension, his cruelty, his sense of privilege, his pride of ownership.

As in the book, Gatsby himself remains an enigmatic and peripheral figure. As Gatsby, Robert Redford is too poised, too obviously "acceptable." Had they the nerve, the filmmakers ought to have cast the part with an unknown, a dark, brooding actor, his ethnic features a little lopsided, his voice edged with coarseness, his stance as a gentleman too eagerly insisted on to be entirely convincing. Gatsby is a man who creates himself according to his image of what an American millionaire should live like and look like. Underneath the cosmetic dazzle, of course, he is an amateur: Gatsby is one of the great losers in American literature. Does Redford, with his male model looks, answer such a description? Redford wears his pink summer suit much too well; he looks and sounds as if he belongs right at the center of his extravagant, dopey parties.

Redford tries, though. In searching for a rhythm for his character, he gives his lines a clipped, edgy reading. He uses his toothpaste-ad smile, but this isn't one of his walk-through performances. As he offers glimpses of his character's hidden life, Redford works conscientiously against his leading man image. It's thoughtful work that's never quite right but that's never simply a star turn either.

Jack Clayton's direction of "The Innocents" (based on Henry James's "The Turn of the Screw") was the finest film adaptation of great literature I've ever seen. "Gatsby" doesn't have the authority that distinguished the earlier film. It isn't Clayton's collaboration with a master, the way "The Innocents" was, but it is by no means the crude Hollywood hustle or the blatant bore that its reputation suggests. "The Great Gatsby" is a graceful and intelligent complement to the novel rather than a dimwitted bludgeoning of it. It is eminently worth savoring.

Foster Hirsch is a freelance writer.