

Carol (15) USA 2015

24 April 2017

DIRECTOR: **Todd Haynes**

Running time: 118 minutes

LEADING PLAYERS: **Cate Blanchett** (Carol Aird), **Rooney Mara** (Therese Belivet), **Sarah Paulson** (Abbey Gerhard), **Kyle Chandler** (Harge Aird), **Jake Lacy** (Richard Semco), **John Magaro** (Dannie McElroy).

SCREENPLAY: **Phyllis Nagy** based on the noel by **Patricia Highsmith**. PHOTOGRAPHY: **Edward Lachman**. EDITING: **Affonso Gonçalves**. MUSIC: **Carter Burwell**.

In 2002, Todd Haynes directed Julianne Moore in *Far from Heaven*, a kind of riff on Douglas Sirk's *All that Heaven Allows*, in which Jane Wyman falls for her gardener (well, it is Rock Hudson!), and her shocked society friends shun her. Now, of course, we know, and Rock, Jane, and almost certainly Douglas himself, knew, that Hudson was gay, and that's what makes those rich Sirk melodramas all the more enjoyable in retrospect. (See *Written on the Wind*, in which he is crippled and can't, or won't, make love to Lauren Bacall!) So Haynes has his own bit of fun, makes the husband gay and the gardener black, and watches what happens when the wife forgives the husband his 'misdemeanour', while he cannot do as much for her far more restrained one. It was a Sirkian melodrama for our more grown-up times, and it was done with an inimitable sense of style and period.

Since then Haynes has refashioned Curtiz's Joan Crawford vehicle, *Mildred Pierce*, as a five episode TV series with Kate Winslet. Therefore, it came as no surprise to find him directing a lesbian love story set in the fifties, with Cate Blanchett and Rooney Mara.

Carol is a mother, married to a perfectly decent guy – this is important – and devoted to her young daughter, but for whom, like Julianne Moore's mom in *The Hours*, whose Philip Glass score Carter Burwell positively channels here, there is something unsatisfied, an unacknowledged truth. When she goes to a department store at Christmas time to buy her child a train set, she meets shop assistant, Therese Belivet,

and that's it! You can probably fill in the rest.

Now you might say, 'Big deal'. Aside from the unaccustomed gender orientation of the lovers, we have seen that story before countless times. Except that, because of the gender orientation, it is a very different story (it is the 1950s, the stakes are higher, etc.), and it is different because of the detail and sensitivity with which we are made to witness the emotional journeys of the participants. For this we are grateful in no small part to our actresses, who take risks with this material, and yet make it a graceful series of looks and inflexions rather than erotic tableaux; and then to Haynes, whose sense of period, and of the just measure to be applied, right down to the way he treats the ancillary characters, bespeak a true humanist.

The film itself is told in flashback, from a point where Carol meets Therese at a restaurant, when we infer that their relationship has reached a crucial point. It is a painful scene, but much more painful when we see it for the second time! I won't give anything more away, except to say that, if you are not positively jumping up and down in your seat by the time Haynes grants us one last, lingering gaze at this thing called love, then I am sorry. For this reviewer, perhaps owing to the time and the place (I saw it at the Notting Hill Gate just before Christmas), *Carol* was the cinema experience of 2015, a long overdue 'up yours' to the straitlaced conservatism of *Brief Encounter*, and I am intrigued to find out if it will have the same power over me this time around!