Virginia Woolf’s Night and Day review – dreamy adaptation reaches for the stars

Peter Bradshaw — Read time: 2 minutes

Here is an adaptation, written by Justine Waddell, of Virginia Woolf’s peculiar and tonally elusive work that is all about the quarterlife crisis of a headstrong, well-born young woman in Edwardian London faced with the necessity of getting married. What emerges is a wayward, unworldly fantasia, a four-leaf clover of a film – or even five-leaf; rather beautifully designed and photographed, flavoured with a wistful, unexpectedly Germanic kind of romanticism.

Waddell and Iranian-born director and Bafta nominee Tina Gharavi have creatively gone against the grain of the novel, amplifying Woolf’s single glancing reference to astronomy and making that the centre of the heroine’s yearning, perhaps playfully implanting a subconscious memory of Cole Porter’s lyrics to the song of the same title: “You are the one, only you beneath the moon, under the sun ….” And – thankfully, in my view – the film removes Woolf’s supercilious condescension towards the self-betterment of newly educated lower and middle classes, and instead focuses on a sweet-natured story, performed with conviction by its all-star ensemble cast, interspersed with dreamlike set pieces. The result is not precisely Virginia Woolf’s Night and Day; maybe more EM Forster’s Night and Day or even Ronald Firbank’s Night and Day.

With spirit and charm, Haley Bennett plays young Katharine Hilbery, the only child of wealthy parents (Timothy Spall and Jennifer Saunders), who are burdened by the reputation of Katharine's late grandfather, an illustrious poet and critic like a B-division Ruskin or Carlyle, whose unwieldy biography her mother is in fact trying to write. Katharine is a self-taught astronomer trying to gain admission to the University of Cambridge to read maths, and battling academia's anti-women attitudes (women students were being refused degrees in those days even if they were admitted). With her queer pacifist cousin Cyril (Misia Butler) she larksomely dresses as a man to gatecrash a pompous male-only astronomical society – though she is as innocent as a child about Cyril's private life.

Realising that her intellectual ambitions are only possible as a married woman, Katharine impulsively gets engaged to her clueless childhood friend William Rodney, amusingly played by Jack Whitehall: Rodney is a complete chump of a man who writes insufferable essays about Elizabethan poetry and Sir Philip Sidney's Astrophel and Stella. But it is at this moment Katharine realises she might have feelings for Ralph Denham (Elyas M'Barek), the young writer that her mother has hired as her personal secretary to edit that sprawling biography.

It is such a sweet story and guilelessly eccentric – a butterfly fluttering just beyond the wheel of realism.

Virginia Woolf's Night and Day screened at SXSW London; it is in UK and Irish cinemas from 19 June and is released in the US later this year.