Virginia Woolf's Night & Day review — it's Jack Whitehall's best buffoon yet

Kevin Maher — Read time: 2 minutes

Literary pedants beware, this woozy Edwardian melodrama is not exactly faithful to its source material: a meandering early effort from Virginia Woolf. There's a lonely line in that 1919 novel, about how contemplation of the stars makes us "dissolve" into infinity, that seems to be the inspirational backbone for this adventurous, singular adaptation from the Iranian-British film-maker Tina Gharavi (*I Am Nasrine*).

Haley Bennett, who has been craving an all-consuming lead role since *Cyrano* (2021), delivers an empathetic masterclass as Katharine Hilbery, an amateur astronomer, spurner of suitors and early 20th-century feminist. Obsessed with the vastness of the cosmos and its philosophical implications ("We are nothing but a speck!"), Katharine is determined to study science at Cambridge despite the objections of her imperious father, Terence (Timothy Spall), her fabulously effete fiancé, William (Jack Whitehall), and the boorish, sniggering interview panel she encounters at the university.

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Filling out the finest of casts are a deft Jennifer Saunders as Katharine's eccentric mother, Bess, Frances Barber as her scientific mentor Lady Margaret Huggins and Sally Phillips as the nasty Hampstead harridan Joan

Denham. Lily Allen also co-stars as the suffragette trailblazer Mary Datchet, supposedly based on Margaret Llewelyn Davies, but it is, alas, not an entirely comfortable fit.

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Thankfully this is no Merchant Ivory knock-off and Gharavi enlivens it with the kind of dreamy stylistic diversions normally found in Sofia Coppola mood pieces such as *Marie Antoinette* or *The Beguiled*. Katharine, in vintage shades, struts around period London streets (filming locations: Newcastle and Cologne) in slow motion montages while sweetly anachronistic pop tunes by the Icelandic composer Hogni Egilsson pulse away on the soundtrack.

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While star-gazing, Katharine is framed in blue-lit silhouette like a ghostly daguerreotype. And at the climax of a quietly moving sequence set under the glowing path of Halley's Comet, she suddenly turns to camera and addresses us with sombre resignation: "We'll all be dead next time Halley pays us a visit."

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Bennett is exceptional, part open wound, part furious intensity, and Whitehall gives us his best blue-blooded buffoon yet. The ending is perfectly bittersweet.
★★★★☆
12A, 95min
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