



DISGRACE

Spring
Season
2010

Review by Peter Bradshaw, *The Guardian* (reveals much of the story):

JM Coetzee's 1999 Booker prize-winner, set in post-apartheid South Africa, has been respectfully transformed into a heartfelt, intelligent film with two very good performances at its centre. John Malkovich is the white Cape Town academic David Lurie, whose seduction of a mixed-race student initiates the first phase of a catastrophic personal downfall. Jessica Haines plays his grownup daughter Lucy, the intimate witness-participant in his ruin.

In its opening act, Professor Lurie's story runs along lines familiar from Philip Roth novels such as *The Human Stain* and *A Dying Animal* – both translated into movies of varying quality. Liberal academic males of a certain age defy the approaching chill of death and professional obsolescence, clinging fiercely to their passionate rapture for women's bodies and a refusal to concede culpability in the face of political correctness. Added to all this, Lurie is unreconciled to the terms of surrender imposed on the white caste. Resisting the new politics of sex and race is a game played at far higher stakes in modern South Africa than in the American academy.

Malkovich's Lurie is a single man, evidently divorced, and a lecturer on romantic poetry. He begins an affair with his student, Melanie Isaacs (Antoinette Engel), who, though consenting, does indeed appear to be pressured by his advances in a highly unequal relationship. Lurie winds up giving Melanie a passing grade for an exam she never took and is finally forced out of his job, contemptuously refusing to co-operate with the university's disciplinary board in any way which might have softened his disgrace or their embarrassment. Almost penniless, he goes to live with his daughter on her farmstead in the remote and lawless Eastern Cape.

But his ordeal is only just beginning, and Lurie still has a long way further down to go before reaching the nadir of his defeat.

It is a story of almost transcendental humiliation – it could be called biblical, except that unlike Job, Lurie has no God to confront. His professional prestige has been crushed, his social position has been cancelled; he is too proud for self-pity which would be in any case unheeded. He has done nothing to deserve all this and this tacit, stunned sense of cosmic injustice is his only comfort, although Lurie's overdog experience of life has given him no facility in the politics of victimhood. He has no rights.

The almost masochistic horror of Lurie's descent is well managed in the movie, though I was sorry to see one detail lost. He now has the demeaning new job of preparing unwanted dogs for cremation, and, in the book, this involves beating the rigor-mortis-affected corpses into shape with a shovel so they can be disposed of. This exquisitely horrible touch has been omitted. Malkovich's South African accent comes and goes and he is mannered – but it is sound casting. Director Steve Jacobs and his wife, screenwriter Anna Maria Monticelli, have carefully crafted a worthwhile film which is concerned to do the right thing by a modern classic.

Film4 review by Jamie McCleish:

Both an absorbing study of a man coming to terms with his emotional failings and a subtle portrait of post-Apartheid South Africa, this is a very faithful and hugely successful adaptation of JM Coetzee's Booker Prize winning novel.

Centring on a complacent intellectual who suffers a series of humiliations that lead him to question the way he is living, Steve Jacobs' film is grounded by a superb performance by John Malkovich. Aloof and emotionally frosty, David Lurie spends his days teaching classes, reading Byron, writing an opera and, when it all gets too much, having sex with prostitutes.

When he has an affair with one of his students, a storm of recrimination breaks around him and he flees to his daughter Lucy's (Jessica Haines) smallholding in the countryside. When three young black men arrive at the farm one day, David and Lucy are subjected to an episode of appalling violence and David has to reassess both his own life and the moral ambiguities of life in the new South Africa.

Steve Jacobs has taken a highly literary, allegorical novel and turned it into a highly literary, allegorical film. While there are moments when it can feel a little dry and rarefied as a result, it's still an incredibly complex piece of work and its compensations more than make up for it. A perfectly cast John Malkovich gives a superb performance in a powerful and intelligent study of a man coming back from the brink.

