

38th SEASON**ENGLISH FILM CLUB 2017/18****Locarno, Cinema Kursaal****18.15****Friday, 17 November 2017****FLORENCE FOSTER JENKINS****2016**

110 minutes

Directed by **STEPHEN FREARS**

Starring: Meryl Streep, Hugh Grant and Simon Helberg

New York City, 1944. Florence Foster Jenkins is a happy and carefree heiress who founded the Verdi Club to celebrate a passionate love for opera and music. As it is 1944 and the U.S. is in the midst of World War II, Florence is of the opinion that "music matters more than ever". St. Clair Bayfield, a British Shakespearean actor, is her husband and manager. Despite being married, Florence and Bayfield live in separate residences. She lives in a grand hotel suite while he resides in an apartment in the city with his secret mistress, Kathleen Weatherley. Florence suffers from a long-term case of syphilis, which she contracted from her first husband. The illness has caused her to have various health problems for which she takes medication, including mercury and arsenic, that have toxic side effects. Due to the fear of passing the disease on to Bayfield, she has no sexual relations with her husband, and Bayfield fulfils his sexual urges with Kathleen.

Florence decides to resume her singing lessons, which she has neglected. She hires pianist Cosmé McMoon and introduces him to her vocal coach, Carlo Edwards, the assistant conductor at the Metropolitan Opera. McMoon is shocked to discover that Florence is a terrible singer, yet Bayfield and Edwards pretend she is wonderful, with the former giving McMoon a dire warning not to criticize her.

Bayfield makes arrangements for a small recital, hand-picking people allowed to buy tickets. On the night of the performance, loyal members of the Verdi Club sit respectfully, but others can barely contain their laughter. Feeling encouraged by her recital's good reviews, she makes a recording of her singing as a Christmas gift for the Verdi Club. Florence gives McMoon a copy of the record, which leads to her recalling that Bayfield was not always a very successful actor and how she hid negative reviews to protect his feelings. She also informs McMoon of her history as a piano player and teacher, having once played for the President as a child. McMoon realizes at this moment that Florence

Critics' comments:

- A splendid Simon Helberg as Florence's new piano accompanist is at first aghast at hearing the hellish sounds emanating from the throat of this strangulated soprano. You're probably asking, what kind of a movie is this? A damn fine and funny one, thanks to the way the estimable director Stephen Frears (*Dangerous Liaisons*, *The Grifters*, *The Queen*) conducts the piece, keeping a delicate balance between the comic and the tragic providing an atmosphere in which three dazzling and very different actors can work in blissful harmony.

(from *Rollingstone*, adapted)

- The real Florence Foster Jenkins was one of those larger than life characters you just couldn't make up. No wonder, then, that she has inspired numerous theatrical and cinematic productions. There's a touch of Woody Allen in Frears's uncomplicated handling of the period setting, but I was also reminded of Tim Burton's *Ed Wood*, another film rooted in affectionate admiration for a much-mocked subject. Just as Wood became celebrated for directing *Plan 9 From Outer Space*, labelled "the worst movie ever made", so Jenkins is called "the worst goddamn singer in the world" by those who scorn her atonal appeal.

(from *The Guardian*, adapted)

- Meryl Streep steps up to the plate with another cheerfully resolute performance in "Florence Foster Jenkins", a warm, generous-hearted portrait of the title character: a wealthy music aficionado who, in real life, became a cult figure in the 1930s and '40s with her earnest, wildly off-key singing. The film chronicles the final year of Jenkins's life following the preparations for her infamous performance at Carnegie Hall in 1944 — a boisterous affair attended by rowdy sailors, sundry onlookers and the likes of Cole Porter and Lily Pons.

(from *The Guardian*, adapted)