



39th SEASON

ENGLISH FILM CLUB 2018/19

Chiasso, Cinema EXCELSIOR

18.15

Friday, 9th November 2018

THE SHAPE OF WATER

2017

123 minutes

Directed by **Guillermo del Toro**

Starring: Sally Hawkins, Octavia Spencer, Michael Shannon

An opening voiceover establishes the fable-like tone, setting the story "a long time ago" in "a small city near the coast, but far from everything else". This is the US in the early 1960s, with the cold war and the space race providing the backdrop for "a tale of love and loss and the monster who tried to destroy it all".

Sally Hawkins is sublime as the orphaned Elisa Esposito, voiceless since the day she was found "by the river, in the water", the scars on her neck suggesting the key to her silence. Her neighbour, Giles (Richard Jenkins), is an artist who has lost both his hair and his job and spends his days watching Bill "Bojangles" Robinson and Betty Grable on TV reruns, dreaming of the waiter behind the counter in the local Dixie Doug's pie emporium.

Elisa works as a cleaner at the Occam aerospace research facility, where she mops floors with the loquacious Zelda (Octavia Spencer). When Occam takes possession of an amphibious creature from the Amazon, Dr Hoffstetler (Michael Stuhlbarg) wants to learn from this strange beast, once revered by local tribes as a god. Vindictive government agent Strickland (Michael Shannon) disagrees, seeing only "an affront" that he dragged here from South America to be tortured and destroyed. Yet Elisa, whose expansive and erotic dreams are fuelled by water, hears music in the creature's plaintive cry; a haunting refrain interweaving with the waltzing melody that accompanies her own floating steps.

What follows is a weird and wondrous romantic thriller that casts its inspirational web wide: from 50s monster movies such as *Creature From the Black Lagoon* to Ron Howard's 80s mermaid rom-com *Splash*. Del Toro calls it "a fairytale for troubled times. There are strong undercurrents, too, of the silent pathos of Keaton and Chaplin, interspersed with bouts of musical fantasy, including an audacious Fred and Ginger-style routine.

It sounds ridiculous, yet through some magical alchemy it works – magnificently so. Part of its success is the superb ensemble cast: Shannon seething as the scripture-quoting patriot whose world starts rotting from the inside out; Spencer radiating resilience as Zelda, tirelessly tending to the needs of others; Stuhlbarg underplaying nicely as the scientist with lofty aspirations and fluid affiliations. As for Doug Jones, his shimmering amphibian man is a sinewy symphony of movement, the perfect partner for Hawkins's heroine, swimming through the dreamy pools of her endlessly expressive eyes.

(Abridged from The Guardian, 18 Feb 2018)

Critics' comments:

- *Del Toro has conjured a boundary-crossing hybrid that is as adventurously personal as it is universal, a swooning romantic melodrama that reshapes the mythical themes of Beauty and the Beast with deliciously bestial bite. (Mark Kermode, Observer film critic)*