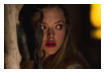

The story of Little Red Riding Hood has long been analyzed and dissected as a parable about the struggle between the innocence of childhood and the big bad adult demons of sexuality. Which makes it appropriate, if regrettable, that the new film adaptation of the fairy tale represents a battle between director Catherine Hardwicke’s stated desire to really get under the fur of the story and the studio’s anxiousness to pitch to the TWILIGHT crowd.

Hardwicke, of course, likely got this gig at least partially based on TWILIGHT’s success, though it didn’t carry quite the same requirements of fidelity to the source material. Nonetheless, once again we have a young woman (Amanda Seyfried as Valerie) torn between two young men of opposing “species”: Henry (Max Irons), a blacksmith from a wealthy family whom her parents have arranged for her to marry, and a poor woodcutter who really gets her juices flowing named, ahem, Peter (Shiloh Fernandez). The choice is obvious just based on the casting; Irons (son of Jeremy) is a bit of a stiff, while Fernandez, reportedly the second choice to play Edward Cullen, gives better smolder just in his first scenes with Seyfried than Robert Pattinson has managed in all three of his TWILIGHT turns so far.

But the course of forbidden love never did run smooth; no sooner has Valerie agreed to elope with Peter than her sister is killed by a wolf that has been plaguing their forest village of Daggerhorn for two decades. (Punishment for giving in to her desires? Not so much, in the script by ORPHAN’s David Leslie Johnson, as it is a plot device.) The villagers have been keeping the beast at bay with animal sacrifices, but now that it has claimed human blood, a mob quickly forms to track it down and attempt to kill it. Dissenting from that decision is Father Auguste (Lukas Haas, one of too many good actors in RED RIDING HOOD given too little to

do), who misguidedly favors calling in Father Solomon, a legendary werewolf hunter who’s better equipped to solve the problem.

Unfortunately for the townspeople, Solomon winds up hijacking the village upon his arrival, and Gary Oldman, who plays the role, hijacks the movie as well. Speaking in a vaguely sinister Slavic accent (while everyone else in the cast talks in neutral American tones), he brings an insinuating charge to the story, stalking through Tom Sanders’ meticulously crafted sets like he owns the place (as well he should, since Sanders was production designer on BRAM STOKER’S DRACULA too). It is Solomon who brings up the idea that the wolf may in fact be one of the locals in transformative guise, and he foments fear and suspicion, turning the fearful Daggerhorners against each other and using a fiery torture device to extract the truth. The straight line RED RIDING HOOD draws between the witchhunts of the past and Homeland Security’s more recent practices isn’t a subtle one, but it does create a sense of tension that’s lacking in Valerie’s story.

Part of the reason—a large part—is that the erotic undercurrents of the story are never allowed to bubble up to the surface. Seyfried, with her golden curls and big blue eyes, is just right physically for the role, but Valerie as written, or at least as she stands on screen, is a largely passive heroine, more acted upon than active, without the dark side or sense of genuine erotic curiosity that might have made her more compelling (but might also have threatened the point of identification for the tweeners the studio is courting). RED RIDING HOOD’s violent content is neutered as well; the huge black wolf charges through a few scenes, full of CG sound and fury, but the dead bodies it leaves in its wake are chastely bloodless, which kinda undercuts its bona fides as a savage threat.

Beyond Oldman’s performance, RED RIDING HOOD’s strongest assets are its visuals, with Sanders’ constructions and Cindy Evans’ costumes—including two variations on Valerie’s striking red cloak—captured by Mandy Walker’s cinematography in a manner that might seem artificial to some, but struck this viewer as an effectively heightened, otherworldly reality. The cast are all great to look at, too; it’s always nice to see Virginia Madsen on the big screen, and as Valerie’s mom, she’s an uncannily perfect match for Seyfried. Veteran Julie Christie brings a share of vinegar and mystery to the crucial role of Valerie’s grandmother, who lives in a house outside Daggerhorn and may have a few dark secrets—and, yes, engages in the “What big eyes you have!” exchange with Valerie. Both actresses are underutilized, though, in a film that also doesn’t push the undercurrents of Red’s original tale to anywhere near their boundaries—and whose crucial revelation hinges on a character we’ve barely gotten to meet, much less know. The howls resonate here and there, but in the end, this wolf doesn’t have much bite.

{jcomments on}