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Golden Years

By Josef Woodard, February 15, 2007

Venus

Peter O'Toole, Jodie Whittaker, and Leslie Phillips star in a film written by Hanif Kureishi and directed by Roger Michell.

Reviewed by Josef Woodard

In the movies, May-December romances or flings are a recurring theme, often fueling the male fantasy machine. With *Venus*, though, the genre gets a goosing. We're not sure whether to cheer, cringe, or glow warmly when Peter O'Toole's seventy-something character Maurice falls in love — one last time — with the twenty-ish woman who falls into his life (named Jessie and beautifully played by newcomer Jodie Whittaker). It's more of a March-late December romance, but without the boinking.

Maurice is an actor now reduced to playing corpses on TV and occasional cameo speaking roles; Jessie is an as-yet fully formed adult, arriving in London from a small town and vaguely interested in modeling or acting. He tries to extend enlightenment, exposing her to Shakespearean quotations and Velázquez's "The Toilet of Venus" (partly as a means of warming her up to the idea of nude modeling).

While their strange romantic flowering is the plot's centerpiece, other themes sneak into the film and ennoble it, including the injustice of aging, the proverbial youth being wasted on the young, and the ever-louder tick of mortality's clock.

Venus is yet another example of the dubious nature of preview trailers. The preview tipped us off to many of the film's ripest gags, but had its tone all wrong. Despite the presence of giddy moments and comic zing, the film's true personality is more like an autumnal meditation. Instead of being a breezy, gag-driven project, it takes us into an atmosphere of intimacy and reflection, with close-ups in the recurring quarters where Maurice and his friends gather and grouse. Through it all, O'Toole shines with a wondrous and nuanced performance. Even when we hate him, we love him.