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Love and Friendship (U)

dir: **Whit Stillman**

Starring: **Kate Beckinsale, Chloë Sevigny, Xander Samuel**

Sponsor: **Susan Firth and Tony Butcher**

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Synopsis: London, the 1790s. The scheming Lady Susan has come to Churchill, her in-laws' estate, to wait out the colourful rumours about her dalliances circulating through polite society, insisting that they are unfounded. Whilst there, aided and abetted by her loyal friend Alicia - who's married to upright killjoy Mr Johnson - she decides to secure husbands for herself and her long-suffering daughter Frederica, who has run away from school, much to her mother's dismay.

Two men arrive at Churchill, handsome and eligible Reginald DeCourcy and wealthy but foolish Sir James Martin. Lady Susan manoeuvres for Sir James as Frederica's husband (against Frederica's wishes), while it emerges that Lady Susan has not only promised to marry Reginald, but has been seeing someone else - Lord Manwaring. She is forced to deny this and calls off her engagement. Frederica and Reginald begin a romance. Lady Susan marries Sir James, who remains unaware that her relationship with Lord Manwaring continues. Reginald and Frederica marry.

"You mean she's dumped Ted and gone back to Ramone because of some *conversation*?" asks an irritable Fred of Marta, his date, in Whit Stillman's *Barcelona* (1994). The naval officer's appalled tone, his looking aghast, makes us laugh, because *Barcelona* is *all* conversation; one followed by another, followed by another, like a row of ants. It's not by chance that one of the nightclubs frequented by Fred and Marta is called "Visà-Vis."

As in *Barcelona*, so in Stillman's other films; talking - in rooms, in bars, inside cars, on the dance floor - precipitates incident; dialogue has consequences. Among other qualities, it's this that makes Stillman so eligible a proxy for Jane Austen. *Love and Friendship*, his fifth film, adapts Austen's *Lady Susan* - a lesser-known epistolary novella - converting many of the letters that pass between the title character and her confidante Alicia into tête-à-têtes. Stillman returns periodically to these frank exchanges (conducted in secret - Alicia is forbidden by her husband to meet with the dissolute widow), imparting structure to a film that is otherwise as peripatetic as its heroine, who has nowhere to hang her ostentatious, ostrich-feathered hats. As she reminds her teenaged daughter, "We don't live, we visit."

The film's focus is Lady Susan's scheming, the precise aims of which are withheld from the viewer, albeit we know what she covets: a steady flow of money and a man to slake her lust. Stillman fills his film with holes; doors close on consequential conversations, leaving the viewer shifting from foot to foot in the hall. Lady Susan's subjective filling in the blanks for her best friend introduces an element of tension that keeps us interested to the end: does she exaggerate her upper hand; will she be undone?



Stillman is experienced at putting unpleasant characters to the fore of his films. It takes the full running time of *Love and Friendship* to discover just how cunning and self-centred its protagonist is; less time to discover how intelligent. This is made apparent early on, when Lady Susan arrives - with an impoverished companion she has made her unpaid domestic - at Churchill, home of her late husband's brother, and is introduced to Reginald, who is staying there. He is amused by the rumours of her improprieties. So confident is he that he has the measure of his sister's husband's brother's widow that he greets her with a sardonic "your renown precedes you". But if he assumed - as we, too, might have - that her charms are purely carnal, he was wrong. With the suddenness of a viper striking at its prey, she defuses his superciliousness, so that neither he nor we will underestimate her again. Undoubtedly, Lady Susan is beautiful, but it's social intelligence that enables her to control others with staggering success. As such, she is very like Jane Austen, if Austen had bent her gift of perception to evil-doing.

Besides this, a large part of Lady Susan's personality is an almost pathological inability to admit wrongdoing, and a great deal of the film's comedy arises from the mental acrobatics she is wont to perform in order to assert her rectitude. Kate Beckinsale is effectively straight-faced in the role - menacing, narcissistic, enjoyably unlikeable - but doesn't bend over backwards. Much of what works about her performance is inherent: the actress's girlish, airy voice, for example, amplifies the deceptive innocence of her exterior. Furthermore, her director does her the service of having all intimacies and many of her most pivotal workings-over take place off-screen. This nourishes her mystery, so that Lady Susan rears over the film, a monster of mythic size.

Tom Bennett, by contrast, as the idiot-suitor of Lady Susan's daughter, quadruples the intended humour of his lines by his delivery, and Stillman gives him reams of time to do it in. The wooden bonhomie of Sir James - Bennett gives him only two attitudes, hand on hip and pointing a finger, as if Sir James has studied, in a book, the body language befitting a respectable gentleman - is as inventive and hilarious a physical performance as any I've seen on screen.

Stillman doesn't have as much fun with the camera as one could wish. (one misses the silly POVs of *Barcelona*.) Combined with the structural principle of looping back to Alicia and the deadpan

sameness of the dialogue, the lack of compositional variation makes it possible to tire of the film's concept two-thirds of the way through. Otherwise, *Love and Friendship* is highly entertaining, with Austen's text fitting Stillman's style like a Regency-era glove

Credits

Kate Beckinsale	Lady Susan Vernon Martin
Xavier Samuel	Reginald DeCourcy
Morfydd Clark	Frederica Vernon
Emma Greenwell	Catherine De Courcy Vernon
Tom Bennett	Sir James Martin
James Fleet	Sir Reginald DeCourcy
Jemma Redgrave	Lady De Courcy
Justin Edwards	Charles Vernon
Stephen Fry	Mr Johnson
Chlöe Sevigny	Alicia Johnson
Jem Murray	Lady Lucy Manwaring
Director	Whit Stillman
Screenplay	Whit Stillman
Dramaturge	Trevor Brown (after the novella <i>Lady Susan</i>)
DoP	Richard van Oosterhout
Editing	Sophie Corra
Costume	Eimer Ni Mhaoldomhnaig
Sound	Jean-Luc Audy
Composer	Benjamin Esdraffo

Another View

Whit Stillman's films are often concerned with the absurdities of human interactions. His latest, Love & Friendship, is no different - except that it's based on a Jane Austen novella. Yet Stillman, whose previous work like 2009's Damsels in Distress focuses in a skew-eyed perspective of modern America, is the perfect fit. Based on the Austen's epistolary Lady Susan, written in 1794 but not published until fifty years after her death, Stillman's period comedy centres on Kate Beckinsale's Lady Susan Vernon, a recently widowed socialite whose gallivanting around London since her husband's death has caused her reputation to plummet. She's a Machiavellian schemer who succeeds through arrogance and flirtation, wanting nothing more than a comfortable life but with the chance for some seduction on the side.

Susan is a literary cousin of Austen's Emma, in this story trying to arrange the marriage of her daughter Federica (Morfydd Clark) to the simple-minded, "a bit of a rattle" Sir James Martin (a scene-stealing Tom Bennett), while herself wooing the handsome, wealthy young bachelor Reginald de Courcy (Xavier Samuel). Meanwhile Reginald's sister (Emma Greenwell) is appalled that her brother has been sucked in by Susan's manipulation, embarking herself on a plot to thwart Susan's charms. Chlöe Sevigny, who starred alongside Beckinsale in Stillman's Last Days of Disco, serves as Susan's confidante, an equally morally challenged confidante who herself is married to an older man (Stephen Fry) with whom she is comfortable but does not love. It's a pleasant surprise to see Beckinsale excel as Susan. She is deliciously articulate in her rapid-fire dialogue, running rings around victims of her flirtations as they - like us - try and keep up with her. The speed of dialogue may be too much for some, but for those willing to keep up, Stillman's script is pure joy. Visually, Love & Friendship isn't too far from a typical Austen period piece like Joe Wright's Pride and Prejudice, but in focussing so emphatically on comedy, it feels fresh, perhaps the best Austen adaptation since Ang Lee's Sense & Sensibility. There are weddings and love affairs, but the whole thing has an air of an anti-romance, that for a woman marriage is being subsumed to someone "too old to love, too young to die". Perhaps Stillman hopes to highlight the eternal absurdity of

period dramas such as these, so consumed they are with romance and so often ending on marriage - making it subversive when indeed this story does. Still, there's little time to think on lofty themes Austen might have been contemplating - Stillman's film is such a brisk, breezy delight.

Ed Frankl: Cinevue

Our next screening Friday January 27th, 7.30 Son of Saul (Hungary 2015. Cert 15)

How to make a film about the Holocaust? All too often attempts to do so have been over-dramatised, resulting in what critic Peter Bradshaw calls the "grotesquely misplaced language of redemption and naive humanism."

Not Son of Saul. First-time director László Nemes' astonishing film conveys the awfulness of the death camps through sound rather than image, shooting almost entirely in close-up and using an indelible soundtrack to provide context.

The result is superbly realised, a haunting drama about survival and dignity that, once seen, is never forgotten. It's nominated for a BAFTA this year and deservedly won the Oscar for Best Film in a Foreign Language and Grand Prix in Cannes in 2016. It's our way of marking Holocaust Memorial Day and is not to be missed.