



Amy Adams and Frances McDormand

Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day

Directed by: Bharat Nalluri
Screenplay by: David Magee and Simon Beaufoy
Based on the novel by Winifred Watson

Cast: Frances McDormand, Amy Adams, Lee Pace, Ciaran Hinds, Shirley Henderson, Mark Strong, Tom Payne

Rating: PG-13

Running Time: 92 minutes

Screen Savor Movie Review: Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day

Opening March 7

Various theaters

By Kimberly Gadette

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Just like Miss Pettigrew herself, Winifred Watson's 1938 novel of the same name had been shoved aside by time and circumstance. Originally optioned by Universal to become a musical starring Billie Burke (Glinda, the Good Witch from *The Wizard of Oz*), once World War II had become a grim reality, Hollywood's taste for musicals was supplanted by more dramatic fare. As Miss Pettigrew suffered a setback due to one World War, so, too, did the project. Shelved, overlooked — until one inexplicable day, when suddenly, voila!, a rebirth. For the novel, it happened in 2000; for Miss Pettigrew...well, you'll have to see for yourself.

The movie is set in 1939; though London is on the verge of war, high society is in deep denial. Amid all the fashion, fun and high times, a plain governess, a clergyman's daughter (Frances McDormand's Miss Pettigrew) finds herself unexpectedly unemployed. Desperate to find work, she pushes her way into a position as a social secretary to American actress/singer Delysia Lafosse. Though the movie unfolds in just one 24-hour period, it is the one day that will profoundly change both Pettigrew's and Delysia's lives.

It's hard to say which element is the most delicious: the acting, the dialogue, the pace, the sets and costumes, the story...or the delightful, eye-filling blend, expertly helmed by director Bharat Nalluri. Though his previous experiences couldn't be further away from period comedy (the miniseries *Tsunami: The Aftermath* and the London caper television series *Hustle*), this is a director who will not be pigeonholed. Per Nalluri: "I was perhaps not the obvious choice for a romantic comedy. But after *Tsunami*, which dealt with such pain and loss, I knew I wanted — needed — to do something that dealt with love and hope. Having just gotten engaged myself, I wanted to explore love and the choices we make."

Perhaps the film resonates on a deeper note particularly because of Nalluri's experience. There is a gravitational pull underneath all the layers of *Pettigrew's* petticoats, adding a much darker, modern tone to the whole. Compared to madcap musicals and comedies of the late '30s, [Pettigrew](#) is not so much a twin but a worldly, older sister who joins in the fun of the evening, all the while knowing that the party is about to end.

The filmmakers choose strong, visual devices to cue us in. The mannequins in the store window are fashion-plate perfection — yet wear gas masks. Flighty Delysia and her friends gasp in horror...but at the capped sleeves rather than the masks. Bearing witness to the haves and have-nots, while Pettigrew stands begging at a soup kitchen, expensive motorcars carrying sumptuously-dressed passengers pull up within a few feet of her shabby shoes.

Her shoes notwithstanding, McDormand's performance is richly complex. One of the most stunning chameleons of her generation (*Fargo's* Marge, *Laurel Canyon's* Jane), McDormand embodies this plain, knowing woman with strength and kindness, a prim shell barely able to contain the passionate woman stifling beneath her utilitarian, brown cloth coat.

Her co-lead, the bubbly Amy Adams, is at first concerning — is there any gray matter inside this cotton candy-headed, goodtime gal? Though there's a long wait, we eventually get to understand the hungry little girl inside.

Speaking of hunger, a compelling theme runs throughout. Pettigrew can't get a calorie to save her life; like Delysia, for all the seeming abundance right at their fingertips, they are both emotionally (and in Pettigrew's case, literally) starving to death.

Supporting the duo are two wonderfully-layered performances: Ciarán Hinds' Joe, far more assured in business than in matters of the heart, and squeak-voiced Shirley Henderson (unrecognizable from her Moaning Myrtle of the Harry Potter films), a conniver who understands exactly what she needs to do to survive. Lastly, Delysia's three boyfriends each add their individual personalities into this sparkling, champagne cocktail mix.

[Miss Pettigrew](#) may look like a casual romp, but it's much, much more.

The newsreel report: Scathingly funny dialogue, grand performances, a marvelous story — the London blitz notwithstanding, this one's an utter blast!