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“Just an excuse for debauchery!”

Lady Booby (Ann-Margret)

Woodfall’s second and final Henry Fielding adaptation

arrived a full decade and a half after the first, Tom Jones, but has never quite escaped the heavy shadow of its illustrious and Oscar-laden predecessor. Such comparisons, while inevitable, only go so far: the later film is much more unambiguously comic and satirical

in tone, amping up the bawdiness levels to the extent that some reviewers sniffed that the results were close to the hugely popular Carry On series than traditional literary adaptations. Such criticism is arguably misguided, the Joseph Andrews film and Carry On both emanating from a very long and extremely resilient British tradition of saucy titillation perhaps most pithily encapsulated in the 20th century via the “naughty” postcards of illustrator Donald McGill.

Richardson’s Joseph Andrews is drenched in sex, bringing to vivid—and often grotesque—life the West Country of England in the middle of the 17th century. It is a world dominated by class and financial distinctions, riven with corruption of all sorts, through which our innocent, fresh-faced, lowly-born eponymous hero (played by Peter Firth) moves as a pawn in the hands of those more powerful than he.

Footman to the impetuous Lady Booby (Ann-Margret), Joseph’s native intelligence, good looks and pleasant nature catch plenty of eyes, and propel him through various strata of society. But while many desire this blond, strapping lad, he only has eyes for his childhood sweetheart Fanny Goodwill (Natalie Ogle). Fate places many obstacles in the duo’s path, needless to say, which Joseph is determined to surmount without surrendering a fraction of his virtuous dignity. Easier said than done...

Joseph Andrews received a mixed reception on its release, but earned a full-blown rave from Vincent Canby of the New York Times: “[a] funny, stylish, infinitely cheerful film, which... contains more great (and more greatly funny) character performances than any film I’ve seen in years. It’s one of the few movies around now that truly lifts the spirits, not only because it is so good-humored but also because the humor is laced with so much wit and wisdom.” A fascinating companion piece not only to Richardson’s Tom Jones but also to Stanley Kubrick’s Barry Lyndon (1975), it may not match either in terms of sheer cinematic mastery but if anything exceeds them both in terms of sheer period verisimilitude. Indeed, Richardson’s attention to detail verges on the pathological: he reportedly hired long-outmoded varieties of livestock from the Rare Breeds Survival Center to populate the backgrounds of agricultural scenes.

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The costumes (both designers were BAFTA-nominated) and make-up are a riot of colour and excess, with Joseph and Fanny's unpainted visages standing in telling contrast to the gaudy affectations of Lady Booby and the myriad decadent aristocrats who crowd the busy frames. Staging a brief but spectacular return to the Woodfall fold some 16 years after *A Taste of Honey*: Murray Melvin, flutteringly fey as the fop to end all fops ("I bruise as easily as a peach!")

But this really is a cast for the ages, headed by Ann-Margaret (top-billed after her magnificently unbridled turn in Ken Russell's *Tommy*, but Golden Globe nominated as Best Supporting Actress) and Firth, fresh from his successful handling of a very trying central role in *Equus* in London and New York; Joseph Andrews beat Sidney Lumet's film version of the latter into cinemas by just a few months. Tom Jones veteran Peter Bull pops up briefly as Lady Booby's ill-fated husband, while a key character from the 1963 picture returns with a different face, Hugh Griffith taking over from Milo O'Shea as Squire Western, confirming Joseph Andrews as a kind of "spiritual sequel" to the earlier smash.

But whereas *Tom Jones* is very much a countrified affair, *Joseph Andrews* has a foot in "town" too: Bath, the city to to which the action frequently returns, is depicted as a work-in-progress metropolis where great wealth and extreme poverty co-exist, powdered cheek by disease-addled jowl. Inequality goes hand in hand with cruel repression: while the overall tone is jovial, strong stomachs are required for the scene in which one of the most sympathetic and heroic characters on view—*Carry On* escapee Jim Dale, unrecognisably swarthy and curly-maned as "the pedlar") is flogged until he vomits. And even Russell would surely have applauded an extended sequence involving a Dracula-like wicked squire (Kenneth Cranham as "The Wicked Squire"), who stages a Black Mass complete with highly sexualised nuns. A film with something for—and to offend—everyone, indeed.