



Friday, January 23rd, 7.30pm

In Secret (15)

dir: Charlie Stratton

starring: Elizabeth Olsen, Oscar Isaac, Jessica Lange

sponsor: LFS member

this review is reproduced with the kind permission of Sight and Sound magazine

After a career in television, Charlie Stratton turns to feature directing with an American adaptation of *Thérèse Raquin*, the 19th century novel by Emile Zola about an obsessive affair that precipitates murder and its ghoulds of conscience. But heavily-handedly reproducing the book's more pulpish, gothic aspects at the expense of character exploration or stylistic risk, his insipidly named *In Secret* lacks a stamp of fresh personality or contemporising flair.

The Victorian period's fascination with morbidity colours the film's world. In an awkward rush of broad-stroke exposition, the child Thérèse, her mother dead, is deposited in the rain at the home of her widowed aunt, Madame Raquin, who enshrines in needlepoint tapestry the household dictum: "Don't make a sound." As Madame Raquin, Jessica Lange is convincingly flinty and emotionally needy by turns, but such blunt literalism is difficult for her and the rest of the cast to ignite. Also oppressing Thérèse is the sickly constitution of Madame Raquin's doted-on son Camille, which leaves her as nursing guardian. Years later, and penniless, Thérèse doesn't protest when her aunt insists she marry Camille. This is an era, it's made clear, when a lack of material means left little agency, and one's fate was vulnerable to the self-interested whims of others.

An abrupt jump takes us to Paris – shot in Budapest as a dingy, stifling lair. Gloom is laid on thick in the haberdashery shop the three inhabit. A bolt of vibrancy strikes through Thérèse's ennui when Laurent, her husband's darkly handsome old acquaintance, starts frequenting their domino evenings. An artist, he regales the other regulars (a gallery of grotesques among which is a police commissioner, prone to muse on monstrous crimes) with talk of having painted corpses at the morgue. Oscar Isaac plays Laurent like a Byronic scoundrel, all smirks and smoulder, reeking of a base sensuality that Thérèse has been starved of by clammy, wheezing Camille (Ton Felton.)

Zola defended his novel as a naturalistic study of human temperaments, though his schematic characterisation and bare prose only become flatter under Stratton. At least Isaac has more to work with here than he did as ludicrous erotic fantasy Evegeni



in Madonna's *W.E.* (2011) and he has rakish magnetism down pat. Elizabeth Olsen seems less sure of what to bring to thinly sketched Thérèse. She's all gasps and barely concealed, fixated looks that don't get beyond shorthand eroticism. Stratton at first seems keen to play up her desire as liberating sexual awakening, but as the lovers throw themselves into their trysts, hardly caring if they are discovered, it's more light, situational farce (he hides under her skirts) than anything transgressive.

Although *Thérèse Raquin* shocked in its day, its brand of hysteria and comeuppance via guilty conscience has little to hook modern audiences who have moved on to more graphic assaults on moral structures – such as last year's steamy titillation *Blue Is The Warmest Colour*. Visual motifs of entrapment and animal symbolism signposting the torments of humanity's bestial urges abound (a caged bear that has mauled itself conveniently pops into view during a walk, for instance.) The river's cold dampness seeps through foreboding dreams with blatant foreshadowing – which is faithful to the novel but no more graceful for it. After the decisive boating trip, the film only descends further into gothic melodrama. Laurent's blue-grey portrait of Camille, in which he looks already drowned, hangs over them – subtlety's final, sodden grave.

Synopsis: France, the 1860s. After her mother's death, Thérèse is taken to live with her aunt, Madame Raquin, and cousin Camille. Growing up, she nurses sickly Camille. Thérèse consents to marry Camille – Madame Raquin hopes that their union will secure her own future – and the family move to Paris, where Camille becomes a clerk and the women run a haberdasher's shop. Camille's old friend Laurent begins calling. He and Thérèse embark on a passionate affair. When Camille announces that the family is to move back to the country, the lovers, desperate to stay together, consider murdering him. During a boating trip, Laurent throws Camille overboard and he drowns. Though Thérèse and Laurent are not suspected, their guilty consciences torment them. Beset by grief, Madame Raquin has a stroke, which leaves her wheelchair-bound and unable to speak. On the suggestion of family friends, Thérèse and Laurent marry, but their relationship descends into mutual animosity. Madame Raquin overhears them fighting about their crime. Unable to tell anyone, she suffers in silence, finally looking on with satisfaction as they commit suicide by drinking poison.

Credits (selected)

Thérèse Raquin: Elizabeth Olsen

Laurent LeClaire: Oscar Isaac

Camille Raquin: Tom Felton

Madame Raquin: Jessica Lange

Suzanne: Shirley Henderson

Olivier: Matt Lucas

Grivet: Mackenzie Crook

Director: Charlie Stratton

Screenplay: Charlie Stratton

DoP: Florian Hoffmeister

Editors: Paul Tothill, Celia Haining

Music: Gabriel Yared

USA 2013. 107 mins



Lincoln Film Society

Patron: Jim Broadbent



"I have not read *"Thérèse Raquin,"* the 1867 Emile Zola novel upon which *"In Secret"* is based. A little research revealed that Zola's serialized story of adultery, murder and marriages, both arranged and desired, has been adapted numerous times. *"Thérèse Raquin"* has been remade as a German silent film, TV movies in Belgium, Italy, Sweden, Germany and the UK, a BBC radio play and an opera. French director Marcel Carné cast Simone Signoret in his 1953 film version, and Park Chan-Wook worked several plot elements into his 2009 vampire movie, *"Thirst."*

A little research also revealed that the ripest plot elements of *"In Secret"* come straight from its source. This explains the TV movies, the opera and the vampires, all of which thrive when fed a good, soapy, trashy story. I enjoy being fed one, too. *"In Secret"* was roundly panned when it played at last year's Toronto Film Festival, but to paraphrase and reverse Shakespeare's *Marc Antony*, I have come to praise it, not to bury it.

Director Charlie Stratton wraps his adaptation in the appropriate period dress of Zola's era. In 19th century France, Madame Raquin (Jessica Lange) is visited by her brother, who leaves young Thérèse (Lily Laight) in her charge. Madame puts Thérèse to work taking care of Madame's heir, Camille. Camille is a sickly boy whose coughing keeps Thérèse awake in the bed they share; she pulls the bedcovers over her head in frustration. Courtesy of the film's editor, when Thérèse pulls the bed covers down, she has morphed into Elizabeth Olsen. Now 21, Thérèse is forced by Madame into an arranged marriage with her first cousin. Camille (Tom Felton) moves Mom and wife to Paris, where he starts his career and meets up with an old family friend named Laurent (Oscar Isaac). To support Camille, Madame and Thérèse open up the gloomiest looking shop in town. It's designed and lit like a mausoleum, and though people come and go, I don't recall seeing anyone buy anything.

More important activities happen upstairs in the living quarters anyway. There, Madame plays dominoes with her wards and fellow members of her class. Her contemporaries talk of the most morbid of subjects, including the foreshadowing topics of scandalous murder and the gruesome aftermath one witnesses at the morgue. Soon, Madame's wards will also become knowledgeable of the contents of the local morgue: Camille makes the fatal mistake of bringing Laurent to visit one evening.

Camille may be French, but his skills *dans le boudoir* are far from ooh-la-la. So when the sexually frustrated Thérèse takes one look at the dark haired, brooding Laurent, her libido starts doing the Can-Can. Immediately, she and Laurent begin an affair. Their lunchtime trysts occur above the shop, right under the nose of Madame, but go undetected. (Have you not ears, woman?!) Unlike in the pulpier fiction, these nooners seem more a cynical matter of convenience than an all-consuming passion—Thérèse is horny and Laurent can no longer afford the brothel. Camille, of course, is completely unaware of his betrayal, at least until he winds up at the bottom of the river.

Stratton wisely withholds the murder at first, cutting directly to the agonized cries of the murderers pretending to be upset at the "accidental" death. For a time, we're left to ponder who did the killing and how it transpired. When Camille's body is finally pulled

from his watery grave and delivered to the morgue, Laurent discovers it's just as gross as Madame's domino buddies described. Thus begins his downfall.

With Camille out of the picture, the lovers try to figure out how to get together publicly without arousing suspicion. *"In Secret"* finds an unpredictable way around this by playing up the cluelessness of Madame's domino buddies. They misread everything by filtering the obvious through a prism of societal sexism and individual idiocy. This has a major payoff later. For now, their obliviousness is hilarious: *"Thérèse has been sick with grief! She must need another husband! Now whom can she marry? Ah yes, Laurent!"*

So far, we have the noir element of lovers who kill to be together. *"In Secret"* now adds the juicy, soap opera components. The film becomes haunted by Camille's ghost, which the guilty see in their grisly dreams and Madame literally sees the moment before she experiences a life-changing event. Thérèse and Laurent turn on each other; their guilt becomes a bucket of ice water on their sex-based relationship. Thanks to the marriage, neither can leave, so they each consider killing the other. *"Body Heat"* has now become *"War of the Roses."* With ghosts.

The actors approach this material with varying degrees of success. Isaac is better in his early scenes as a seducer, Olsen is better in her bitter, angry later scenes, but they synch up by the film's over-the-top last moments. Felton is suitably foppish and dopey. Shirley Henderson plays the hell out of a scene that seems inspired by *"The Shining"*.

None of them, however, can match Jessica Lange. Those years on *"American Horror Story"* have convinced me that Lange can bring credibility to the most ridiculous plot twists. Somehow, she finds the perfect line of lunacy to tow, which *"In Secret"* requires for her character's arc. She goes from villainous to victimized to vengeful, stopping along the way for what I'll simply describe as an extremely important game of charades. The plot forces a late-movie restriction on her performance, and her handling of it made me want to throw roses at the diva onscreen.

"In Secret" is a costume drama with a gigantic accent on the drama. It's my kind of crazy, and I was quite entertained. To borrow again from Shakespeare, *"'Tis Madness, but there's method to't."*

Odie Henderson, Roger Ebert.com

Our next film: Friday January 30th

We Are The Best (Sweden/Denmark, 2013. Cert 15)

Director Lukas Moodysson's highly entertaining adaptation of his wife's graphic novel centres on three young misfits growing up in early '80s Stockholm. Pixieish, mohawk-sporting Klara and her best friend Bobo are 13-year-old rebels looking for a cause. Despairing at the attitudes of their peers and despite having no instruments - or discernible musical talent - the two are determined not to let the spirit of punk die and put all their energy into forming an all-girl band, recruiting their shy, classical guitar-playing schoolmate Hedvig as the third wheel.

Beautifully performed by the young cast, and with superb photography, *We Are The Best* shows tender affection for the period in which the film is set, and Moodysson paints an ebullient and sharply observant portrait of growing up. Being 13 has never seemed so much fun!