



Lincoln Film Society

Patron: Jim Broadbent
Registered Charity No. 1156478
Friday March 16th 2018
Certain Women (Cert 12a)

Dir: Kelly Reichardt

Starring: Michelle Williams, Laura Dern, Kristen Stewart.

Lily Gladstone

Sponsor: Indie-Lincs Film Festival

This review contains plot details. It is reproduced with the kind permission of Sight and Sound magazine

Synopsis: Three loosely connected stories set in present-day Livingston, Montana.

Lawyer Laura's affair with Ryan is petering out as one of her clients - angry at what he sees as negative advice - takes a hostage. She tries to get him to turn himself in but he flees. Meanwhile Gina is building a new house for her family, hoping it will strengthen her marriage to Ryan. Outside town, rancher Jamie meets Beth at a night-school Beth teaches. There is rapport between them but Beth suddenly abandons her teaching role. Jamie tries to understand why. Laura visits her client, who's in jail. Gina organises a barbeque on the site of her new house.

Beyond a sliding stable door, a muted but ravishing Montana vista fills the frame with horizontal ribbons of snowy peaks, blue-grey ranges, frosted plains and weathered fencing. In front of it, a lone ranch hand drops off feed for horses, immersed in her daily tasks. Winding women's stories into north-western landscapes, traditionally given over by film to men and their noisy Manifest Destiny, is Kelly Reichardt's speciality. But rather than the homeless roamers of *Wendy and Lucy* (2008) or *Meek's Cutoff* (2010), the stoical struggling heroines of this triptych of lightly linked narratives are rooted in town or ranch: lawyer Laura (Laura Dern) is dogged by her troublesome client Fuller, his hostage taking dropping her directly into his revenge plans; businesswoman Gina (Michelle Williams) plots the perfect rural house to underpin her wavering marriage, seeking authentic local stones from an elderly neighbour; and a rancher (Lily Gladstone) gets a crush on night-school teacher Beth (Kristen Stewart), a frazzled rookie lawyer worn down by working two jobs.

Around the four sharply observed character studies, the landscape lingers without pressing in, to be picked over by acquisitive Gina, worked on by the rancher or traversed by the exhausted Beth. Visible through every window and car journey, the Montana mountains preside over everything. Shot by long-time Reichardt collaborator Christopher Blauvelt in 16mm, giving grain and subtle texture to the film's slate-and-beige palette, they have a painterly look that's never overworked. There's a hint of Milton Avery's blocky landscapes about them, as Reichardt has acknowledged. Looming large, they add to the film's discreet echoes of north-western history, successive inhabitants signalled by the costumed Native Americans dancing in the mall or Gina's townie hunger for the original sandstone blocks that were once the frontier schoolhouse. A meticulous natural soundscape underlines all of this, its outdoor silences embroidered almost imperceptibly with river splashes, birdsong, wind in the trees and the distant hum of a car.

Reichardt is a master minimalist whose style suits the short story



form. Laura's and the rancher's tales in particular are delicate, pared-back miniatures that deliver both character and story skilfully. The three tales are taken from Maile Meloy's collections *Both Ways Is the Only Way I Want It* and *Half in Love*, nimbly feminised and connected so lightly that they just brush past one another; it's utterly unlike Altman or *Crash*'s heavily interwoven plots. But their short span, coupled with Reichardt's austere storytelling, allows us less time to trace the links between character and setting. This only becomes an issue in Gina's section, where the sliver of story and Williams's deliciously tetchy and contained performance feels slightly ambiguous. Is this cheated-on wife simmering with suppressed rage? Or is she a selfish yuppie pushing others aside in pursuit of her 'authentic' Montana home? Or perhaps both at once. By contrast, Laura's experience with Jared Harris's despairing, life-swiped client is a beautifully sketched mix of frustration and sympathy, expressed in exasperated meetings and a slyly comic hostage standoff where the police cheerfully pitch Laura into danger.

What the triptych structure nicely amplifies, however, are the women's plights and their tiredness, as they struggle with debt or loneliness, unhappy marriage or male neediness. With minimalism as an organising principle, characterisation is pieced together from scant dialogue, worn-in clothes of fleeting expressions. Reichardt shoots her actresses' faces with the same lingering attention that she gives to the landscape - Dern long-suffering and game, Williams pursed and irritable and newcomer Gladstone shyly eating up a bone-weary Stewart with her eyes.

This last story is the film's best, a slender handful of scenes creating an emotionally engaging tale of infatuation, with Gladstone's standout performance speaking volumes with a bitten lip or a darting glance. It's quite an achievement, in a film where the playing is uniformly excellent. Threaded through with the chores that the rancher undertakes daily (reminiscent of the fascination with the work of women pioneers in *Meek's Cutoff*), it's a pitch-perfect portrait of loneliness and longing. Gladstone and Stewart infuse their characters with an exquisite awkwardness, which melts only during a late-night horse ride, a rare moment of tenderness.

In all three stories, traditional 'women's film' territory is traversed (infidelity, a disintegrating marriage, a near-miss love). But just as she made an innovative, no-action western of *Meek's Cutoff*, here Reichardt has created a 'woman's film' that never tips into melodrama. Her stories pierce the viewer without resorting to violence, marital showdowns or any kind of over-dramatic gesture.

Spare but wide-ranging in its concerns, quietly played but emotionally powerful, *Certain Women*'s whispers are more penetrating than most films' shouts.

Credits

Laura Wells	Laura Dern
Ryan	James Le Gros
Fuller	Jared Harris
Sheriff Rowles	John Getz
Gina	Michelle Williams
Guthrie	Sara Rodier
Albert	Rene Auberjonois
Jamie, rancher	Lily Gladstone
Elizabeth 'Beth' Travis	Kristen Stewart
Billings, personal injury lawyer	Guy Boyd
Amituana	Joshua T. Fonokalafi
Director	Kelly Reichardt
Screenplay	Kelly Reichardt
Cinematographer	Christopher Blauvelt
Editor	Kelly Reichardt
Production design	Anthony Gasparro
Music	Jeff Grace
Sound mix	Paul T Maritsas
Costume	April Napier

USA 2015 106 mins

Another View

Sometimes, in those rare, remarkable occasions, you know right off that a film is great. From the first shot of Kelly Reichardt's *Certain Women*—a grainy Montana landscape grayed by winter, with hills so soft in they could be painted on, and a train arcing its way towards the camera—it is clear this film is special. Based on stories by author Maile Meloy, the film takes the unusual form of a sequence of three stories, all set in small town Montana, and each foregrounded on a woman and her conflicted yearning.

Laura Dern is a lawyer whose client (Jared Harris) in a dead-end malfeasance lawsuit gets increasingly dejected and unhinged at the same time her love affair with an anonymous man—played by James Le Gros and introduced in the film's opening scene in an homage to *Psycho*'s work break rendezvous—falters. In the second tale, Michelle Williams sneaks a cigarette in Lululemon running gear on a nature trail, returned to her family's deluxe campground, and with her down-to-earth but somewhat apathetic husband (Le Gros, re-appearing) continues a discussion with a local to buy a pile of historic stone with which the couple can build their second home. The final story follows seasonal horse tender Lily Gladstone as she goes about her solitary work and shows up at a local adult education class out of curiosity and loneliness. It is being taught by Kristen Stewart's haggard greenhorn lawyer, moonlighting from several towns over as an instructor, and Gladstone, drawn to her, invites the distracted and exhausted young woman along after each class for a chat over a diner meal.

In each story - connected causally, with Le Gros subtly wavering between Dern and Williams in the background of their two stories, and Gladstone eventually looking for Stewart at Dern's law firm - we see Reichardt's exquisite skill realized: a breathtaking precision that captures the reality, character, and emotional tenor of her people and their world in nearly every shot, and builds up this observation and insight with economy and beauty. (This is realized in no small part by Christopher Blauvelt's gorgeous, restrained Super 16 mm photography.) With the exception of Gladstone's lone rancher, these certain women are actually doing much better in their lives than Reichardt's Oregonian outcasts she has so movingly introduced us to in the past in such films as *Old Joy* and *Night Moves*; yet they each are united in a common feeling, emotional and existential, of just being on the outside, of being held on the cusp of what would make them happy and fulfilled.

Dern's story cleverly displaces her bumpy romance—briefly suggested—with a pocket-sized but deeply felt relationship study between herself and her distraught client. She is patient and calm in the face of his exasperation, yet something of his despair seems to echo in her. Williams' story is a flashpoint for the stumble this

otherwise impeccable filmmaker sometimes takes, of making her political point too on the nose. The film is already suffused with the frontier landscape of westerns, and the story of a yuppie re-claiming Montana's past for herself (the stones belonged to an old schoolhouse) clangs a bit obviously. Yet this story is shot with the same detail and loveliness as the rest, and it continues Reichardt's wonderful collaboration with the actress, re-imagining Williams not as the social outcast of *Wendy and Lucy* but as the kind of person who may never have noticed that earlier, more destitute and desperate incarnation of herself.

The final tale works best at integrating the film's desire to connect across the landscape echoes of America's bygone history with the smaller, sadder lives in the present in these same epic spaces. The attraction—like that between the two men in *Old Joy*—of the kind-faced Gladstone to the grouchy Stewart is marvelous in its ambiguity: it is sexual, certainly, but the attraction is also professional, friendly and social. This figure of Montana's past, spending all her time as a ranch hand, encountering this other young American woman who is clawing herself up—with remarkable lack of charisma, I might add: Reichardt and Stewart make her character a bit unpleasant, which pays off in a bracing final scene between the two women—is a tenuous but moving connection. That Stewart may eventually turn into Dern's lawyer, for better or for worse, continues the film's quiet engagement of American lives lived not only through specific spaces but through time, and is one of many subtle nuances evoked by this feature film unexpectedly made of short stories. You'd be hard-pressed to find a more quietly rich, or more obviously beautiful film this year.

Daniel Kasman: MUBI

Our next film: Friday March 23rd The Innocents (France 2016. Cert 15)

Rearranged to this evening, after the technical problems of January 12th, *The Innocents* provides another chapter in Poland's exploration of its recent history. Mathilde, a young doctor attached to a Red Cross unit in Poland at the end of World War 2, answers a request for help from a local convent. When she arrives, she finds one of the sisters in labour and several others in advanced stages of pregnancy. Mathilde is sworn to secrecy by the Reverend Mother but the situation she has become involved with not only presents her with a practical challenge, it also provides a challenging spiritual crisis.

Programming news

Planning for the new season is now under way, so it's time for our annual call to members for their nominations for the long list. As usual, we are looking for films from the last 12 months which have not been shown in Lincoln before.

The deadline for suggestions is April 30th; they should be sent to filminlincoln@gmail.com or give them to committee members.

We can also confirm that **The Other Side of Hope** (postponed from March 2nd) will be screened on Thursday May 17th, at 7.30pm

Important Membership information

Membership for the new season will become available in May. There will be some changes from previous practice which the committee is currently deciding. Members should look out for details which will be announced next month