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A New 'Rebecca'— 'Still Great Fun'

The woman, seemingly talking to herself, says, "Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again," and the mystery-fiction buff will immediately recognize the famous opening line of a classic. Daphne du Maurier's 1938 novel "Rebecca" was translated by Alfred Hitchcock into a memorable film starring Laurence Olivier, Joan Fontaine and Judith Anderson. The movie won two Hollywood Oscars in 1941 and has remained a favorite on the revival circuit. Tampering with established success can be foolhardy, but, in 1978, the British Broadcasting Corporation saw fit to produce an entirely new version of "Rebecca," this one consisting of four 50-minute episodes — the film ran 115 minutes — tailored specifically for the television screen. The package, acquired for public television's "Mystery!" series, begins its weekly run this Tuesday at 10 P.M. on WNET/Channel 13.

"Mystery!," produced by Joan Wilson for Boston station WGBH, has turned out to be one of the more appealing surprises of the current season. Underwritten by Mobil Oil, the long-time patron of the "Masterpiece Theater" showcase for British imports, the new series is at once specialized and not stuffy about its literary pretensions. The emphasis is on fun, in the sense of a good easy read.

Now, with "Rebecca," the series turns to the presumably more serious matters of romance, jealousy and ominous intrigue. But if the tone is darkly mysterious, the melodramatic manner is cleverly diverting. It's still great fun. The 1941 film was more Hitchcock, in a sense, than du Maurier. The director's magic was employed in the service of a psychological thriller. Spare, almost ascetic film techniques were combined with inventive editing to create an almost suffocating enclosure for the principal characters. Every frame of the film was used calculatingly as Mr. Hitchcock meticulously explored demonic reverberations. Indeed, he took liberties with the book, most notably in having the death of Rebecca, who is never seen, depicted as an accident. In the Hollywood of those days, it seems, the hero of a piece could never be a murderer.

Produced by Richard Beynon, whose BBC credits include "Madame Bovary," "Poldark" and the Lord Peter Wimsey stories of Dorothy Sayres, television's "Rebecca" offers a much more literal translation of the novel. Hugh Whitmore's script is, with the exception of one scene, painstakingly faithful to Dame du Maurier. At the same time, the production, directed by Simon Langton, has been opened up to include sweeping, on-location vistas. When the unnamed heroine, the "girl," meets Maxim de Winter in Monaco, the viewer is afforded a pronounced sense of place. When the newlyweds go to his estate, Manderley, there is no doubt that this is Cornwall, England, overflowing with dramatic cliffs and flowering hedges.

The Hitchcock interpretation of "Rebecca" was relentlessly intense. This one is more relaxed and relatively lush, closer to the pacing of the novel. It is certainly not better. It is different and works surprisingly well on its own terms. The story is set up brilliantly. In Monte Carlo, the girl, only 19 years old, is a paid companion to the wealthy and rather vulgar Mrs. Van Hopper. Max, still recovering from the death of his beautiful wife Rebecca, is staying at the same hotel. When Mrs. Van Hopper is put to bed with a cold, Max begins a casual relationship with her mousey companion, who happens to be an orphan. The girl is puzzled by his attentions, convinced that he is only sorry for her. But Max is persistent: "Damn your ideas of my kindness and feeling sorry for you — I want you with me, that's all." Meanwhile, just about every exchange of dialogue contains suspicious overtones. The girl: "If only there could be an invention that bottled up memories like scent." Max: "I wish to ignore memories. The past exerts its own powerful fascination — sometimes the scent is too strong for the bottle." Or, Max: "One of these days, you'll realize that being kind isn't one of my strong qualities."

Of course, the 42-year-old aristocrat marries the shy waif, and the happy couple spend their honeymoon in Venice, creating an opportunity for a tender love scene, the scene that is not in the novel. Then they head for Max's Manderley, overseen by the strange, to put it mildly, Mrs. Danvers. There, as the result of the tireless machinations of Mrs. Danvers, the girl is made to feel thoroughly inadequate. It seems she cannot compete with the beauty and vivaciousness, the indomitable spirit that once belonged to Rebecca. Max seems to grow more distant. The castle itself, with its closed rooms, becomes a menacing character. Faces can be fleetingly seen retreating behind its shutters. Puzzling characters, such as the common thug Jack Favell, keep popping up at regular intervals. The mystery of the dead wife spreads and deepens into a spellbinding yarn.

Let it be stressed that Mr. Hitchcock had a better cast. As Max, Jeremy Brett is no Olivier. But, then, who is? Mr. Brett is, nonetheless, the matinee-idol type of actor who can make a thoroughly impossible character unexpectedly tolerable. He expertly maintains a layer of intriguing vulnerability just below the surface of Max's arrogance. Joanna David's "girl" occasionally threatens to disappear altogether in a mist of excessive humility and devotion. But she eventually establishes her own modest yet firm personality. In the role of Mrs. Danvers, Anna Massey is fully worthy of a Hitchcock benediction. Without imitating Judith Anderson, Miss Massey gives a performance that is equally as memorable. Whether distantly contemptuous or threateningly insinuating, this Mrs. Danvers is a creation to be savored by students of acting.

No British production, of course, would be complete without superb cameos. In "Rebecca," there is Elspeth March turning the pretentious Mrs. Van Hopper into a monument of blowsy vulgarity. Splendid! There is the character of Beatrice, Max's outdoorsy, no-nonsense older sister. I kept taking notes on this marvelous performance only to discover that the actress was Vivien Pickles, who has played, among other roles, the lead in Ken Russell's television biography of Isadora Duncan and the unusual woman with children in John Schlesinger's film "Sunday, Bloody Sunday." The remarkable Miss Pickles never disappoints.

While hardly profound, "Rebecca" is chock full of nice touches. At the same time, "Mystery!" continues to make favorable impressions. The series is a welcome addition to the public-television schedule. ■