

Lady Chatterley

Benny Crick in Paris

28 Feb 2007 15:15

Dir: Pascale Ferran.Fr-Bel. 2006. 168mins.

***Lady Chatterley* sees Pascale Ferran deliver a coolly elegant new screen take on DH Lawrence's once notorious novel about a high-born woman's adulterous affair with a commoner. It forgoes the book's obscene language and graphic sexual realism for a more contemplative drama of sex, love, and moral regeneration.**

Elevated by a gracious breakthrough performance by Marina Hands, the film returns Ferran to the front rank of French arthouse film-makers after more than a decade in a professional wilderness.

Ferran first entered the spotlight in 1994 with a debut feature, *Coming To Terms With The Dead*, which won the Camera d'Or at Cannes, and a second feature the following year. Since then, she has struggled in vain to mount ambitious projects but has kept busy on co-screenwriting duties for fellow directors.

Lady Chatterley has already won France's prestigious Louis Delluc Prize and five César Awards. After screening in the Panorama at the Berlin Film Festival (where it enjoyed a good reception), it should play widely on the international arthouse circuit. That said, the film's length, measured pacing and lack of conventional erotic heat may put off audiences expecting something closer to the rutting vitality of the book.

Lawrence's book has inspired several official screen versions as well as some soft-core exploitation films. It was previously filmed in France by Marc Allegret with Danielle Darrieux (1955) and Just Jaeckin with Sylvia Kristel (1981). Ken Russell directed a BBC TV adaptation in 1993. Ferran's film was also prepared as a two-part TV film for Franco-German culture channel, Arte, which co-produced.

Ferran and co-writers Roger Bohbot and Pierre Trividic (for the dialogue) drew their script not from the final version of Lawrence's book, published as *Lady Chatterley's Lover* in 1928, but from a preceding version of the story (there were three in all), titled *John Thomas And Lady Jane*, that Ferran found less wordy and didactic and closer to her own concerns.

Too, Ferran respects the time and place of the story – a country estate in the Midlands a few years after the First World War – though she reduces the social backdrop so essential to Lawrence to incidental importance.

The film centres every scene on young Constance, Lady Chatterley (Hands), whose baronet husband, Sir Clifford Chatterley (Girardot), is a paraplegic war veteran and mine owner. But her listlessness, poor health and sexual frustration lead her into an affair with her husband's gamekeeper, Parkin (Coulloc'h).

Their sexual relationship deepens into a more complex passion and Constance finds herself pregnant. She decides to join her sister and father on a holiday on the Riviera where she is supposed to cover up the true parentage of her child.

Constance returns to find Parkin embroiled in a painful divorce suit with his estranged wife. The film ends on a long dialogue between the lovers about building their future together.

Responding in particular to Lawrence's pantheistic world view, Ferran, with the assistance of Julien Hirsch's exquisite cinematography, pays special attention to the sheer physicality of the heroine's world and her sensual delight in (re)discovering not only her own body but that of her lover and the vibrant beauties of nature.

So far as screen sex goes today, the carnal scenes are subdued, with only a few moments of full frontal nudity in a charming scene when the lovers frolic naked (but with their shoes on!) in the rain.

As the gentle, inquisitive and warm-hearted Constance, Hands (daughter of British stage director Terry Hands and French actress Ludmilla Mikael) delivers a beautifully calibrated performance as a wide-eyed, often child-like woman growing into emotional and moral maturity.

Coulloc'h, a newcomer to film, is aptly gruff, guarded and virile as the burly gamekeeper and Ferran uses his physical awkwardness to good effect. Fillieres has the flapper-like alacrity as Constance's sister and Alexandridis has presence as Sir Clifford's austere but caring nurse, Mrs. Bolton.

Special kudos go to Girardot's Sir Chatterley, who avoids melodramatic caricature to give us an even-handed portrait of a proud but vulnerable member of the ruling class – the scene in which his motorised new wheelchair keeps stalling on a grassy forest incline and his stubbornness cedes to an admission of defeat is one of the film's most memorable moments.