

Anna Veen talks to Margaret Atwood

Future Imperfect



The Handmaid's night out: Tali tales in the toilets

There are impeccable credentials behind the film of *The Handmaid's Tale*. Volker Schlöndorff, the director, is best known for his work in putting the final stamp on such arch dissenters as Heinrich Böll (*The Lost Honour Of Katharina Blum*) and Günter Grass (*The Tin Drum*). Margaret Atwood, who wrote the original novel, has a distinctive feminist flavour and following. Natasha Richardson, the lead actress, comes of Redgrave stock. And Harold Pinter, the adaptor, needs no introducing for British liberal audiences. Strange, then, that Atwood's subtle dystopia has emerged as such a flatly-coloured, slickly-moulded Hollywood product.

As the Euro-movie machinery whirred into action, it left little of Atwood's vision intact. Pinter bled dry the background of the novel, which depicts the movement of America into a highly plausible dystopia, assuming the victory of a fundamentalist Right. Atwood's method was to use the memory of

her heroine to show this social transformation as realistically as possible, since, as she says, 'the future is like death, nobody has ever been there. But I still wanted to make it convincing so I didn't use anything that isn't in the programme of the American fundamentalists today'.

These latter-day puritans are preaching everything from women-back-to-the-home to death-to-homosexuals. Atwood explains, 'I thought about it realistically: if I wanted to put you back in the home, how would I go about it? Probably, I'd make it impossible for you to have a job. I'd make it illegal for you to own property. I wanted to show the mechanics of divesting women of their power.'

But the problems of translating Atwood's idiosyncratic stream-of-consciousness style onto the screen means that most of this disappears. The process of social transformation is more or less lost, leaving the story to float as weightless as science fiction.

Unfortunately, the film was originally shot to hold lengthy voice-overs, which were cut at the final moment, leaving Natasha Richardson's face to struggle silently with the weight of expectation and interpretation. Without its verbal subtlety, much of the novel's charged symbolism is lost: 'Films are too literal', Atwood says shortly. 'It's too hard to film a metaphor.'

Overall, Atwood's tone tends to suggest that she is dissatisfied with the film. When we discuss the parallels between mothering and artistic creation that crop up in her work, she smiles a little bitterly: 'No it's not my baby. When your books go out into the world they're not yours any more.'

But she still believes in the film and its messages, and admires - if she does not entirely sympathise with - the visions of the men who were its foster-fathers. She admires producer Daniel Wilson: 'Of course his wife put him up to it. She persuaded him into it. It was difficult,

because nobody in America wants to touch a film that deals with an apocalypse masterminded by the fundamentalist Right. But he sweated blood to make that movie'.

The rifts created by the circumstances of an international co-production are obvious in *The Handmaid's Tale*. The touchstone of the novel is Atwood's female consciousness, raised by her 60s and 70s experiences. The North American context is vivid too. Where else in the West are fundamentalists confident enough to preach the return of women to traditional womanly roles, death to homosexuals, and the restructuring of society along puritan lines?

Taking a male adapter and director destroys the first of these contexts. Taking a British adapter and a German director the second. Atwood tends to downplay these differences, 'It doesn't do to be simple about gender,' she says and the Europeans know about totalitarianism

too'. Yet she cannot deny that certain results of this re-contextualising upset her.

The worst divergence occurred in the German publicity machine. *The Handmaid's Tale* was advertised there with posters showing a naked woman with a blood-streaked back, her hands chained behind her. 'The advertisement was extraordinary,' Atwood says. 'The slogan ran, "Every man's desire, every woman's dread". Then, I was angry about the methods men used to film my novels. I didn't want them marketed as soft porn.'

But although Atwood feels that an influx of women into film-making would make a difference, she feels pessimistic about her own ability to take such control. 'It's easy for women to write,' she says. 'You don't have to ask someone to have millions of dollars worth of confidence in you. But in Germany, there were a few women who tried to persuade me that I could direct. And I was tempted.'

Atwood is eager to emphasise that the few unfortunate circumstances that surround the film should not entirely damn it. Indeed, although it opened to mixed reviews in the States, and will probably seem even more alien here, where Christian fundamentalism is not an immediate social threat, there is a refreshing sense of enterprise about the project. The visual metaphors and individual performances are excellent, and its sense of responsibility remains.

Volker Schlöndorff sidesteps any opportunity for sexual voyeurism. The peculiar scenes in which the Commander (Robert Duval) makes love to the Handmaid (Natasha Richardson) in the presence of his wife (Faye Dunaway) are carefully untitillating; while the few moments of free sex between Natasha Richardson and her chosen lover carry a charged, erotic tenderness rarely seen on Hollywood screens.

'Whatever the problems of adapting a complex novel,' Atwood says, 'movies communicate on a scale that novels just don't, any more. And that makes it worth while.'