



FILM: **CATHERINE CALLED BIRDY**

FDG RATING: 2.2

Film Discussion Group (FDG) Scale is 1-5 (5 is best)

Lena Dunham: *director*
Bella Ramsey: *actress, Birdy*
Andrew Scott: *actor, Lord Rollo*

DATE: November 20, 2022

DISCUSSION SUMMARY: **CATHERINE CALLED BIRDY**

Catherine Called Birdy, directed by the edgy-creative, Lena Dunham, is based on the 1994 children's novel of the same name, a story that Dunham read when she was 10 years old, and immediately identified with the character. The novel is written in diary format, set in 13th-century England, which Dunham uses as the template for her film.

There's an easy explanation for the title. Catherine is called "Birdy" because she keeps many birds as pets. She is the daughter of financially destitute, Lord Rollo, (a colorful performance by Andrew Scott, best known for his role as Sherlock Holmes' nemesis Moriarty in the BBC drama series Sherlock). Lord Rollo is a devoted husband to his wife, Lady Aislinn, and traipses around their manor in fine clothes, or lounges in silk pajamas, coveting the finer things in life.

Birdy is a head-strong, free spirited, teen girl, not at all interested in becoming a "lady". While her brothers are allowed to learn swordplay and have mud fights, she is expected to do embroidery, look pretty, and act like a "lady" but she purposely avoids those constraints. In the opening scene, we see her laughing as she sloshes in mud, cavorting with her loyal pal Perkin, a goat herder, and other lower class youngsters, having a great time.

But Birdy, at 14, is marriageable age so Lord Rollo, to solve his financial woes, decides it's time to marry her off, to the highest bidder. A series of undesirable, wealthy, suitors, arrive, but Birdy cleverly hijinks her way out of each "tete-a-tete". When one suitor was using the outhouse, she spontaneously sets fire to it. It's the last sniveling, repulsive suitor who makes Lord Rollo realize how horrible life would be for Birdy.

Several discussion participants criticized the film for being too theatrical while others were enamored with the theatrics, the costumes, and cinematography. Some questioned the accuracy of the costumes and thought they were overdone. One comment was that it was a sweet romp, coming of age film but this viewer had greater expectations for a new Dunham film. Another discussion participant described it as a fairy tale from a child's perspective. Another was annoyed at the character who was too full of herself and didn't enjoy the film at all. On the other hand, one discussion participant noted that the young actress was excellent and really came across as a spoiled brat. Those who didn't like the film, noted the mismatch of contemporary music which seemed disjointed and the relationship of an older man and young black woman when the introduction of an African American woman character was not accurate for that time.

But maybe inaccuracy was the point in that the story of repressed females isn't confined to a specific time but rather exists still today. Inserting contemporary music underscores that point. More than a fairytale coming of age romp, Dunham is saying some things haven't changed since the middle ages. Females still are commodities in male dominated societies with attributes of feisty independence being squelched. Seeing this through a medieval lens puts an exaggerated fairytale spin on the issues which are unfortunately still prevalent today. The overlay of contemporary tunes merges the past with the present.

The film opens with a sloshy, muddy free-for-all, villagers' mud fight where everyone is having a blast, especially Birdy, covered head to toe in slimy gray sludge, inferring that the film will be messy but free-spirited and fun, which also sets the tone for Birdy's personality.

Her father, Lord Rollo, having squandered away his wife's riches, is trying to "marry" Birdy off to various wealthy Lords to collect the dowry money. As we know, some cultures, today, still arrange marriages into wealthy families, or how many times have we seen parents who want daughters to marry doctors/lawyers? And not too long ago careers for women were limited and even now women have to jump through hurdles to be accepted in male dominated careers. Birdy was to pursue lady activities and was restricted from all the fun things her male friends were doing.

The absurdity of forced marriages was seen in the exaggerated match of her best friend to a 9-year old boy after the boy's father who was the intended husband, dies. Another unexpected mismatch was the older wealthy woman who ends up matched to her favorite uncle. And Birdy is surprised that she actually likes her.

Her mother kept trying to give birth to another child although the babies were repeatedly still born, which exaggerates the attitude that a woman's sole purpose is to have children. We see her once-again-pregnant but this time the baby survives as we witness the pain that women experience during child birth.

Birdy definitely shows that young girls should stand up for themselves. The film probably resonates more with teen age girls than adults, just as the book made a deep impression on Lena when she read it at age 10. At one point Birdy bellows to her father, "You don't get to decide who we are or where we go or how much we cost — like we're just things! We're not things. We're people. And we can think and we can hear and we can feel!"

Many of us were disappointed, expecting more from such a creative film maker, or maybe something much different. But focusing on the feminist theme allows a greater appreciation of how Dunham made her points with a bit of humor. In that context, it really was entertaining. Several of us especially liked the humorous duel scene where Lord Rollo is definitely not a good swordsman.

Missing the big message, our cumulative score for the film sunk to groveling low of 2.2 on our scale of 1 to 5. (5 is the best).



See you at the movies!

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