



# THE HANDMAIDEN

SOUTH KOREA

PARK CHAN-WOOK

WINCHESTER  
FILM SOCIETY

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Park Chan-wook's last film, the US-made *Stoker* (2013), seemed at the time like a blind alley for the South Korean king of the baroque thriller, an uncharacteristically demure step away from the Artaudian extremity of his so-called revenge trilogy (*Sympathy for Mr Vengeance*, 2002; *Oldboy*, 2003; *Lady Vengeance*, 2005).

In *The Handmaiden*, however, Park visibly rules his cinematic kingdom with imperial autonomy, cooking up a hyper-elaborate plot (based, in slightly simplified terms, on Sarah Waters's 2002 neo-Victorian novel *Fingersmith*) and mounting it on spectacular sets, designed by Ryu Seong-hee, of extraordinary beauty and intricacy. The sprawling, oppressive dwelling of wicked uncle Kouzuki is a Wellesian Xanadu, and creating it on screen in all its palatial complexity is in itself a statement of triumphantly unrestrained auteurial power. The exteriors are magnificent, too, both in the labyrinthine depths of Kouzuki's garden – at one point, his niece and intended bride Hideko is glimpsed through dense thickets of branches – and in DP Chung Chung-hoon's 'Scope vistas of exaggeratedly green rolling landscapes.

But the house is also a metaphor for the narrative's constantly shifting construction of surface appearances and shock reveals, in which the criminals prove to be the dupes and the seemingly gauche victim is the canniest manipulator of all. Handmaiden Tamako has been sent by the Japanese 'Count' Fujiwara to prepare his seduction of Hideko, whose fortune he intends to steal, but her work as an undercover agent is far outdone by Hideko herself, who reveals layer after layer of duplicity from the moment we discover that her neurotic ingénue

persona is in fact an elaborate performance. All this is cleverly developed in the film's arrangement in chapters, with section two repeating scenes from section one, with entirely different inflexions.

*The Handmaiden*, then, is a vastly successful advance on the gothicry of *Stoker*, transplanting that film's decorative intricacies on to a huger scale. But where *Fingersmith's* tale of illicit lesbian passion might be read unequivocally as a feminist fable of liberation, it is hard not to see *The Handmaiden* partly as a generically Sapphic-styled arthouse teaser that objectifies female stars Kim Tae-ri and Kim Min-hee, just as the erotic tales recited by Hideko — like her suicidal aunt before her — exploit their heroines' sexuality for the pleasure of a club of male libertines.

*The Handmaiden's* play on innocence and evil is profoundly textual, not least when it comes to the grand guignol ending (to which there's a rather Greenaway-esque flavour, from the recitation of a list of arcane Japanese pornographic texts to the aberrant use of bookmaking tools). The literary eroticism is underpinned by allusions to the Marquis de Sade's novel about a female libertine, Juliette – recited here by proxy, it seems, in an Asian pastiche version – which inescapably implies the presence of Juliette's virtuous counterpart, eternal victim Justine. At different points in this hall-of-mirrors narrative, the ostensibly wicked Tamako and the supposedly virginal Hideko occupy both positions – taking 'positions' to mean narrative functions as well as sexual postures.

**Jonathan Romney, Sight and Sound**

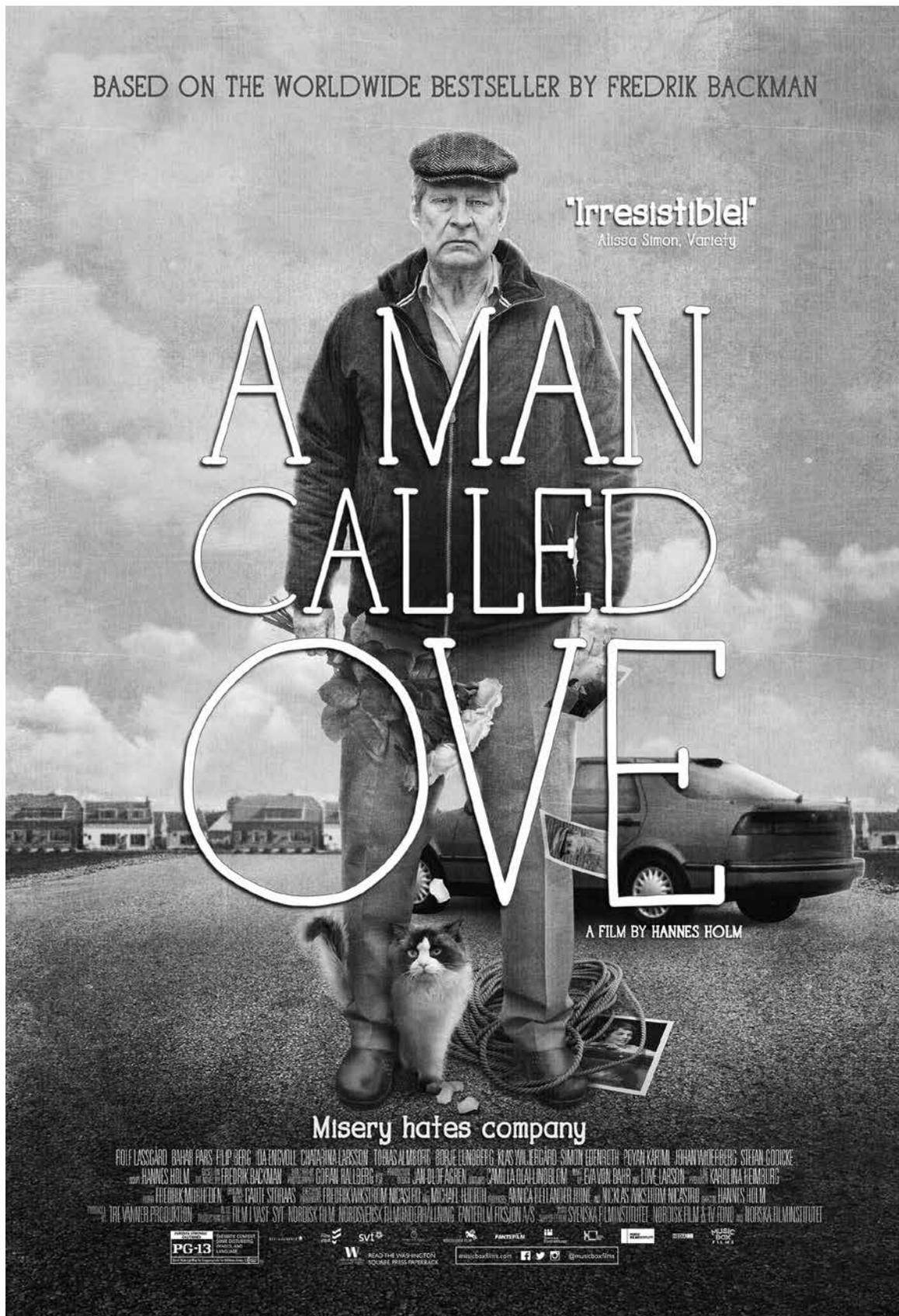
**WRITERS:** Sarah Waters, Jeong Seo-kyeong, Park Chan-wook **CINEMATOGRAPHY:** Chung Chung-hoon **MUSIC:** Jo Yeong-wook  
**CAST:** Lady Hideko Kim Min-hee | Sook-Hee Kim Tae-ri | Count Fujiwara Ha Jung-woo | Uncle Kouzuki Jo Jin-woong

VOTING FOR *LAND OF MINE* A78 | B22 | C2 | D0 | E0 | Rating 93.6% | Attendance 124

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'... a morbidly funny and moving success...'

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