

Bad Company



The young and the restless: Georgina Cates with Hugh Grant in *An Awfully Big Adventure*

By Jeff Taubin

An Awfully Big Adventure

Directed by Mike Newell
Adapted by Charles Wood from a
novel by Beryl Bainbridge
A Fine Line release

The Net

Directed by Irwin Winkler
Written by John Brancato and
Michael Ferris
A Columbia Pictures release
Opening July 28

Pandora's Box

Directed by G. W. Pabst
At the Walter Reade Theater
July 27 and 28

Mike Newell's follow-up to his smarmy smash-success, *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, is a febrile, haunting, girl's coming-of-age story. An oedipal tragicomedy of errors set in the late 1940s in a tacky English theater company whose fall-back hit is *Peter Pan*, *An Awfully Big Adventure* is a cyclical tale of loss and discovery.

A former *Voice* music editor once explained why he thought *Four Weddings* was so terrific. "It's all about us," he said, us being 30-year-old males, edging toward the terrifying abyss of marital commitment. Well then, I love *An Awfully Big Adventure* because it's all about me (the adolescent me I still cherish), and, unlike the former music editor, I don't see myself onscreen very often. Decide who you are and buy your ticket accordingly, remembering, of course, that one-to-one identification is not the only pleasure of movies.

Newell first showed his talent for digging into the past and for twisting social history with sexual obsession in 1985's *Dance With a Stranger*. *An Awfully Big Adventure* is tougher and fresher, perhaps because the central character is less easily categorized than were the noir-ish types played by Rupert Everett and Miranda Richardson in the earlier film.

Faithfully adapted from Beryl Bainbridge's semi-autobiographical novel of the same name, *An Awfully Big*

Adventure focuses on Stella (Georgina Cates), a 16-year-old aspiring actress who's hired as an apprentice by a Liverpool repertory company, less for her talent than for her naïveté—she seems eminently exploitable. Abandoned in infancy by her single mother, Stella was raised by her aunt and uncle in a rancid flat with peeling wallpaper and matted carpets. The loss of her mother and the trauma of the Blitz have made her a little mad. She seems literal-minded but, in fact, she lives in a fantasy. She hasn't a clue how to read other people, which leaves her free to see only what she wants to.

Thus, she falls madly in love with the company's manipulative and self-loathing artistic director Meredith Potter (Hugh Grant), a rather inappropriate object of desire, being 20 years older than she and gay to boot. Her infatuation with Potter blinds her to the more direct sexual appeal of P.L. O'Hara (Alan Rickman), who arrives just in time to save the season by re-creating his legendary performance as Captain Hook. O'Hara, however, is an even more unsuitable lover than Potter would have been, and not just because he's old enough to be her father.

An Awfully Big Adventure is not couched in the first person. Nevertheless, Newell gives us access to

Stella's subjectivity, putting us inside her skin at crucial moments as she begins to distinguish eroticism from romantic yearning, neither of them a satisfying substitute for the lost maternal bond. As Stella, Georgina Cates gives a nuanced, multilayered performance, managing to be at the same moment blockheaded and clear-sighted, clumsy and radiant, vulnerable and self-determined. The film is hers for the taking and she runs away with it.

That's not to say that she doesn't get marvelous support from Grant, Rickman, and in smaller roles, Rita Tushingham, Prunella Scales, and Alun Armstrong. Grant has the courage to make himself look despicable and disgusting (he plays one scene with vomit dribbling from his mouth) and, as a result, is more winning here than he was during his round of televised mea culpas, to say nothing of his toothy turn in *Nine Months*.

Rickman, the smart woman's romantic hero, enters late in the film, on a motorcycle wearing goggles and an aviator scarf. Newell shoots him from below for maximum phallic effect. His is the most emotionally demanding, and also, the most underwritten part. In *Peter Pan*, he who plays Hook must also play Mr. Darling, which means that O'Hara

stands for both the good and the bad father. Rickman is both tender and frightening. He could easily have overpowered the film (and in a way I wish he had) but he keeps himself in check until the very end. Obsessed with the past, O'Hara trips on the present, causing havoc all around.

An Awfully Big Adventure hovers between memory and desire, fantasy and gritty realism. A torn dirty slipper can be a sign both of the world Stella is desperate to escape and of the anguish of her loss. In matters of the psyche, ambivalence is all.

"I am I because my little dog knows me," wrote Gertrude Stein. Stein was deeply attached to her dog, Basket, but she here also was pondering the problem of modernist identity. In *The Net*, Angela Bennett (Sandra Bullock) finds herself in an even more precarious situation than Stein suggests, with absolutely no one, except those who want her dead, to confirm that she is she. Angela doesn't have any pets but she does have a mother. Unfortunately, her mother has Alzheimer's disease. Who is Angela when her mother doesn't know her? This anxiety-provoking question is proposed at the opening of *The Net* but is soon suppressed in the interest of summer entertainment.

A cyberspace riff on *The Fugitive*, *The Net* gives us a female systems analyst whose specialty is tracking down computer viruses. Except for occasional visits with her forgetful mom, Angela lives entirely on the Net. Freerelancing out of her home, she communicates exclusively via electronics. It's been a long time since she's had face-to-face contact with anyone but the odd delivery person. Thus, she's an easy mark for anyone who wants to make her disappear.

Suspecting that she knows their secret, a group of terrorist hackers, bent on world domination, try to murder Angela in the flesh. When she eludes them (for a woman who never ventures out of the house, she's in fabulous physical condition), they take the precaution of deleting her identity from the various information

systems in which she's encoded. Who am I if someone's stolen my pocketbook, and the records of my social security, credit cards, and driver's license no longer exist? Such is the riddle of identity in the postmodern information age.

Blandly directed by Irwin Winkler (who before he turned "creative" was a first-class producer) but neatly photographed by Jack Green (a favorite of Clint Eastwood), *The Net* is largely a vehicle for Bullock, who exhibits a more calculated version of the self-sufficiency that seemed so fresh just a year ago in *Speed*. In addition to *The Fugitive*, Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* also makes it into the mix. A little Hitchcock is a distracting thing. I got through *The Net* by trying to imagine what the master would have done in cyberspace.

Call it *colossalinos* but, like the female heroes of *An Awfully Big Adventure* and *The Net*, Lulu, the archetypal femme fatale/victim of G. W. Pabst's *Pandora's Box* (1929), has an unerring instinct for the wrong man. (Did I mention that Angela is seduced by her would-be assassin?) The Film Society of Lincoln Center is presenting *Pandora's Box* with live orchestral accompaniment, composed and played by San Francisco's Club Foot Orchestra. I have mixed feelings about the trend toward providing new musical scores for silent films. Among the advantages of sync sound is that music could be used intermittently for color and punctuation rather than, as in the silent era, blanketing the narrative.

The Club Foot Orchestra provides a Kurt Weill-styled blanket of a '30s porno edge for this downward spiraling tale about a prostitute whose sexual power inspires as much fear and hatred as desire. Having heard the score only on tape, I'll reserve final judgement except to say that the tango bit that accompanies Lulu's first encounter with Jack the Ripper and the drumroll that marks the murder scene are quite brilliant. I suspect, however, that the mystery of Louise Brooks is best contemplated in silence. ■



Not lost: Sandra Bullock gets caught.