

# Whit and humour





Beyond the petticoats, predictable romances and grand Georgian manors of familiar Austen adaptations is Whit Stillman's deliciously cutting and perfectly assembled script for *Love & Friendship*.

**Hannah Lemon** chats to the scriptwriter, director, producer and comic genius behind the film

"IT IS THE first time I've ever had a poster that I really, really detest." The dry, sardonic tone of Whit Stillman's voice reaches me down the phone from the US, with a quality and intensity not dissimilar to John Malcovich's. We're talking about the publicity for his new film *Love & Friendship*, which has been marketed as another rom-com for Austen fans, who, seemingly, prefer to read *Pride and Prejudice* mainly to reimagine Mr Darcy's wet shirt or because it was recommended by Richard and Judy for a summer read.

Stillman's production is more intricate in its approach to Austen compared to the naïve meddling in adaptations of *Emma* or the flights of whimsy in *Sense and Sensibility*. Based on the British author's novel *Lady Susan*, *Love & Friendship* follows the delightfully conniving and recently widowed Lady Susan Vernon (Kate Beckinsale), who, on announcing that she has "no money and no husband", is on the lookout for both. By flirting with a suitor her daughter's age (Reginald DeCourcy played by Xavier Samuel), toying with another woman's husband (Lord Manwaring, Lochlann ►





► O'Mearáin) and dragging along the dim-witted (Sir James Martin, Tom Bennett), she sets out to manipulate situations for her own accord with the support of her American comrade in arms Alicia Johnson (Chloë Sevigny).

In a similar style to his caustic comedies of high society – *Metropolitan* and *The Last Days of Disco* (in which Beckinsale and Sevigny also star) – Stillman has injected the script with a modern, quirky and wicked humour. This is something that has not made it to the promotional poster; there's a period love triangle hinted at instead.

"It turns off the people who might like it," continues Stillman. "I'm not really keen on people saying it's Jane Austen chic-lit, it's *Downton Abbey*, it's this or it's that, it's all the same or it's a woman's film. It's one of the negative things in film business. *Love & Friendship* is a film for people who get it."

Not only do I get it, I can't help but laughing out loud throughout. At every formal entrance and courteous conversation, Stillman (who wrote, produced and directed the picture) offers a surprise morsel of amusement. Characters are introduced with the solemnity of going to battle (be it a societal warfare of fine suppers, promenades and sharp tongues) – complete with the slow and steady beating of a drum – which is countered by captions describing characters' traits: 'divinely attractive', 'helps pack and unpack', 'a bit of a rattle'.

For me it is Bennett as Sir James Martin who steals the show. His comic timing is ingenious; from a confused hello to awkward soliloquies, he



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has me giggling and cringing in a moment. One scene, in particular, where he delights in a plate of peas referring to them as "tiny green balls" and a "novelty vegetable", while everyone else round the table politely avoids bursting out with a guffaw, has me in stitches. "When I saw what Tom was doing, I kept getting ideas and funny things we could add and do," remarks Stillman. "So there were a lot of things added to his part to fill it out."

FROM TOP:  
FREDERICA VERNON  
(SECOND ON THE  
LEFT) AND THE  
DECOURCEYS REACT  
TO THE RETURN OF  
LADY SUSAN; WHIT  
STILLMAN ON SET

Beckinsale, too, brings life to the fake humility and graciousness of Lady Susan and balances it fabulously with her devious plans and perfunctory barbed dialogue. On one occasion, walking through a square with Alicia, Lady Vernon is greeted by a man on the street to whom she sternly reprimands: "How dare you address me, sir. Be gone sir, I will have you whipped." Her companion asks, "Have you never met him?" Lady Susan graciously corrects her with: "No, I know him well. I would never speak to a stranger like that." Much like this scene, the rest of the script is almost Oscar Wildean in tone.

"In most cases I tried to have everything written down by the start of the day," explains Stillman. But the fluidity of his work process meant that when ideas came to light, he would add them in just before they were to be acted out on set. "I would be sending a PDF of new scripts and scenes to the assistant directors right as they were getting into the production van and then printing it out for everyone, which was cutting it a bit close." Much like his characters, every sentence by Stillman is delivered with upmost sincerity, but still has me smirking on the other end of the line.

The production was filmed on location in Ireland, the perfect setting for enormous stately homes, grand ballrooms and picturesque streets. Stillman refers to it as one of "the happiest shoots" he's done. "This area around Dublin has retained its 18th-century quality and it was when there was a time of great wealth with aristocrats building these great houses. All the streets and squares retain that Georgian feeling." Not only that, but he had an experienced crew to guide him. "In this case, they had more expertise than I did," smiles Stillman. "They would bring all this excellent knowledge and



work: the pictures, the research, the theories." He cites the progression of Lady Susan's mourning garb as one example of their guidance, and its subtle evolution from black widow's weeds to a rather seductive red corseted outfit.

Stillman is an anomaly in show business. Having garnered promise after his first three films from 1990 to 1998, he spent more than a decade not in the industry at all. "I think a lawyer or someone I worked with, or a manager of some type, said after my first three films: 'Whit, now you have to start doing things the industry way.' So I started trying to do things the industry way and I had 12 years without a film. Whatever way I'm going to do it, it's not going to be the industry way."

Stillman seems bruised by the "highly capitalised business" of TV and film and deems some of its processes "disrespectful". But with *Love & Friendship*, he had the opportunity to work with a hugely supportive team from Castle Rocks, the Irish Film

FROM TOP: LADY SUSAN AND ALICIA JOHNSON; LADY SUSAN AND REGINALD DECOURCY



Board and up-and-coming producer Katie Holly. "That was the lovely thing about this project," he says. "I wanted it to be totally secret and to do it at the right pace. It was going to take forever, to change this epistolary novel into something dramatised and comic. That's the way to go if you can afford to – although, of course, you might have to get a bartending job." Luckily for us, Stillman's time for pulling pints is long behind him. ■

*Love & Friendship* is released on 27 May, including at Curzon Mayfair