Another tale of doomed love in “Prick Up Your Ears”

PRICK UP YOUR EARS
Directed by Stephen Frears
Screenplay by Alan Bennett
Starring Gary Oldman, Alfred Molina, and Vanessa Redgrave.
Opening today at the Nicholsdean.

By PETER DUNN

J ohn Osborne (nee John Kingsley Osborne) wrote, among other plays, “The Ruffian On The Stair,” “Emmerwing Me, Sweeney,” and “ Loot.” The last of these was named Best Play of 1966 by the London Evening Standard. Kenneth Halliwell...well, Kenneth Halliwell never really amounted to much. But the two were lovers, living together for 16 years. On Aug. 9, 1967, Halliwell bludgeoned Osborn to death with a hammer and took his own life with an overdose of sleeping pills.

“Prick Up Your Ears” tells the story of Orton (Gary Oldman) and Halliwell never really amounted to much. But the two were lovers, living together for 16 years. On Aug. 9, 1967, Halliwell bludgeoned Orton to death with a hammer and took his own life with an overdose of sleeping pills.

Both films are structurally, thematically, and cinematically very similar. As with “Sid & Nancy,” this new film both begins and ends with the climactic death scene. But where “Sid & Nancy” was essentially one long flashback, progressing in linear fashion from when Sid Spungen to their deaths of Joe and Ken. But more importantly it places death in its proper place in this film — as its very center. While the familiarity of “Sid & Nancy” displayed the unerring fate of Vicious and Spungen’s quick-dying flames, their death as the only possible conclusion to their love affair, “Prick Up Your Ears” presents death not as a culmination but as the core, the ultimate representation, of Joe and Ken’s relationship.

The mood of the film is a tense and claustrophobic one. The scenes are cluttered and dark, often shot in small rooms indoors, and even the outdoor scenes seem always to be overcast. The actors’ movements seem always to be restricted: they are always going in a certain direction, only standing or sitting, always confined by their surroundings. The most unnerving aspect of the film, however, is the way the camera slowly circles and moves in from medium shots to close-up closeups as characters talk amongst one another. This movement, repeated over and over again, reinforces the claustrophobia of the film.

The acting is uniformly excellent, but it is not the overall performances which make the characters memorable but the tiny, added touches: the way Joe’s croaky demeanor is always exemplified with an Alfred Molina as Kenneth Halliwell in “Prick Up Your Ears.”

...splendid chic; Ken’s slow progression from tall, dominating behemoth to sullen, down-headed, lump of flesh; the way Joe’s always strokes her legs, forever bordering on flirtation with her clients.

Finally, “Prick Up Your Ears” ends as a harrowing, gripping tale of a doomed love affair, best sympolized by the first and final deaths scenes. In the beginning of the film, we are disoriented as we see the deaths from the close-up perspective of an insider — the audience has a vague idea of what is going on but loses its bearings because everything is so unexplained. But after the story has fully unfolded before us, we are again shown the death some but now viewed at a distance, like outsiders.

The film begins as it should and ends as it should begin. In turning things upside-down, “Prick Up Your Ears” presents a subtle nightmare where death, at its center but as the center, the ultimate reality could be us the deaths to the close-up perspective of an insider — the audience has a vague idea of what is going on but loses its bearings because everything is so unexplained. But after the story has fully unfolded before us, we are again shown the death scene but now viewed at a distance, like outsiders. The film begins as it should and ends as it should begin. In turning things upside-down, "Prick Up Your Ears" presents a subtle nightmare where death, at its center, is the solution to, instead of the culmination of, a doomed love affair.

GARY OLDMAN IN "PRICK UP YOUR EARS."