

REVIEW: 'Never Let Me Go' a chilly slice of alternate history



Photo: Fox Searchlight Pictures (c) 2010



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Of all the classic horror stories, "Frankenstein" seems to cast the longest shadow. In the new film, "Never Let Me Go," based on the novel by Kazuo Ishiguro, the point is made clearer than ever that it isn't the creation that's the monster, it's the technology that created it. Ishiguro also wrote "Remains of the Day." Do not expect to come out of this movie whistling the tunes.

The story is narrated by "Kathy" (Carey Mulligan), a young woman who starts us at Hailsham, a private boarding school where the students are completely isolated from the outside world and unusual emphasis is placed on their physical health. This is a Hogwarts from Hell, where instead of wizards, human clones are being raised as spare part suppliers for the general population. They're less than second class citizens at the outset, given hokey old movies as entertainment and second hand junk as prizes.

"Never Let Me Go" unfolds as a romantic triangle between Kathy and her Halisham

classmates, Tommy ("The Social Network's" Andrew Garfield), and Ruth (Keira Knightley). When Kathy decides she can't handle being on the losing end, she volunteers to be trained as a "carer" to nursemaid organ donors through the process of having multiple operations to remove parts you're not supposed to live without. Years later, she has a second chance with Tommy, and an old rumor that clones who can prove they're in love can defer their donations, begins to take on greater importance.

There's no conspiracy theory at work in "Never Let Me Go." In this alternate history, cloning was perfected in the sixties, and emerged as a way to ensure an inexhaustible supply of organs for donation, extending the average human lifespan by decades. Apparently, everyone knows about the organ donation program and people prefer not to think about the question of whether clones have souls or anything like God-given rights. Even the clones don't ask. You might expect an armed rebellion but nothing like that happens in this story. This is a quiet, even mannered study in how people accept norms no matter how hellish.

Mark Romanek's direction is nearly stately and the photography by Adam Kimmel is Oscar-worthy. The acting is heart-breaking. Carey Mulligan is in full control throughout, and Andrew Garfield, who seems quite Ivy League American in "The Social Network" but is thoroughly British here, gives a brilliant, revelatory performance. Quiet, restrained, unassuming for most of the film, he eventually takes the gloves off and does an anguished meltdown that tears your heart out.

"Never Let Me Go" takes place through the seventies and nineties completely without typical science fiction trappings of any kind. And though the moral of the story runs pretty parallel to "Frankenstein," this film has no creation scenes in lightning storms with thundering music. "Never Let Me Go" is more like walking on a beach in November, listening to a solitary violin in the rain.

SHOWING: "Never Let Me Go" opens Friday, November 8, 2010 at the Spectrum Theatre in

Albany and the Regal Crossgates Stadium 18 & IMAX.