'Howards End' is stunning

TICKETS PLEASE

JOHN MONAGHAN

Through some 30 films, the producer-director team of Ismail Merchant and James Ivory have created beautiful — if somewhat stiff — adaptations of British and American literature. A few, like the fabulously entertaining and romantic "A Room With a View," have reached wide audiences.

"Howards End," the new Merchant-Ivory offering playing for a second weekend at the Detroit Film Theatre, may be the best of the bunch. This moving adaptation of E.M. Forster's 1910 novel of upper class double standards stars some of the screen's finest actors.

The time is England in the early part of the 20th century. Margaret and Helen Schlegel (Emma Thompson and Helena Bonham Carter) enjoy the privileges of the upper classes but are far from interested in commerce. Instead, they cultivate a life of books and philosophical discussions with the most free-thinking minds they can find.

The Wilcox family, on the other hand, is wildly wealthy, but also stuffy. Vanessa Redgrave plays the Wilcox family matriarch who takes an immediate liking to Margaret. On her death bed, the old woman scribbles a request to give Margaret Howards End, her favorite of the several country homes that the family owns.

The Wilcox descendants, however, led by son Henry (Anthony Hopkins) decide to ignore these last wishes and toss the document in the fire. But the lives of the two families will cross again with romantic and sometimes tragic circumstances.

As in other Forster novels, "Howards End" is a cleverly crafted story of inequality between the classes. Howard Bast, a young clerk, is given some bad advice from Henry that loses him his job. The wealthy can always start a new career mid-stream, Bast notes, but for a man over 20 to lose his position means there's something wrong with him.

Henry truly believes that the poor were placed on earth to suffer. You feel sorry for them, he says, but you certainly don't do anything to help them.

As Henry, Hopkins proves himself one of the screen's most versatile actors. His portrayal of Henry is so complex and finely tuned that you'll almost do the impossible — forget his menacing portrayal as Hannibal Lecter in the Oscar-winning "Silence of the Lambs."

Redgrave, meanwhile, makes the most of her relatively short time on screen. She embodies the 19th Century lady who wisely sees in Margaret all the freedom and compassion that women will enjoy in the years to come.

Some of the lesser known performers fare equally well. Instead of making Leonard Bast a romantic pretty boy, Sam West comes off *slightly clumsy and gooney, driven* half-mad by bitterness and circumstance. With the proper breaks, the Schlegels feel he could be a great man.

Helena Bonham Carter, the star of "A Room with a View," has a feisty spirit that refuses to give into the hypocrisy of Henry Wilcox.

"Howards End" captures both London and the English countryside beautifully. There are sumptuous images of horse and buggies and automobiles sharing busy London streets, canoes on gentle lakes and the interiors of ivy-covered country homes and castles.

It takes until well into the second half to finally reach Howards End and again director Ivory makes a wise choices. Instead of having the music swell during a dramatic drive toward the home in Manderly in "Rebecca"), he lets Margaret explore it more subtly — and to stronger effect.

Simply put, the filmmakers have learned plenty in the last 30 years *and it all culminates in "Howards* End."

Life of books: *Helena Bonham Carter plays one of the upper-class Schlegel sisters, who prefer to cultivate a life of books and philosophical discussions, in "Howards End."*

SCREEN SCENE

DETROIT FILM THEATRE
Detroit Institute of Arts, 5200 Woodward Ave., Detroit. Call 832-2730 for information. ($5)

"Howards End" (Britain — 1992), 7, 9:45 p.m. May 15-16 and 1, 4 and 7 p.m. May 17. The long-awaited film version of E.M. Forster's 1910 novel about greed and its impact on the human spirit by the producer-director team of James Ivory and Ismail Merchant stars Anthony Hopkins, Vanessa Redgrave and Emma Thompson.

HENRY FORD CENTENNIAL LIBRARY
16301 Michigan Ave., Dearborn. Call 943-2037 for information. (Free)

"My Man Godfrey" (USA — 1936), 7 p.m. May 11. Two wealthy sisters seek a vagrant for a scavenger hunt. As payment, he is given a job as their butler in this zany screwball comedy, starring William Powell and Carole Lombard.

MAGIC BAG THEATRE
22918 Woodward Ave., Ferndale. Call 541-3030 for information. ($6)

"Dial M For Murder" (USA — 1954), 8 p.m. May 11-13. A rare 3-D presentation of the colorful mystery by Alfred Hitchcock. Husband Ray Milland tries to bump off wife Grace Kelly, but things go awry in typical Hitchcock style.

"Sick and Twisted Festival of Animation," 11:30 p.m. May 15-16. A wicked collection of some of the sickest cartoon shorts ever created. Along the way, you'll meet such off-color creations as "In-Bred Red" and "Dog Pile." No one under 17 will be admitted.

MAPLE THEATRE
4256 W. Maple, Bloomfield. Call 855-0901 for information. ($5.75; $2.95 twilight show).

"Antonia and Jane" (Britain — 1991) A British comedy about two women — one a cool beauty, the other a lost soul — who spend each year preparing for their annual reunion lunch. Directed by Beeban Kidron.

"Raise the Red Lantern" (Japan — 1991). In the 1920s, the newly arrived fourth wife of a Chinese feudal master becomes her husband's favorite, much to the consternation of the women around her. From the director of "Ju Dou" and "Red Sorghum."

MICHIGAN THEATRE
603 E. Liberty, Ann Arbor. Call 668-8397 for information. ($5; $4 students and senior citizens)

"Meeting Venus" (USA — 1992), through May 13 (call for show times). Glenn Close stars in the story of an unknown Hungarian conductor who has the opportunity to broadcast Wagner to 27 countries. From Istvan Szabo, the director of "Mephisto."

"Mediterraneo" (Italy — 1991), May 15-28 (call for show times). Italian soldiers during World War II find solace on a Greek island in this quirky, often charming film that won the Best Foreign Language Film Oscar this year.

STATE WAYNE THEATRE
35310 Michigan Ave., Wayne. Call 326-4600 for information. ($2, $1 students and senior citizens)

"Sergeant York" (USA — 1941), May 13-17 (call for show times). Gary Cooper has one of his best roles as a pacifist who is drafted into the Army during World War I. He becomes a hero in the process in this moving war film that mixes believable battle scenes with views of rural America. Directed by Howard Hawks.

"From Here to Eternity" (USA — 1953), May 13-17 (call for show times). A powerful adaptation of the James Jones' best-seller, about Army life in Hawaii shortly before the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Frank Sinatra, Montgomery Clift, Deborah Kerr and Burt Lancaster all have some of their finest hours on screen here.

— John Monaghan

Big Daddy is romancing the blues

In terms of learning the blues, Al Lewis, a.k.a. Big Daddy Romance, couldn't have picked two better places of higher knowledge.

A son of a preacher, Lewis was reared singing in the gospel choir at his father's church, Avondale Baptist. His education was later enhanced under the tutelage of legendary Detroit guitarist Willie D. Warren.

For two years, Lewis played as a sidekick to the seminal axeman and later went on to succeed Warren in the Blues cruisers.

From Warren, he perhaps learned the best advice of all, "To stay out his way.

"He, like most musicians who are frontmen, had his own approach," said Lewis, a 1973 graduate of Avondale High. "You have to play to that and go along with the program. He did teach me a lot about the blues."

Lewis learned the growl of a bluesman, how to chew off words deliberately and effectively from Warren. All of which he exercises as a frontman these days in hard charging rhythm and blues outfit, Big Daddy Romance and the Hedgetrimmers.

Big Daddy Romance evolved four years ago, dressed in zoot suits and hats the size of an oil pan from a semi-truck. He's been kicking up a duststorm of rhythm and blues, yearning at area venues ever since.

"There's always something in there about women and love," he said about his songs.

These days, he has a full band complimenting him with the Hedgetrimmers. The outfit features such notable performers as guitarist Bobby East, Second Self alum drummer Jeff Fowlks and bassist Nick Desmond.

The group performs regularly in the area, including this Friday before the judges(s). Big Daddy Romance headlines a benefit, "Judges Against Domestic Violence," 5-8 p.m. at St. Andrew's Hall, 431 E. Congress, Detroit.

Tickets are $25 with the proceeds going to First Step, a non-profit organization providing assistance to survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault. (People may send checks payable to: First Step, 8381 Farmington Road, Westland 48185 or call 525-2230 for information).

The band will also perform at 4 p.m. Sunday, May 24, as part of the annual mega Blues Festival that weekend at Hart Plaza.

Benefits, such as the one for First Step, are not new to Big Daddy Romance. His outfit was part of a host of bands performing at the annual Blues Benefit for the Homeless in December at the Majestic Theatre.

Such events keep Big Daddy Romance in love with performing live in this area.

"What I enjoy about it is the blues community in this town," he said. "It's not quite as big as Chicago's, but they've been around for a lot longer. . . . I love the people. We've been involved since it (blues revival) started up 12 years ago."

— Larry O'Connor

Some romance: *Al Lewis, better known as Big Daddy Romance, learned his blues lessons well from legendary Detroit guitarist Willie D. Warren.*

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