

The Party (2017)

Rated R. Running time: 1 hour 11 min.

Our content ratings (1-10): Violence 2; Language 2; Sex/Nudity 2.

Our star rating (1-5): 4

*Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher,
vanity of vanities! All is vanity.
What do people gain from all the toil
at which they toil under the sun?
A generation goes, and a generation comes,
but the earth remains forever.*

Ecclesiastes 1:1-4



Bill (seated) is about to bring the festivity to an abrupt halt with his two announcements. (c)

Roadside Attractions

British writer-director Sally Potter's film is labeled a comedy, but the members of the motley crew who come to the party are not laughing. Instead, they seem like they've just come from a screening of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf?* The only ones in the theater laughing are those in the audience, and unless they are hopeless cynics, their laughter will be uncomfortable.

The film begins with a disheveled-looking Janet (Kristin Scott Thomas) opening her door and pointing a pistol at the person at the door, whom we do not see. Cut back a few hours that same day when Janet is in the kitchen preparing for the evening, and her husband Bill (Timothy Spall) is in the living room dropping the needle onto a record spinning on their phonograph. He settles back in his chair, a bottle of booze sitting beside it on the floor. His mind seems to be a thousand miles away, weighed down with some heavy burden. Janet's meal preparation is interrupted a couple of times by her cellphone as she exchanges texts with an apparent lover. She is a successful British politician who is holding a party to celebrate her appointment to be the Shadow Minister for Health.

April (Patricia Clarkson) and her partner Gottfried (Bruno Ganz) are the first to arrive. They seem an unlikely couple because she is an acid tongued American cynic who wastes no opportunity to put down whomever comes up in a conversation, whereas he is an optimistic German aromatherapist. Next come the lesbian couple Martha (Cherry Jones) and Jinny (Emily Mortimer), aglow that the latter has had a pregnancy scan revealing that they are about to become parents of triplets. Last to arrive is Tom (Cillian Murphy), a banker whose wife Marianne is due any minute. (And so was Godot.) As soon as he is in the door the distraught man rushes to the bathroom, locks it, and feverishly snorts some coke. He takes from a shoulder holster a small gun, clumsily checking to see if it is loaded. If the last were not enough, a shot of a fox straying into the garden also forewarns us that the party might not proceed as planned.

As the guests chitchat it, is the distracted Bill who brings the proceedings to a sudden halt when he announces that he has a terminal illness. Aghast, everyone expresses dismay—except for Gottfried who steadfastly maintains that there could be a natural cure or that the doctor has misdiagnosed his friend's

case. Janet, bending toward him, immediately says that she will resign her position, despite the reason for the party. She declares that Bill had given up his teaching post back in America to support her political career, so she must now devote her time to support him during this crisis. Part of the dark humor is that she mentions the wrong college, Bill correcting her "Harvard" with "Yale." Out in the kitchen again, she texts her lover that their affair is ended

If his first announcement had provoked sympathetic concern, Bill's second produces an even greater rage that soon explodes into physical violence. He tells the group that he is leaving Janet, that he wants to spend his last days with the woman he loves. He does not give her name. Janet is shocked, and then angry at such betrayal, even though she herself is guilty of adultery. She slaps her husband hard in his face, and then again. (At some point her main dish, smoking away in the oven, diverts their attention for a while.) Another touch of humor is her taking the time to text her lover a retraction of her previous message. She is also upset to learn that her friends all knew of Bill's deception, some of their response also containing a touch of dark humor.

Tom is in and out of the bathroom as well as into the backyard where he ditches his gun in a trash container. He retrieves it once, then puts it back, and then a distraught Janet discovers it and wraps it in a towel. Tom is also angry at Bill, so much so that he slugs him while the women are out of the room. The older man falls unconscious to the floor, with Gottfried and his attacker quickly bending over him, trying to revive him. The women, who have been in the kitchen, also rush to Bill's side. Then comes the sound of someone summoning Janet to the door, and—.

If you enjoy ensemble-cast tales that leave you pondering about their next moves, you will enjoy this wry tale of success gone amuck. Each actor is at the top of his/her form, with Patricia Clarkson often stealing a scene with the zingers

she is given by Sally Potter. The latter seems to be saying "What fools these mortals be," her script often reflecting the viewpoint of Qoheleth, the "Preacher" whose jaded view of humanity seems so modern today.

This review with a set of discussion questions will be in the April issue of Visual Parables.