

Florence Foster Jenkins (2016)

Rated PG-13. Running time: 1 hour 51 min.

Our content ratings: Violence 0; Language 1; Sex/Nudity 4.

Our star rating (1-5): 4.5

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.

Romans 12:3

What Rachel Maddow has often said about strange happenings in the world of politics, so it goes with Stephen Frears' film about Florence Foster Jenkins. "You just couldn't make up this stuff!" This grand dame of New York society put on the most bizarre concert ever held in the venerable Carnegie Hall in 1944, despite the fact that she could not sing more than two notes in tune. Yet the great Mecca of classical music lovers was packed to the rafters. It is the almost unbelievable incidents leading up to this event with which the film deals.

The story easily lends itself to farce, but both Mr. Frears and Meryl Streep, who portrays her, obviously care too much about her to treat the would-be diva so cruelly. This film is a little like those Broadway and classical music tales of the 30s and 40s in which a plucky young woman follows her dream to wow conquer New York, and thus the world. The two differences in theirs and Florence's story is that she lacks talent, and she is no longer a spritely young woman when she debuts at Carnegie.

Oh yes, and one other thing about Florence, a very important

one-hers is no rags to riches tale. She has inherited a large fortune, so much that when the world famous Arturo Toscanini needs a thousand dollars for his NBC orchestra, he comes to her for it. Despite her awful singing, neither he nor her peers dared laugh out loud—reminding me of that old statement from The Wizard of Id about the Golden Rule: “Whoever has the gold makes the rules.” Florence certainly had the gold. (However, to save his ears, the Maestro makes sure that he has a planned vacation when she invites him to come and hear her.)

She loves music so much that she founded The Verdi Club, to which her many friends and associates would come periodically for performances. The film begins with the climax of one of these gatherings, though by this time she had given up singing. Instead she participates in the climax of a living tableaux about Stephen Foster in which the composer sits at his piano bereft of his muse. How is he to become inspired? By the descent of his heavenly Muse, of course. Backstage we see burly stage hands struggling with the ropes as they slowly lower Mrs. Jenkins decked out in a sparkly angel’s costume with feathery wings as the composer starts playing and singing “I Come From Alabama,” the audience joining in. The audience applauds approvingly. (Later, when she sings, I thought the applause was for her not singing!)

Florence is watched over, even guarded (from critics), by her second husband St Clair (Hugh Grant). He obviously adores her, even tucking her into bed at the end of the evening. We are shocked by two things—we discover that she is baldheaded when she takes off her wig; and that he does not turn in himself, but leaves their lavish resident hotel and travels to a less swank part of town where he maintains his girlfriend Kathleen (Rebecca Ferguson) in style. Eventually we learn that Florence caught syphilis from her first husband, the treatment apparently leading to her baldness. Unable to engage in the intimacies of the marriage bed, Florence has been willing to look away while St. Clair indulges his sexual appetite. As he

says at one point, he is spiritually married to Florence, and physically to Kathleen. (His courtship and early marriage would itself, I think, make for an interesting film.)

The third important figure in the story is Cosme McMoon (Simon Helberg), to whom St. Clair had described his unusual matrimonial arrangement. The young, ambitious pianist had been hired to be Florence's accompanist after a Lily Pons concert at Carnegie Hall had planted in Florence the dream to sing once more. The hiring sequence provides the set piece for comedy. He sits down at the piano while the voice coach talks abstemiously to his pupil. When the coach says that they will practice the famous coloratura piece, "The Bell Song" from Lakme, Cosme plays the introduction and then goes wide-eyed. The sound that erupts from the singer is like nothing he has ever heard. He looks with unbelief at the coach, who instead of looking equally upset, merely encourages her here and there as she murders the music. Needless to say, in the ensuing weeks it is the good pay that keeps him to his post, though as he gets to know his employer better, he becomes fond of her.

Cosme is so distressed with Florence's decision to sing at Carnegie Hall that he tries to get out of the situation, but St. Clair prevails upon him. The latter has his hands full trying to keep critics and distractors from the Hall, but this will be impossible. The night of October 25, 1944 finds the Hall not just sold out, but some 2000 people turned away. In the film popular composer is in the audience along with many other notables. (Lily Pons is there with her husband, composer Andre Kostelanetz and opera composer Gian Carlo Menotti.)

The film pays fitting tribute to St. Clair and McMoon for their loyal devotion to Florence. Ms. Streep again shows her incredible ability to blend into a character. Padded to make her midriff as thick as Florence's, and dressed in costumes so outlandish that they become the epitome of bad taste, she becomes the woman dubbed by some as "the worst singer in the world." Ms. Streep, actually a very good singer, deserves

special acting kudos for learning to sing so off key, not doubt the result of long practices in the studio. Although self-deluded for most of her life, she must have come to accept reality at the end, as one of her statement suggests, "People may say I couldn't sing, but no one can ever say I didn't sing." Give her an E for Effort. In this respect she reminds me of the film [Eddie the Eagle](#), the Olympic skier from Britain whom some would call the world's worst athlete. Both he and Florence dared "the impossible dream" and persevered despite what others thought and said.

If you want more on this unusual woman, you can see on YouTube the documentary about her, *Florence Foster Jenkins: A World Of Her Own* at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UvcatZDdaIY>.

This review with a set of discussion questions will be in the September issue of VP.

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