



REVIEWS

Poor Things Review: Emma Stone Leads a Frankenstein Fable for the Ages

Emma Stone gives the performance of her career as Bella Baxter, a woman brought to life by mad science and even madder filmmaking in Yorgos Lanthimos' *Poor Things*.



By [David Crow](#) | November 27, 2023 |

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Photo: Searchlight Pictures

Almost 90 years ago, Elsa Lanchester made history when the titular Bride of Frankenstein was quickened to life by a bolt of lightning—plus the eager gaze of two men who wanted to “create” a woman without the aid of an actual woman. To this day, it’s an iconic moment in cinema. And a fleeting one. In fact, “the Bride,” as she is christened by her makers, is never even allowed to leave the lab.

After all this time, Yorgos Lanthimos and Emma Stone’s ***Poor Things*** corrects that oversight. While the new decadently weird dark comedy could never be mistaken for a horror movie, I am quite certain it will horrify some folks, perhaps including Oscar voters, who I doubt have gotten nearly so cosmopolitan as ***Poor Things***’ champions suggest. For others, though, Stone’s galvanizing Bella Baxter is sure to become a cinematic legend in her own right, one who will live on for decades to come.

With as fearless a performance as any I can think of from a movie star in the last 10 years, Stone builds Bella piece by piece, and choice by choice, into a ferocious creation. Hers is a turn that’s both physically spirited and emotionally complex, with Bella beginning life as a reanimated corpse that’s only elbows and thumbs. For all intents and purposes, she is a toddler trapped in a full grown woman’s body. Yet, little by little, her

curiosity will take her on a quest to learn what it means to truly be alive as a woman in a man's world—in laboratories or otherwise. Her dawning inquisitiveness is only dwarfed by a tempestuousness that starts as something baroque and comical before proving this Victorian “New Woman” has far bolder ambitions than meets the eye.

It might just be the performance of Stone's career, and its alternating good humor and frailty is carefully tailored to Lanthimos' bizarre vision. Indeed, ***Poor Things*** is a grandly perverse spectacle, leaning as much into the hedonistic side of life as it does any high-minded metaphors about women's need to flee, or eventually invert, the patriarchy. Rarely can it be so safely said, but audiences have never seen anything quite like ***Poor Things***. It's a one of a kind bacchanal fantasia, even as it is crafted from what could be labeled cinematic spare parts.

Bella Baxter certainly is that. The film begins with the woman she used to be (a person we never get to know) throwing herself in despair from a bridge in 19th century Glasgow. We are keyed into the location later when we meet Bella's maker, a man she is taught to affectionately refer to as “God.” He is really Dr. Godwin Baxter—Willem Dafoe with a thick Scottish brogue and a Grand Guignol monster makeup of his own. *God* found Bella's pregnant body in the river, and it was God, as a proper Victorian man of science, who did the only rational thing: He removed her brain and replaced it with the unmarred mind of the unborn fetus in her womb. Ergo, Godwin's Bella is a full-grown woman who is experiencing life for the very first time.

Many of the men she meets dismiss Bella as simple, but it doesn't stop them from falling in love with her, be it God's own right hand, the meek but vaguely kind Dr. McCandles (Ramy Youssef), who proposes marriage to Bella, or God's lawyer, the worldly libertine Duncan Wedderburn (Mark Ruffalo), who steals Bella away to see the continent and to practice what Bella calls “furious jumping” in the bedroom. Yet behind their preconceived notions is an intensely alive and observant woman who is learning quickly the social mores, etiquettes, and expectations around her. She is also untethered enough to figure out how to break each and every one of them as she indulges in a little madness of her own.

Based on a 1992 novel of the same name by the late author Alasdair Gray, ***Poor Things*** is brought to gleeful anachronistic life by screenwriter Tony McNamara. The same playwright and author who ironed out ***The Favourite***'s barbed creases for Lanthimos, McNamara and the director have refined their penchant for blending the cultured with the crude. Like that previous period piece, ***Poor Things***' dialogue is eagerly loquacious, but that blunt chattiness can careen from Bella drolly assessing the human condition to simply assessing the type of humans she meets in a Parisian brothel based on their thrust count. When she hears an infant crying at a restaurant, she calmly asserts, "I must go punch that baby" and rises from her seat to do exactly that.

It's a bawdy decadence that, somehow, never loses its sweet fragility. Easily the most good-natured film in Lanthimos' filmography—an oeuvre that also contains the bitter satire of ***The Lobster*** and the literal Greek tragedy of ***The Killing of a Sacred Deer***—***Poor Things*** reveals an unexpected optimism that plays as simultaneously jejune and profound. It's like discovering that inside of Castle Dracula resides a big softie who wants to read you nursery rhymes.

This is partially achieved due to a dazzling fairytale affectation that draws on ***Poor Things***' obvious Gothic heritage and weds it to a steampunk aesthetic and set designs which are closer to Never Never Land. Holly Waddington's costumes are characters unto themselves, tracking each of Bella's moods as she traverses a world built by production designers Shona Heath and James Price. The great cities of Europe and the Mediterranean Bella visits are unmistakably artificial, but like a theme park designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, the viewer cannot help but get lost in the daydream. For instance, the film's Alexandria is a vertical tower where the wealthy stare down into a dark pit at the center. It is literally the poverty beneath their feet, and to navigate the port city, Bella and her paramours must scale stone staircases that look as if they were carved from stalactites in the style of M.C. Escher.

As a narrative, it is as eccentric as some of Dr. Baxter's earlier experiments, which include a chicken with a dog's head that Bella dotes on in the garden, but the macabre and the sublime prove surprisingly comfy bedfellows. The same might be said of the cast. While this is indisputably Stone's showcase, Lanthimos invites many of her co-stars, especially a preening Ruffalo and a deadpan Dafoe, to also attempt to chew the

scenery. One particular standout sequence even tops the anachronistic voguing in *The Favourite* when Ruffalo's befuddled bon vivant proves incapable of keeping up with Stone as she skips and twirls across a dance floor that's photographed in outlandish splendor by returning cinematographer Robbie Ryan and his fisheye lenses.

Poor Things is likewise a sprightly cinematic conga. In an era of flat and cautious films devoid of personality, ambition, or even the now debated sensuality, Lanthimos' movie is vitally exuberant—a fable that's as energized by its perversity as Bella is reawakened by lightning. The film follows its own drumbeat while cartwheeling between Gothic horror, philosophical parable, and bordello humor, stitching together its fascinations and fixations before ultimately transcending them. The thing is alive.

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Poor Things opens in the U.S. on Dec. 8 and in the UK on Jan. 12, 2024.

Rating:



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Comedy

Emma Stone

Horror

Mark Ruffalo

Willem Dafoe



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