

“She did not even halt at poison or the knife: a big cake, sent by Mother, of which she invited all alike to partake, and into which she inserted a fatal poison, so that the whole school died like rabbits; or a nightly stabbing, a creeping from bed to bed in the dark, her penknife in her hand.” – from page 51 of Chapter V in The Project Gutenberg e-text reproduction of the 1910 novel *The Getting of Wisdom* by Ethel Florence Lindesay Richardson writing under the nom de plume of “Henry Handel Richardson”

THE GETTING OF WISDOM is a Third Quarter 2018 LVCA dvd donation to the Ligonier Valley Library. Below is Kino Ken’s review of that dvd film.

16 of a possible 20 points

****** of a possible *******

**Australia 1977 color 97 minutes live action feature coming-of-age drama
Southern Cross Films Pty. Limited / Nine Network Australia /
The Australian Film Commission / Victorian Film Producer: Phillip Adams**

Key: *indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance

(j) designates a juvenile performer

Points:

- 2 Direction: Bruce Beresford***
- 1 Editing: William Anderson**
- 2 Cinematography: Don McAlpine***
- 1 Lighting: Rob Young (Gaffer)**
- Special Visual Effects: Roger Cowland**
- 1 Screenplay: Eleanor Witcombe, based on the 1910 novel by
“Henry Handel Richardson” née Ethel Florence Lindesay
Richardson**
- 2 Music: Sigismond Thalberg, Ludwig van Beethoven, Franz Schubert,
Johann Sebastian Bach, Robert Schumann**
- 2 Production Design: John Stoddart* Art Direction: Richard Kent*
Props: Mark Rochford, Nick Hepworth
Costume Design: Anna Senior*
Makeup: Vivien Mephram**
- 2 Sound Recording: Desmond Bone* and Gary Wilkins***

Sound Mixing: Peter Fenton*

2 Acting

1 Creativity

16 total points

Cast: Susannah Fowle (j)* (Laura Tweedle Rambotham, age 15), Hilary Ryan* (Evelyn, a senior student), Terence Donovan (Tom McNamara), Patricia Kennedy* (Miss Chapman, deputy and chief governess), Sheila Helpmann* (Mrs. Gurley, school headmistress), Candy Raymond (Miss Zielinski, French teacher), John Waters* (Reverend Shepherd), Barry Humphries* (Reverend Strachey, school principal), Julia Blake (Isabella Shepherd, sister to Reverend Shepherd), Dorothy Bradley (Miss Hicks), Kay Eklund (Mrs. Rambotham, Laura's mother), Max Fairchild (Mr. O'Donnell), Jan Friedl (Miss Snodgrass, English teacher), Diana Greentree (Maisie Shepherd, mistreated wife to Reverend Shepherd), Maggie Kirkpatrick (Sarah, the Rambotham family maid), Monica Maughan (Miss Day, Phys. Ed. instructress), Kerry Armstrong (Kate Horner, a boarder), Celia de Burgh (M.P., aristocratic senior boarder), Kim Deacon* (Lilith Gordon, glutton), Alix Longman* (Chinky, new girl with crush on Laura), Jo-Anne Moore (Tilly), Amanda Ring (Cupid), Janet Shaw (Bertha), Karen Sutton (Pin, Laura's younger sister), Sigrid Thornton (j) (Maria Morell, student befriending Laura), Jeremy Kewley (Frank Palmer), Cordelia Beresford, others

The quotation leading off this review summarizes protagonist Laura Tweedle Rambotham's response to initial welcome from fellow boarders and staff at a late Victorian private girl's school in Melbourne, Australia. Laura, aged twelve in the original novel and fifteen in Eleanor Witcombe's screen adaptation, is eldest child in a family of four and by far the most stubbornly individualistic. Nonetheless, as a young lady approaching adolescence, fitting in with others is of paramount importance for self-respect. Her misfiring attempts to do so, which another author might seize upon as wellsprings for comic ineptitude, become instead grounds for increasingly smoldering rebellion against society and its expectations.

***The Getting of Wisdom* novel was significantly autobiographical, depicting Melbourne society through the eyes of a middle-class, fatherless girl from the**

back country who has arrived at a completely different social setting intending to become famous as everyone's beloved friend. Laura quickly discovers reality in the city is much different from what she encountered at home. Snobs and prudes abound, everyone appearing to hide behind a mask of indifference or sarcasm. Fashion is determined by religious edict, the goal being not to stand out but rather to blend into the background as far as possible.

Sermons are memorized, their content largely ignored. What counts, at the Presbyterian Ladies' College, is proper deportment, censorship of communication, obedience to rules, gossip, and informing on others to improve one's own status and deflect criticism. Verbal bullying receives reinforcement from parallel behavior on the part of Lady Superintendent Gurley. This formidable belittler employs staff and cowed students as personal dorm and classroom mobile observation posts. She's obviously chiefly interested in the school's reputation and income security. Instructional excellence is subordinate. As played with glacial stiffness by Sheila Helpman, Mrs. Gurley is a more effective version of *A Little Princess's* Miss Minchin, patronizing to girls most likely to influence favorable alumni donations, a disrespectful tyrant to the remainder.

Her supervisory partner is the school's male principal, Reverend Strachey, equally humorless and unmerciful. Alternately ogling and condemning young ladies, the minister employs Holy Scripture to strike fear and submission into his charges, vehemently condemning theft while passionately encouraging snobbery and social persecution. Barry Humphries depicts that individual's perhaps unconscious hypocrisy with utter seriousness, letting observers approve or condemn his behavior with no attempt to prejudice their judgments. The scene where he castigates Alix Longman's Chinky for stealing and showing off is an unforgettable portrait of intolerant vindictiveness pretending to be moral indignation. His selected target is shamed at public rebuke, receiving more undesired negative attention than merited for petty theft and buying a ring, the latter intended as a gift for her selfish, insecure idol and erstwhile roommate. Adult investigators fail to detect true motivations for her behavior, contenting themselves with expelling a boarder already discriminated against due to her relatively "common" economic background.

This scene is considerably different from its presentation in Richardson's novel. There, Annie Johns, a poor girl excluded from Laura's upper crust

preferred associates, is the victim. Equally impoverished Laura can imagine what prodded her to such crime and begins to dream a similar fate befalling her in the future.

What absolutely mustn't occur is its repetition in her own life. For Laura can't bear the thought of tumbling off a pedestal she has raised for herself, regardless of how many lies and how much cheating might be required to maintain that position. The "wisdom" she's acquiring at school isn't about how to live nobly. Her real education teaches Miss Rambotham how to dodge accountability, fake resources, lie convincingly, replace affection with affectation, cheat on exams, and use other people as stepping stones to personal advancement.

Freedom to revolt is the accommodator's primary goal. Release from moral precepts, rules, criticism, gibes, dress codes – that and untrammelling of suppressed opinions and emotions are not-so-heroic schoolgirl aspirations. Escape to music conservatory in exotic Leipzig, Germany takes precedence over honor and integrity. To stay free from detection in the aftermath of such sordid peccadillos delights and thrills someone regressing from disdained outsider to admirable polished sneak.

Director Beresford, with formidable assist from his star, charts this self-annihilative course with exacting precision. Casting Susannah Fowle as Laura insured all the self-protective animosity and peer insecurity of Richardson's chameleon-like social climber would pass unfiltered into visual and auditory reality. In an insightful documentary accompanying the feature on Kino Lorber's dvd release, the Australian filmmaker assures listeners contemporary Melbourne schools and students still function in the very same way. Only slang used by insiders has changed, hardly an agreeable comment about civilization's progress over time.

Fowle, who looks combative at virtually every moment, still manages to convey inner queasiness over which supposedly invulnerable armor has been set. Just like her book character, she suggests boyish contours and readiness to instigate aggression at any perceived verbal slight, treating others according to estimates of their value in boosting her to prominence, or lack thereof. She yearns for recognition and simultaneously to enact a role as echo within a larger ring of classmates. These contradictory functions carve out a divided personality, neither fish nor fowl, different from the rest whether she feels

comfortable about it or not. All these warring traits surface in Fowle's finely tuned acting, which carries along film and plot triumphantly.

Outstanding support comes readily from the imposing trenchancy of Sheila Helpman's Mrs. Gurley and Kim Deacon's snotty, double-dealing Janus of a confidante. Alix Longman is vulnerable and transparent in the role of another young oddity who makes the mistake of becoming devoted supporter and morale booster to an equally uncomfortable patroness who spurns her offerings and discards sincere friendship in favor of temporary semblances of chumminess. She finds, to her regret, that money cannot buy loyalty or love.

Nor will fervent boosterism win her reciprocation in a crisis. Senior Evelyn, more interested in making conquests than keeping them, is a darkly complexioned classic beauty. She also happens to depend upon artful prevarication, resembling a spider spinning webs for unfortunates inclined to leap before they look. Laura ultimately learns to her dismay the real nature of her comrade. Hilary Ryan excels in embodying the self-serving seductress.

Among male cast members, John Waters, Max Fairchild, and Barry Humphries prove most formidable.

Waters plays Reverend Shepherd, a young and dashing handsome cleric whose public preachments of love clash violently with manifestations of quite the opposite behavior in domestic interludes. At home, denigration of others is a prime pastime, faultfinding constant and vehement. Showing the beast within the beauty is magnificently realized by an Australian heartthrob doing his best to undercut his usual image as a Southern Cross ladykiller.

As jocular coach driver Mr. O'Donnell, Fairchild has limited time to work with. He makes the most of it, submerging totally into character through a combination of inflected vernacular and effusive energy of movement.

Stunning overhead shots mark the work of cinematographer Don McAlpine, who benefits from imposing stone architecture of the building representing Richardson's College. Closeups of scowling faces and fingers flying over piano keys like restless birds of prey accentuate the twofold ambience surrounding that school, where pent-up feelings duel with relentless curbing.

Costuming and set interiors replicate Victorian stateliness and inhibiting morbidity. Anna Senior's eye-popping, gaudy outfits for Laura deserve unreserved admiration, multiplying the girl's griefs immeasurably.

Not so marvelous the script and lighting. Too little of Richardson's pungent prose is faithfully expropriated into Eleanor Witcombe's screenplay, which treats an established literary property with cavalier disrespect, altering names and personalities seemingly at whim, thereby gaining nothing.

Dim, widely dispersed illumination leaves unanswered a viewer's relish for sharper focus in exterior shots. If Beresford was aiming at nostalgic fuzziness, he somewhat overshot the mark, making film stock look unduly pallid and reducing contrast. That, in turn, deducts from impressions of vitality so essential to period film credibility.

Soundtrack excerpts from piano masterworks of Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann, Johann Sebastian Bach, and the more obscure – but vastly gifted – Sigismund Thalberg lend the production virtuoso keyboard dynamism and make a rich outlet for venting private frustrations encountered by Laura during her uphill quest for notice and approval by the world at large.

Because of suggested lesbian entanglements, **THE GETTING OF WISDOM** is recommended only for audiences aged eighteen or older. While these relationships definitely exist in such settings and are sensitively communicated here, they are not ideal models for confused youths seeking adult gender roles.

The Getting of Wisdom is a definitive counterpart to the English boarding school for boys delineated so pessimistically by Thomas Guthrie in his novel *Vice Versa*, where a small cluster of schoolboys make life miserable for its out-of-his-element lead character.

Kino Lorber's dvd release includes the original theatrical trailer, a feature-length eighty-three minute documentary about the production entitled "Telling Schoolgirl Tales," original film posters, the initial release press kit, and a stills gallery.

One of the finest films emerging from the Australian Film Renaissance of the 1970s, **THE GETTING OF WISDOM** is an important, dramatically incisive film quite rewarding to watch, with assured acting and particularly vivid period decorations.