

EMPIRE ONLINE

DESIRE at the 29<sup>th</sup> Cambridge Film Festival

Cinematographer Alex Ryle ... makes intelligent use of encompassed space in acclaimed screenwriter Gareth Jones's directorial debut *Desire*. This is always more the work of an author than an *auteur*, but Jones laudably attempts to deal with adult emotions in fathoming the passions and frustrations that are unleashed by the creative process.

Oscar Pearce is an agoraphobic who hides away at the top of his plush London home to work on his latest project. But his fears of the world outside his protective walls are also rooted in the sense of emasculation he feels at wife Daisy Smith's continued success in the soap he used to script. She hopes his new work will help pay some bills and restore his self-confidence. But Pearce views it as a potentially transgressive psychological adventure and hires Tella Kpomahou (a Parisian student originally from Abidjan) to serve as much as a *deus ex machina* as a nanny for their two children. Smith is affronted by Pearce acting without her knowledge and is initially cool to the newcomer, especially as the kids take such a shine to her. But sexual curiosity possesses Smith and her late-night visit to Kpomahou's room prompts Pearce to indulge his own instincts. However, neither envisaged that Kpomahou would demand her own input into the twisting story or that Smith's co-star, Adam Slynn, would have such a dramatic impact upon proceedings in the days before Christmas.

Played with estimable intensity, this is as much about control as lust or artistry. For all their supposed sophistication, Pearce and Smith treat Kpomahou with a mix of proprietorial chauvinism and colonial arrogance, which is made all the more reprehensible by the fact she is grieving the loss of an abducted son. Yet she never feels like a victim, even though Jones never quite explains why someone so astute and compassionate would find her stunted, cynical employers so congenial. Moreover, Jones struggles to blur the lines sufficiently between the protagonists' lives and the melodrama that is both reflecting and shaping them, with the consequence that Pearce's voice-over often seems to be coercing the viewer rather than allowing them to think for themselves. Nevertheless, this is an intriguing insight into the politics of marriage, the power of language and the dangerous unpredictability of ardour.

David Parkinson