

Gatsby: you can't repeat the past, old sport

Baz Luhrman's adaptation is visually rich but otherwise flawed

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Is it going too far to assert that *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald's 1925 masterpiece — the indisputable Great American Novel, that Holy Grail critics are still on the lookout for — is mostly concerned with production? After all, Fitzgerald's formative years were spent at the dawn of the 20th century, a new era full of promises as mass, chain production methods churned out goods for massive consumption, instant gratification and quick disposal.

In a broad sense, Fitzgerald, born in 1896 and consequently coming of age in the late 1910s — a decade that breezed past to the sound of jazz, glitter and glamour, and decadent extravaganzas, was brought up to a more relaxed lifestyle, an orgiastic outburst like America had never seen before.

It was debauchery and grandeur, being wealthy and shamelessly exposing your riches while hundreds of thousands stood in the background or, worse still, toiled in the coal furnaces that allowed New York City to shine in all its glory. America was changing, and change was coming fast, too fast for many to catch up. The invention of electricity and its multiple applications may perhaps be considered the early 20th century prefiguring the 1990s rise of the digital age, of Silicon Valley, when fortunes were made and lost at the snap of a finger, at the drop of a digit on NYSE's electronic billboards.

In Fitzgerald's accurate imagination, Gatsby's worldly preoccupations included electricity, as shown by the strict daily schedule he had drawn for himself as a young man: Rise from bed, Dumbbell exercise and wall-scaling and, third on the list, Study electricity, etc. Completing the list were Work, Baseball and Sports, Practise elocution, pose and how to attain it, and Study new inventions.

Born to a family of indecently poor peasants that offered the young Gatz — his real surname — little or no opportunities, the child, unknown to himself, pioneered and became the master of reinvention, that most American obsession accompanying social mobility.

The American Dream was possible, within reach, if you strove hard enough. Gatsby — as the reinvented young man chose to call himself — was the perfect, shiny embodiment of that dream.

ALL THAT JAZZ. It was an era of celebration and excess. The Jazz Age, in fact, was a term coined by Fitzgerald himself, as the prescient observer (in retrospect) and integral part of that endless night of wild partying and infinite possibilities.

Fitzgerald was boldly flirtatious, approaching the ideal of success and achieving it in his mid 20s with the publication of his first two novels, *This Side of Paradise* (1920), and *The Beautiful and the Damned* (1922), crowned by *The Great Gatsby* in 1925.

After countless rewrites and restructuring, Fitzgerald knew — like Tennessee Williams would two decades later, in 1947, that *A Streetcar Named Desire* was destined to be an immortal classic — that *Gatsby* was to be his crowning achievement.

It was with this sense of self-assurance that Fitzgerald wrote to Maxwell Perkins, his editor at Scribner's, that:

- (1) I've brought *Gatsby* to Life.
- (2) I've accounted for his money
- (3) I've fixed up the two weak chapters (VI and VII).
- (4) I've improved his first party.
- (5) I've broken up his long narrative in Chapter VIII.

Those five points — as accurate and succinct as the young *Gatsby*'s list of daily duties — looked simple enough, and constituted the backbone of a 100-page plus nouvelle that represented America in all its glory and decadence, opportunity and irreparable contingency.

In the supreme form of representation — film, though this is a point of contention — *Gatsby* is a high risk to take, mostly after Jack Clayton's 1974 adaptation starring Robert Redford and Mia Farrow. Think *Gatsby* after that year, and the image that immediately springs to mind is the sprightly yet burdened by unmistakable sadness and longing of Redford, young but hardened by the duress of a life spent trying to rebuild and better himself. But he was still to learn that he could have anything that money could buy — except Daisy, the *belle* who had dropped him because “rich girls do not marry poor boys.”

21ST CENTURY GATSBY. Think *Gatsby* today and the paradigm remains the same as in 1925, when the book saw the light, and 1974, when the definitive *Gatsby* lit the big screen in the tersely rough, rugged face of a beautiful man like Redford, who knew, in Fitzgerald's fiction, that he was doomed. Nick Carraway (a suitably cast Sam Waterston) would have contradicted him, thinking of *Gatsby* as irreparably full of hope.

Although the 2013 *Gatsby* is reportedly a cherished project conceived by Leonardo DiCaprio and Tobey Maguire (who once happened to be next door neighbours too, like *Gatsby* and Carraway), it was Australian director Baz Luhrman (*Moulin Rouge*, 2001; *Australia*, 2008) who had to deal with the complexities of bodily characterization and personality representation as well as the daunting recreation of a whole era.

The new *Gatsby*, in spite of Luhrman's grandiose 3D spectacle and fanfare, dazzles and disappoints in equal measure, but it is mostly its downsides that bring upon its fall from grace.

Luhrman's *Gatsby* is pitifully miscast. DiCaprio is now 38, a man approaching middle age and supposedly suitable to look the part of a downcast 32 year-old whose heart still pulsates with the vibrancy of youth in spite of hardship and his unbelievably suspicious, fast rise from ignominious poverty to social triumph. But DiCaprio, a surprisingly malleable character actor, plays *Gatsby* as though in costume. Which would be in line with *Gatsby*'s own falsehood and pretension, wearing expensive British shirts that literally bring tears to Daisy's eyes. In his first appearance in Luhrman's film, DiCaprio's *Gatsby*, standing tall

in a perfectly tailored tuxedo, his back to the camera, his silhouette glowing in the moonlight, fails to convey the mystery and despair of a man obsessively dreaming an impossible dream.

As the story's narrator, Nick Carraway plays no second fiddle, but he is, quite logically, under Gatsby's shadow, helping him push the action towards the inevitable, impending doom. Maguire's childish face does Gatsby very little favour as the sage gone insane who, at his doctor's suggestion, is taken to writing his memoirs, that is, his memories of that crazed summer when he befriended Gatsby, learned who the man really was, and stuck to him till the very end.

As to big spectacle, expect great things from Luhrman if you were already dazzled by *Moulin Rouge's* razzle dazzle, glitter and splashy glamour. It's all here again, progressing from grainy black and white to blinding gold, blinding lights and blinding love of amusement and one's own selfish sense of preservation.

Just like the self-invited guests at Gatsby's lavish parties, the music goes on for as long as the lights shine, but once they start to dim it's everyone for themselves — save for the faithful, reliable, sympathetic Carraway.

In almost every other regard, Luhrman's vision of *Gatsby* is a blunt disappointment — the narrative does not stall, but it doesn't move forward as smoothly as you'd expect, not coming from the seasoned Luhrman.

The narrative device framing the story — that is, the explanation about Carraway writing a detailed, thoughtful account of that summer split between his Manhattan bond business and West Egg's wild partying and romantic but ultimately failed matchmaking — simply fails to perform.

It may be argued that Luhrman has once again pulled off an accomplished job when it comes to sumptuous visuals and impeccably choreographed musical numbers, but the overall sensation is that something's sorely missing.

Rapper Jay Z provides a modern sound but is never edgy enough to tantalize Luhrman's fans, accustomed as they are to daring musical choices and combinations. The songs play beautifully in the background but there's not much more to it than nice, danceable tunes.

The incidental music — the obligatory Cole Porter standards and the American Songbook — is suavely elegant, as was to be expected from The Bryan Ferry Orchestra.

The instrumental version of Ferry's *Love is the Drug*, with its glam rock-fuelled drum orchestration, sounds hauntingly beautiful, as does U2's ballad *Love Is Blindness*, covered by former Seven Nation Army member Jack White.

Gatsby, silently retreating into the shadows and peeping from his veranda, oblivious to all the dissipation and jazz, would have approved, though not without a modicum of reasonable reservations.