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FILM REVIEW: Sisi and I

By Princess Kinoc

A Glimpse Beyond the Corset: Sisi & I (2023) review

What is it with our continuous fascination with royals? Every now and then, there comes a story or two about the monarch and the ubiquitous influence they have in our lives: from culture to psyche. It seems that every now and then there never seems to be any shortage of another Prince or Princess story that is revived to remind us of their melancholy, of the capricious, gregarious ways they live, and what little contribution they have to world peace.

There is however a resurrection of fascination towards the 19th century Austrian Empress Sisi. The number of shows and films that have been made in honor of her beauty, her mystery, and of her strange addiction to a small waistline, and her erratic mood swings in the past two years alone is testament that she was probably one of the most googled personalities from the 19th century.

Which is probably why many might compare this with last year's anachronistic fictional account of the famous 19th century empress, *Corset*. But the similarities of Marie Kreutzer's film and of Frauke Finsterwalder's film relies only on the reimagining aspect of the empress' life. *Sisi and I* is the alternative point of view of the empress through her last lady-in-waiting, Countess Irma Graf von Sztaray. She was also her only companion during her long trips abroad and this film gives us a fictional account of what went on during those trips. The result is a queer, intensely glamorous depiction of the relationship between two women, and what goes on inside that obsession. You could imagine them being on the heels of Celine Sciamma's *Potrait of a Lady on Fire* instead.

The best surprise of all for *Sisi and I* is the employ of Sandra Hüller as Countess Irma. Viewers can also expect Hüller to shine once more in this year's *Anatomy of a Fall* (Justine Triet) so her performance in this film is a quick preview for you before then.

Hüller transforms as the dull yet unmarried Countess who easily applies for the lady-in-waiting position. After rejecting proposals and her mother insinuating that she has nothing better to do, she succumbs to this position like a cow getting ready to be skinned alive. Despite the lack of corsets this film has, it does utilize the garment as a metaphor for pressure. First, during the opening scene where Irma's life is still controlled by her mother and squeezes her in a corset before she is weighted and measured like a piece of meat. The tightness of her corset along with

the exhaustion and the pressure of making it big in the eyes of the bored and irreverent Empress has made her puke on her way to the Greek island of Corfo. The second time the corset makes its appearance is with one of the Empress' boyfriends but for that you'd have to find it yourself. The metaphor in that scene however dissolves as he wears it loose, as if saying that he's had enough of the pressure and wants to be set free, as most of the Empress' boyfriends in real life.

Sandra Hüller's Countess Irma and Susanne Wolff's Empress Sisi compliment each other so well, but there is no denying the fact that this is Hüller's show. This film proves that the intrigue towards Sisi can magnetically revert to her lady-in-waiting. The same adoration and frustration we might feel towards monarchs is the same one you can see in her Countess Irma. She does get dangled in the same addictive feeling of being possessed and adored by the empress at the start, giving in to her every whim --- from replacing all of her wardrobe to switching her diet to fit in with the Empress' compulsion to go on fasting and a small waist --- until she gets herself back to reality and her frustration with the Empress goes even more deeper towards the end of the film.

There's no denying the fact that Sisi and I is a beautiful film to watch. In its attempt to go all in on modernization, as if saying that these stories co-exist with any generation, it gives us a different kind of view of these monarchs as mere mortals trying to get by with the day. Surely, Empress Sisi was one of those royals who detested her position, and quite frankly, it was good that we finally got to see it on someone else's eyes than hers.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Princess Kinoc is a freelance writer, and the current Editor-in-Chief for Film Police Reviews. She is also a member of the Society of Filipino Film Reviewers (SFFR) and the Society of Filipino Archivists for Film (SoFIA). Outside FPR, she has also written reviews and essays for New Durian Cinema and Pelikula Journal, and she co-hosts the Filipino film podcast, Third World Cinema Club. She is a black coffee drinker, and she's not so sure if that matters.