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Reviews/Film; Husband Back From War: Too Good to Be True?

By VINCENT CANBY

Jodie Foster has already won two Academy Awards, but nothing she has done to date is preparation for the romantic, resolute, elegant performance she gives in "Sommersby," a handsome period film set in the post-Civil War South of the Reconstruction. As Laurel Sommersby, a Tennessee farm woman who welcomes home a long-lost husband who may or may not be hers, Ms. Foster is so strong, passionate and mysterious that she seems almost to be a new actress or, at least, an actress of entirely new dynamism.

"Sommersby" is both about the cyclical nature of the universe, where matter can be neither created nor destroyed, only changed in state, and a demonstration of that law: the film is an updated Americanized adaptation of "The Return of Martin Guerre," Daniel Vigne's fine 1982 French film starring Gerard Depardieu. Even "The Return of Martin Guerre" is something recycled, being a reworking of a true story that has long fascinated the French public in various novels, plays and even an operetta.

Richard Gere, one of the film's two executive producers, stars as Jack Sommersby, the Confederate equivalent to Martin Guerre, the wandering 16th-century French peasant who was twice tried for passing himself off as someone he wasn't. In this latest incarnation, as in Mr. Vigne's film, the one-time soldier, having been away for six years and presumed dead, shows up at his farm one day to claim his wife, property and money.

Sommersby says that he has been at the Union prisoner-of-war camp at Elmira, N.Y., a place as notorious for its hardships as the Confederate prison near Andersonville, Ga. The experience has taken its toll. He is physically altered. Even his shoe is two sizes smaller. His memory sometimes plays tricks on him. He remembers some things with uncanny accuracy, while others are inexplicably lost.

Possibly out of fear for their livelihoods, his sharecroppers immediately accept him. His son, Rob (Brett Kelley), is too young to remember Sommersby, but his old dog, Jethro, growls at his first approach. Not long after, Jethro is found dead. Sommersby's wife is the key to his

reinstatement.

At first Laurel can't believe that he is the husband who gambled, swore and brawled, and who ignored her ever after she became pregnant. The boor has been returned to her miraculously transformed. He is polite, hard-working, considerate and loving. His first night home he asks her to shave his beard. He soon becomes the ardent answer to dreams she might not acknowledge even to herself. By embracing this man, she makes her universe secure.

The story of Martin Guerre is true, but it's also the kind of myth that is modernized at a certain risk. Its concerns with love, sex, money and property are timeless. Yet the story only makes sense in a time that is simpler, more dour, more superstitious and more swiftly brutal than that of even the post-Civil War South, especially in a Reconstruction tale that has a late 20th-century sensibility.

Jon Amiel, the director, and Nicholas Meyer and Sarah Kernochan, who wrote the screenplay, have transformed the Martin Guerre character into a 1990's man who behaves as if he had been shaped by the counter-culture of the Vietnam era.

It isn't simply greed that leads Sommersby's old friends, neighbors and family members to denounce him as an impostor. It's racial bigotry. He has a visionary plan to revitalize his farm by setting up a co-op. After the harvest of their first crop of tobacco, Sommersby's sharecroppers, black as well as white, will be allowed to purchase the land they work. The white sharecroppers have no choice but to go along with him. Soon the Ku Klux Klan is burning a cross in front of his house.

The co-op would not be an anachronism in the South of the Reconstruction, but it's not in character for either Sommersby or the ne'er-do-well Confederate Army deserter he's accused of being. The co-op is in character for the man Mr. Gere plays, a fellow who doesn't have much relation to the man described by everyone else in the movie. His Sommersby is an endearing cipher, composed of mannerisms that suggest someone who has recently left his commune and is still tentative about how to behave in the outside world. He's a man full of love, working in his own naive way to let the sun shine in.

The sun never does shine in to explain the circumstances surrounding the death of Jethro, the dog. Once he's buried, he's never mentioned again. It must be assumed he had a bad heart.

Though the film becomes a courtroom drama near the end, Sommersby is of such nobility that the fundamental question about his identity becomes moot in the course of his two trials. The revelations about Sommersby's past, combined with Laurel's contradictory testimony, may confuse audiences so thoroughly that they will leave the theater thinking that "Sommersby" is

about worn-out land, crop rotation and fertilizer.

Though there is a near vacuum at the center of the film, "Sommersby" is never boring, largely because of Ms. Foster's beautifully self-possessed presence. The once-abandoned, now-reclaimed wife becomes the focus. Is it possible to sleep with a man who says he's your husband and not know that he's lying? What degree of longing might lead a comparatively innocent woman to accept a stranger in her house? Has she been fooled? Is she an accomplice? Or, in fact, does she know him to be a scoundrel reborn? These are the operative questions. They give "Sommersby" its drive and cohesion. Everything else is superfluous.

Heading the supporting cast are Bill Pullman, as the angry farmer who had hoped to marry Laurel before her husband's return, and James Earl Jones, who plays the presiding judge at Sommersby's trials. The film, photographed on location in western Virginia by Philippe Rousselot, looks authentic. The production is not helped by the kind of old-fashioned soundtrack score that instructs the emotions. Mr. Amiel is best known as the director of Dennis Potter's great English mini-series, "The Singing Detective," in which music functioned as satiric counterpoint to everything else. He seems to have picked up a lot of American movie-making habits. But perhaps the music in "Sommersby" wasn't his decision.

"Sommersby," which has been rated PG-13 (Parents strongly cautioned), has some violence and sexual situations. Sommersby Directed by Jon Amiel; screenplay by Nicholas Meyer and Sarah Kernochan; story by Mr. Meyer and Anthony Shaffer, based on the film "The Return of Martin Guerre," written by Daniel Vigne and Jean-Claude Carriere; director of photography, Philippe Rousselot; edited by Peter Boyle; music by Danny Elfman; production designer, Bruno Rubeo; produced by Arnon Milchan and Steven Reuther; released by Warner Brothers. Running time: 110 minutes. This film is rated PG-13. Jack Sommersby . . . Richard Gere Laurel Sommersby . . . Jodie Foster Judge Isaacs . . . James Earl Jones Orin Meecham . . . Bill Pullman Reverend Powell . . . William Windom

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