

Albert Nobbs

reviewed by [John Petrakis](#) in the [March 21, 2012](#) issue

Albert Nobbs's journey from page to stage to screen has been long and bumpy. Simone Benmussa adapted a short story by Irish writer George Moore into the play *The Singular Life of Albert Nobbs*; this was then nearly made into a film by the celebrated Hungarian director Istvan Szabo. The fact that the project was still alive and kicking in 2011 is due, in large part, to the determination of Glenn Close, who won an Obie for her performance as Albert in the play's 1982 off-Broadway run and has been linked to the character ever since. Along with starring in the new film version, Close is credited as cowriter (with Gabriella Prekop and John Banville) and coproducer.

The long wait was worth it: *Albert Nobbs* is a moving tale of loneliness, loss and love.

The story begins in 1898 Dublin, where Albert is a longtime waiter at the upscale restaurant of the Morrison Hotel. It is revealed early on that Albert is a woman posing as a man, though it takes longer for us to discover why this charade has been going on for decades. The early part of the film details Albert's quiet life at the hotel, while also showing us what an odd little man he is, with a curious voice and frail body that no one seems to notice is female. (Close's performance has echoes of Charlie Chaplin's Little Tramp character.)

The problems begin when a robust house painter named Hubert (Janet McTeer) is hired to paint part of the hotel—and is told to bunk with Albert during his stay. He soon discovers Albert's secret and responds with a secret of his own: he is a woman too, though a far less frightened one than Albert, which is due to leading a somewhat normal life in a reasonably normal home with an extremely loving wife (Bronagh Gallagher). This revelation motivates Albert to pursue a dream of his own: owning a small tobacco shop with a partner by his side.

The film, directed by Rodrigo Garcia (*Mother and Child*), is at its best when it stays focused on these two master thespians strutting their stuff. It is less successful when

it pursues an obligatory subplot involving a selfish housemaid (Mia Wasikowska) and her brutish boyfriend (Aaron Johnson); this story seems to exist only to reinforce the theme of male-on-female violence that runs throughout the film. Though Wasikowska, a young actress of considerable range, carries her weight, the B story feels heavy-handed in such a delicate script.

More successful are the small set pieces revolving around the denizens of the hotel, including the wise doctor in the house (Brendan Gleeson) and the greedy hotel owner (Pauline Collins, of *Upstairs Downstairs* fame). But the film is at its best when it's focused on Close and McTeer, two fine actresses who bring out the best in each other. It's a first-rate acting class.