

by Kimberly_Gadette

Movie Review of "THE PRESTIGE"

In an early scene in "The Prestige," a performing magician impresses his audience by making a bird disappear. It is later revealed that instead of skillfully creating an illusion, he had smashed the bird to death, replacing it with another. Since his audience is thrilled by the magic trick, his sacrifice of an innocent creature at the altar of his own ego doesn't seem that much of a price to pay. Or is it? Ambition, competition, Faustian bargains cloaked in an 1890s London fog, when sorcery collides with science for the first time – these are just a few of the ingredients that are thrown into this bottomless magician's trunk of a tale.

Layered in a three-part flashback structure, "The Prestige" is far more complicated than it needs to be. But then, that's Christopher Nolan, director of "Memento" doing his multi-tasking best to jumble up both screen and story. As "Memento" became laborious in its machinations, so does "The Prestige." There are too few cues that prompt us from one timeframe to another, resulting in unnecessary confusion. Throw in unintelligible Cockney accents, double diaries, shady characters by the sleight-of-handful, plus a sidetrip to a snowbound hotel in Colorado Springs and voila! a simple trick with some scarves would have been a welcome relief.

"The Prestige" is a tale of two aspiring magicians: One is independently wealthy, weak on technique but strong on showmanship (Hugh Jackman), while the other is the struggling lower class artist, committed to art for art's sake, uncomfortable in the spotlight, yet the more talented of the two (Christian Bale). Michael Caine plays the ingeneur, the behind-the-scenes engineer of the magic, as well as mentor to the two young men. Piper Perabo and Scarlet Johansson play the beautiful, adoring but oh-so-smart magician assistants. As one would expect, Bad Things Happen. People get hurt. To reveal any more would a) give away too much, b) bore the reader to distraction, or c) all of the above.

However, the backdrop of 1890s London is a great treat. The attention to lighting the film was stunning, playing with the contrast between the soft hazy glow of Victorian gas lamps versus the brighter, harsher luminescence delivered by Mr. Edison. In researching the time period, production designer Nathan Crowley discovered that this particular era signified the start of visual mass advertising. Aside from papering the streets with colorful pictures and texts, he used the conceit of the magician's poster to reflect the changing attitudes toward magic, particularly once science became integrated into the act. Such eye-filling detail in both the

interior and exterior sets! Such a gorgeous palette! Such marvelous costumes!

If only this were a travelogue.

But it's not. Instead, "The Prestige" is a turgid drama, collapsing under its own bloat. The most baffling of magic tricks was performed by the filmmakers: How they could hire four of the most talented actors working today (Jackman, Bale, Caine and Johansson), and Abracadabra!, turn them into four plodding characters who could only look searchingly into each others' eyes, delivering one tiresome line after another, is a hat trick of the highest order.

Without giving anything away, there are elements introduced near the finale that should have been given much more prominence. Though it is the job of the magician to distract the eye, deflecting the audience's attention away from his trickery, in contrast it is the filmmaker's responsibility to allude to the inner life, to the actual emotions that his characters are experiencing. Misdirection is fine for magicians – but for filmmakers, specifically Christopher Nolan – deadly.

Grading this movie on the curve of the Deschutes River: C-plus

Production Credits

"The Prestige"

Directed by Christopher Nolan

Written by Jonathan Nolan and Christopher Nolan

Based on the novel by Christopher Priest

Cast: Hugh Jackman, Christian Bale, Michael Caine, Scarlett Johansson, David Bowie

Rated: PG-13

Running Time: 135 minutes

Grade: C-plus

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The Screen Savor: "Too Much Mumbo, Ditto on the Jumbo"™ by Kimberly_Gadette