

The Screen Savor: 'A Magical Mystery Tour'

by Kimberly_Gadette

Movie Review of "The Illusionist"

With one flick of his cinematic wand, writer/director Neil Burger has created some enchanted evening. From the opening image of a kaleidoscopic butterfly, followed by sepia-colored scenes of Vienna, circa 1900, with Philip Glass' music as an understated yet elegant accompaniment, Burger promises a magical, mystery tour in theater-seats-turned-time-machines. He does not disappoint.

Edward Norton and Jessica Biel star in *The Illusionist*. Paul Giamatti (L) and Edward Norton (R) Based on Steven Millhauser's short story, *Eisenheim the Illusionist*, the film is billed as "a supernatural mystery that combines romance, politics and magic." An illusionist named Eisenheim (Edward Norton) magically appears in 1900's Vienna. Soon his remarkable trickery wins over the townspeople, along with the Hungarian Princess Sophie (Jessica Biel), the fiancée of Crown Prince Leopold (Rufus Sewell). Leopold demands that his toady, Chief Inspector Uhl (Paul Giamatti), discredit the illusionist immediately. Eisenheim and the Prince become locked in a power play for both Sophie's heart and ultimately, Inspector Uhl's soul.

The extraordinary Edward Norton is truly a trickster for our time. Not unlike the definition of magic itself, he often chooses characters who take misdirection and concealment to an art form. *Primal Fear*, *Fight Club*, *The Score*, *The Italian Job*, and now *The Illusionist* affirms Norton's propensity for mental prestidigitation. Maybe he should consider remaking the classic *Three Faces of Eve* into *Three Faces of Steve*? Or perhaps an in-depth look at Janus, the two-headed God of Roman Mythology, looking both forward and backward at the same time? His Eisenheim not only shows great skill (under the tutelage of #1 magic man, Ricky Jay, Norton performs the tricks himself), but it is in his eyes, at once determined, intelligent and heartsick, that the

character soars. Instead of wearing his heart on his sleeve, Eisenheim chooses to place his â€œ up his sleeve. Bravo.

The classic definition of the word "protagonist" states that the character must evolve; therefore, it is Giamatti's Inspector Uhl, undergoing the greatest change, who functions as this film's protagonist. It is also Uhl who is entrusted with the film's point of view, a clever choice since we, as "The Illusionist"'s theater audiences, need to be as much in the dark about Eisenheim's motives as Eisenheim's stage audiences. Giamatti plays host, providing both illuminating light for the plot as well as lightness of mood. Maintaining a particular humor that is his alone, yet shaped by each new character he takes on, he expertly uses his comedy to convey his character's humanity. Modern Age or Stone Age, Giamatti keeps proving his skill at any age.

An escapee from tv teen drama (Seventh Heaven) and slasherville (Blade and Texas Chainsaw Massacre), Jessica Biel ably holds her own against Norton and Sewell. With her classic beauty and innate regal bearing, I find it hard to imagine Ms. Biel anywhere close to the 21st century, let alone to a chainsaw. Completing the quartet is England's Rufus Sewell, Prince Leopold. Though still the villain, Sewell portrays the Prince with an almost religious commitment to leading his country out of a dark, antiquated past to a modern enlightenment -- all the while wrestling with an ego bigger than the Austro-Hungarian Empire he intends to make his own.

Lastly, the very property of the light, and its absence, could be considered the fifth star of the film. Under the dancing flames of the footlights, under the flickering gas lamps, we sense more than we see. Depending on the viewer's individual eye, one can appreciate the romance and the mystery, or look a little deeper at the political, socio-economic and metaphysical levels. Subtle suggestion, whether in Eisenheim's spare monologues about the nature of death, the existence of souls, the permutation of time itself, shapes the gravity of "The Illusionist" as much as Eisenheim's hands shape the magic. Oh, I forgot to mention: It's also great fun. Or maybe Neil Burger and Co. just put me under a spell.

Grading this movie on the curve of the Deschutes River: A-

Production Credits: "The Illusionist" Directed by Neil Burger Screenplay by Neil Burger Based on a short story by Steven Millhauser Cast: Edward Norton, Paul Giamatti, Jessica Biel, Rufus Sewell Rated: PG-13 Running Time: 110 minutes Grade: A-

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