

## Paul Thomas Anderson's cinematic vision - THE MASTER is a splendid sum of its marvelous parts

Written by BY TERRY MATHEWS, News-Telegram Arts Editor  
Tuesday, 02 October 2012 09:43

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After the final credits rolled for Paul Thomas Anderson's "The Master," all I could do was sit in the dark theater and wonder, "What the heck just happened?"

Apparently, the movie has this effect on others because most everyone else stayed put for a while, too. When we did finally move, we looked like zombies filing into the afternoon sunlight.

Anderson's cinematic takeover of the senses began with the use of lush 70 mm film, churning water, and a story and performances so powerful that I felt as though I had been physically transported through time and plopped down in 1950. There will definitely be Oscar nominations for cinematography and direction.

A Navy destroyer roams the South Pacific, disgorging its occupants onto soft, sandy beaches where they drink, party and create a life-size, anatomically correct mermaid out of sand.

One sailor, Freddie Quell, (Joaquin Phoenix) becomes totally enamored with the lovely creature. Obsessed with her, really – in the most creepy way possible.

Seems Freddie's war-time experiences have pushed him right up to the edge of insanity. A series of psychiatric evaluations prove him to have serious issues, concerned with only sex and a special blend of liquor, called "hooch." Anderson's storytelling is so graphic that when Freddie tests a batch of the brew, most everyone in the audience winched as though their throats were burning from the lethal liquid, too.



Freddie lands a job as a photographer in a department store, but we know it's not going to last. He continues to make hooch and dallies with models in the dark room. Animalistic energy roils within him and we know it's just a matter of time before it erupts all over the store's shiny marble floors.

Shift immediately to a shot of Freddie in a cabbage patch with migrant laborers. He works hard and plays hard, the jug never too far away. After sharing a bit too much lightning in a bottle with an older man, Freddie is again on the run, literally, through a tilled field. This is not, however, an ordinary chase scene.

Anderson's shot follows Freddie's grunts with every stride, pulling the audience into Freddie's terror. Watching him tear across a barren field left me breathless.

Freddie soon comes under the influence of Lancaster Dodd, "a a writer, a doctor, a nuclear physicist and a theoretical philosopher. But above all, ... a man, a hopelessly inquisitive man."

Dodd (Philip Seymour Hoffman) has written a sensational book, "The Cause," a revolutionary way of living life to its fullest.

Prior to the release of the film, Anderson acknowledged he had used L. Ron Hubbard as a model for Dodd's character, but don't get mired in the Scientology angle.



It is irrelevant where Dodd's theories come from. What matters here is that lost and drifting

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people like Freddie Quell fall under their spell.

Freddie stows away on Dodd's borrowed luxury liner where he undergoes "processing" – Dodd's term for the therapy designed to get rid of the Freddie's animalistic nature.

"I believe in your profession –nostalgia," Freddie tells his new mentor.

Freddie's thirst and sexual cravings do not abate, as Dodd and his wife, Peggy, (Amy Adams) had hoped.

In fact, Dodd begins to share his pupil's love of the dangerous hooch, resulting in one of the most powerful hallucinatory scenes ever put on film.

Who's fantasy is it? The questions still lingers a week later. Maybe it was Freddie's, as he does love the ladies.

Maybe it's Peggy's dream, as she doesn't trust her husband to remain faithful.

Or, maybe it's Dodd's world of worshipful women that Anderson shows us.

Eventually, we learn Freddie's father was an alcoholic, his mother is in a loony bin and he was involved with a much younger girl before leaving for the war.

In a flashback, we see Freddie and a pubescent Doris Solstad sitting on a bench, conversing in fits and starts until Doris begins singing the introduction to "Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree."

And, back to the present.

Freddie continues "processing," but doesn't make much progress. Peggy thinks her husband is wasting his time. Other followers seem to curious about Freddie, but he doesn't let any of them near enough to know his heart.



Of course, men like Freddie and Dodd cannot coexist in the same space. Freddie leaves in a most dramatic fashion, but years later, Dodd lures him back for one more confrontation.

Again, Freddie has to cross a large body of water for the final face-to-face, while Peggy waits, sitting at Dodd's side, confident in her belief that Freddie is lost forever.

No spoilers here, but I will never hear the song used at the end of that scene the same way again.

If there have been more powerful performances captured on film, I missed them. Brando, De Niro, Pacino and Nicholson could learn a thing or two from Phoenix and Hoffman.

Both men use their unique physicality to their advantage.

Phoenix is almost simian in the way he slouches through life, hunched over and dragging his knuckles as he goes.

When he lands in jail, Freddie destroys the cell – and himself – while in handcuffs. Phoenix makes De Niro's work in "Raging Bull" look like a toddler's temper tantrum.

While smoother on the surface, Dodd, too, is a conflicted man, ready to blow at any moment.

When questioned by one of his true believers (Laura Dern in a luminous few minutes of screen time), his swift and violent reaction leaves everyone reeling.

I hope the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences is okay with giving two Oscars in the Best Actor category next year. Anything less is a total miscarriage of justice.



Peggy, the put upon wife, may seem crafted of milk toast, but rest assured she is the backbone of "The Cause."

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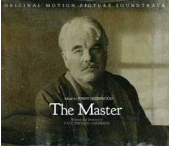
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Amy Adams – the innocuous food blogger from “Julie & Julia” – could play Lady MacBeth in a heartbeat. I wouldn't bet against her for Best Actress during awards season.

I don't want to give away too much, but play close attention to the scene in the bathroom where Peggy confronts her husband about his extracurricular activities.

Then, there's the music, the glorious, dreamy score by Jonny Greenwood (Radiohead). It really is like a supporting character, driving the plot, carrying the audience along with the incredible cinematography. Another Oscar nomination is certain.



The costume and set designers will also be singled out come awards time. Everything had a 1950s vintage feel, right down to the bowling shirts and shirtwaist dresses. A gold statue should go to each category.

This movie is not for everyone, but those who get it will never fully recover from it. Of that I am sure. ●●●●●●●●●●

“The Master” is in limited release. It's at the Magnolia in Dallas.

I'm not sure how they will handle the nudity, language and adult content in wide release. It's rated "R," but I'll bet there were a lot of discussions before the panel came to an agreement. It's not for the faint of heart.

www.landmarktheatres.com/market/  
dallas/themagnolia.htm Click [here](#) to view the official trailer.