

Cult of Personality: "The Master"

Written by Mike Schulz

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THE MASTER

Some 40 minutes into *The Master* – Paul Thomas Anderson’s fascinating, vexing drama about the leader of a questionable self-actualization movement and the man’s devoted acolyte – there’s a scene between stars Joaquin Phoenix and Philip Seymour Hoffman so thunderously well-written and -performed that, for movie lovers, it might singlehandedly make viewing the film less recommended than mandatory.

Set in the years immediately following World War II, Anderson’s latest finds Phoenix portraying Freddie Quell, a rootless, deeply troubled war veteran with an unpredictable temper, a raging libido, and an addiction to homemade brews concocted with hard liquor and paint thinner. Hoffman plays Lancaster Dodd, the charismatic charlatan (notoriously modeled, maybe, after Scientology founder L. Ron Hubbard) who takes Freddie under his wing, recruiting him as a soldier for Dodd’s pseudo-religious following known as the Cause. Yet before Dodd fully accepts Freddie into the fold, he asks the man if he wouldn’t mind first being subjected to some “informal processing” – a query-response session in which Dodd will ply his subject with personal questions and Freddie will answer them truthfully. Freddie accepts the challenge, and while the five-minute sequence that follows is merely of two men sitting at a table, locking eyes, and speaking to each other, it might be the most hypnotic, powerful, terrifying, and moving one that American movies have given us in years – perhaps since the 2007 triumph that was Anderson’s *There Will Be Blood*.

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At first, Dodd's questions, asked with quiet, measured calm, are relatively benign ("Are you thoughtless in your remarks?", "Do your past failures bother you?"), and Freddie replies, mostly *un*

truthfully, with a too-casual blitheness suggesting a soul completely unused to introspection. Dodd quickly ends the session. But Freddie, having a ball, demands that it continue, at which point Dodd relents – only, however, if Freddie agrees to answer his queries honestly, immediately, and without blinking his eyes. ("If you blink, we go back to the start.") Freddie complies, yet with this interrogative session a far more probing, discomforting one ("Have you ever had sex with a member of your family?", "Have you ever killed anyone?"), Dodd's subject soon blinks, and is told they must start again. With an animalistic grunt, Freddie slaps himself on the head three times – Phoenix's ferocity here is legitimately shocking – and the session begins anew ... and is so heart-stoppingly intense and gut-wrenching that not only does Freddie not blink, but I'm not sure anyone in

The Master

's auditorium does, either. A miniature masterpiece of taut and revealing dialogue, seamless performance rhythm, and staggering emotionalism, this sequence ranks with the absolute finest in the Anderson canon, providing invaluable insight into Freddie and the depths of his peculiar attachment to Dodd. The scene is

so

good, in truth, that you don't know how Anderson can possibly top it during the hour and a half that remains, and so it shouldn't come as a great disappointment to learn that he doesn't.



What *is* a disappointment, though, is that for all of the subsequent passages that are nearly as magnificent as this one, *The Master*, at least on a first viewing, is more satisfying in parts than as a complete whole. Part of the problem, I feel, is structural, in that the storyline grows repetitive awfully early; before the halfway mark, the movie gets into a narrative rut – Freddie learning of Dodd's chicanery, blowing up, leaving the Cause, and being lulled back into submission – that it rarely diverges from. Yet the bigger dilemma, to me, is that Dodd's motivations are so cloudy that more questions are raised in the film than are ever resolved, or even addressed. What is it that continually draws "the master" to the hopeless reprobate Freddie, a man of no means, no apparent inclination to better himself, and no obvious aid to the Cause? What, beyond potential fame and financial gain, is Dodd hoping to

accomplish

with his movement? Does some part of him actually

believe

in the soul-travel drivel that, as his son (a fine Jesse Plemons) remarks, he's making up as he goes along? Why is Dodd so seemingly under the thumb of his serene, controlling wife (a splendid Amy Adams, charming and horrifying in equal measure)? As remarkable as Hoffman's impassioned portrayal oftentimes is, the actor can't fully compensate for his Dodd emerging, in the end, as less a character than a conceit, and the lack of a fully formed partner for Freddie to play off makes Anderson's achievement feel somewhat lopsided.

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Still, I stress that these are first-viewing issues brought up one day after having seen *The Master*

and despite my gut-response qualms, I urge you to see the film. See it for Mihai Malaimare Jr.'s gloriously expressive cinematography and Jonny Greenwood's haunting, subtly insistent score. See it for Anderson's stunningly smart compositions, and the unexpected eruptions of physical and emotional violence. See it for the force of nature that is Joaquin Phoenix, whose physically fearless and grandly soulful performance leaves you both sated and shaken. See it for whatever reasons you choose. And then make plans to see it again.

For reviews of *Trouble with the Curve*, *End of Watch*, and *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, see "[S tee-e-e-erike!](#)"

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