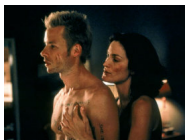


Forget "The Mummy Returns"; "Memento" Spellbinds

Written by Mike Schulz
Tuesday, 15 May 2001 18:00

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MEMENTO

It has taken quite a while, and an especially long while here in the Quad Cities, but the first unequivocally great movie of 2001 has finally appeared: writer-director Christopher Nolan's crime thriller *Memento*. And its greatness is of a very particular kind – you want all of your friends to see it immediately, so you can share your excitement with them and work out passages of the film that you're *almost* sure you understood. (Getting to review works like *Memento* is the absolute best thing about being a published film critic.) Like *The Truman Show*

Memento

is so clever, so smart, so full-to-brimming with detail and wit and filmmaking passion that it feels miraculous, and within its genre, it just might be a new classic.

My fear, though, is that it'll disappear from the area quickly. Released by the independent studio Newmarket without a huge promotional push, many are likely to echo what I've heard from almost every acquaintance I've mentioned the film to: "I haven't even *heard* of it." So here's the skinny: Guy Pearce stars as Leonard, an insurance investigator whose wife was raped and murdered in their bathroom, and who, after being bashed in the skull by one of the attackers, is now without short-term memory. He can recall everything about his life prior to the attack – his name, his past, how to drive a car – but if you meet him, leave, and return five minutes later, he won't remember you. Searching desperately for the still-at-large killer, Leonard requires a series

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of Polaroids, Post-its, and tattoos to keep his information straight (and remind himself what he's looking for); he also requires faith and trust in others, which, as seasoned moviegoers know, is difficult when your allies are Carrie-Anne Moss and Joe Pantoliano.

Such are the makings for what could be a tricky, enjoyable little thriller; Nolan, though, goes a much more complicated, and ultimately satisfying, route: He tells his tale *backwards*. In the extraordinary opening-credits sequence, we are presented with a Polaroid of a dead man; the man holding the Polaroid shakes it, trying to get a better picture, at which point the image begins to fade. A few more shakes of the wrist, and the image is completely gone. This serves as both an attention-getting symbol of Nolan's filmmaking technique and a marvelous metaphor for our hero's plight; the longer he stares at an image or attempts to remember a fact, the hazier everything becomes. From then on,

Memento

tells its story in reverse, where a scene is followed by the scene that would chronologically precede it, until the greater mysteries of the movie become clear.

Needless to say, this technique could easily become insanely convoluted, leaving the audience in the dark. But Nolan seems to be, above all, a born entertainer, which keeps *Memento* thrilling yet light-on-its-feet from scene to scene. He's not above scoring a few jokes to underline Leonard's debilitating, yet sadly ridiculous, malady; the manager of the motel he stays in, for example, turns out to be renting

two

rooms to Leonard without his knowledge. But Nolan knows how to display the terror of his situation, too; there may be no scarier moment in recent film than when Leonard, speaking on the phone, uncovers a bandaged tattoo that reads, "Never answer the phone." You might find yourself stifling giggles all throughout Nolan's work – not at the silliness of

Memento

, but at how beautifully the plot is working itself out, and at Nolan's inspired act of showmanship. This is bravura filmmaking.

It is also bravura filmmaking that doesn't overshadow its performers. Seen in nearly every frame of the film, Guy Pearce delivers an astonishing performance. As he proved in his remarkable *L. A. Confidential*

portrayal, Pearce is able to let us read his thoughts while keeping you guessing about his deeper motivations; the movie would fail with a less focused actor in the role. As Natalie, the bartender whose role in the plot becomes more, and less, crucial as events unspool, Carrie-Anne Moss is revelatory; her blankness in movies like

The Matrix

here becomes a complicated mask of sincerity and possible treachery. And while I've seen him in dozens of films, I don't think I've ever been more impressed with Joe Pantoliano. The fact that

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he's generally cast as an utter scumbag is used to deliriously enjoyable effect, and the film's energy level rises whenever he's onscreen. This is a movie, though, where everyone onscreen transcends themselves; seen in flashback (yes, that impish prankster Nolan throws *flashbacks* in the film, too) and with almost no dialogue, Stephen Tobolowski and the brilliant Harriet Sansom Harris provide an emotional crux to the tale, and one that, like just about everything else in *Memento*, is also turned on its head by the finale.

Many audiences seem positively terrified by movies that require them to *think* a little and work out plotlines for themselves, but the enjoyment you ultimately get from a work like *Memento* is more than worth the extra effort. I believe it stands as a landmark thriller, one that I plan to revisit at least two or three more times before it leaves the area (and countless more times when its DVD is released); I strongly encourage you to catch it *at least* once.



THE MUMMY RETURNS

Memento is an amazing entertainment; it wakes you up and keeps you alert. By contrast, *The Mummy Returns* is the perfect movie to catch when you're feeling a little sleepy and want to stay that way – and that's not meant as an insult. It's like a pleasant, innocuous dream, and I greatly preferred it to its 1999 predecessor. The plotting is nonsense – more gobbledygook about ancient spirits taking human form and threatening to destroy the world – and many will no doubt be disappointed that the much-publicized debut of WWF superstar The Rock as The Scorpion King results in roughly five minutes of screen time (10 minutes, if you count the computer-generated version of him that appears towards the end). But *The Mummy Returns* is completely agreeable nonsense, silly and cheeky and blessedly inconsequential; even the mostly shabby visuals manage to complement the work (the phony CGI effects on display are

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as goofily enjoyable as the crummy-but-who-cares visuals in the *Ghostbusters* films). Best of all, the movie has Brendan Fraser and Rachel Weisz as its adorably lightweight heroes – they look like they're having a ball – and, with the wonderful Oded Fehr standing out in particular, some really terrific supporting players adding to the fun. Writer-director Stephen Sommers doesn't show much ability beyond being able to keep everything tongue-in-cheek, but that's not necessarily a detriment; I'll take a meaningless but zippy piece of fluff over a hard-working but overblown Hollywood blockbuster wannabe any day.