DVD Review: Flawed ‘Brighton Rock’ Adaptation Enhanced By Fine Ensemble

Submitted by mattmovieman [1] on January 11, 2012 - 1:34pm

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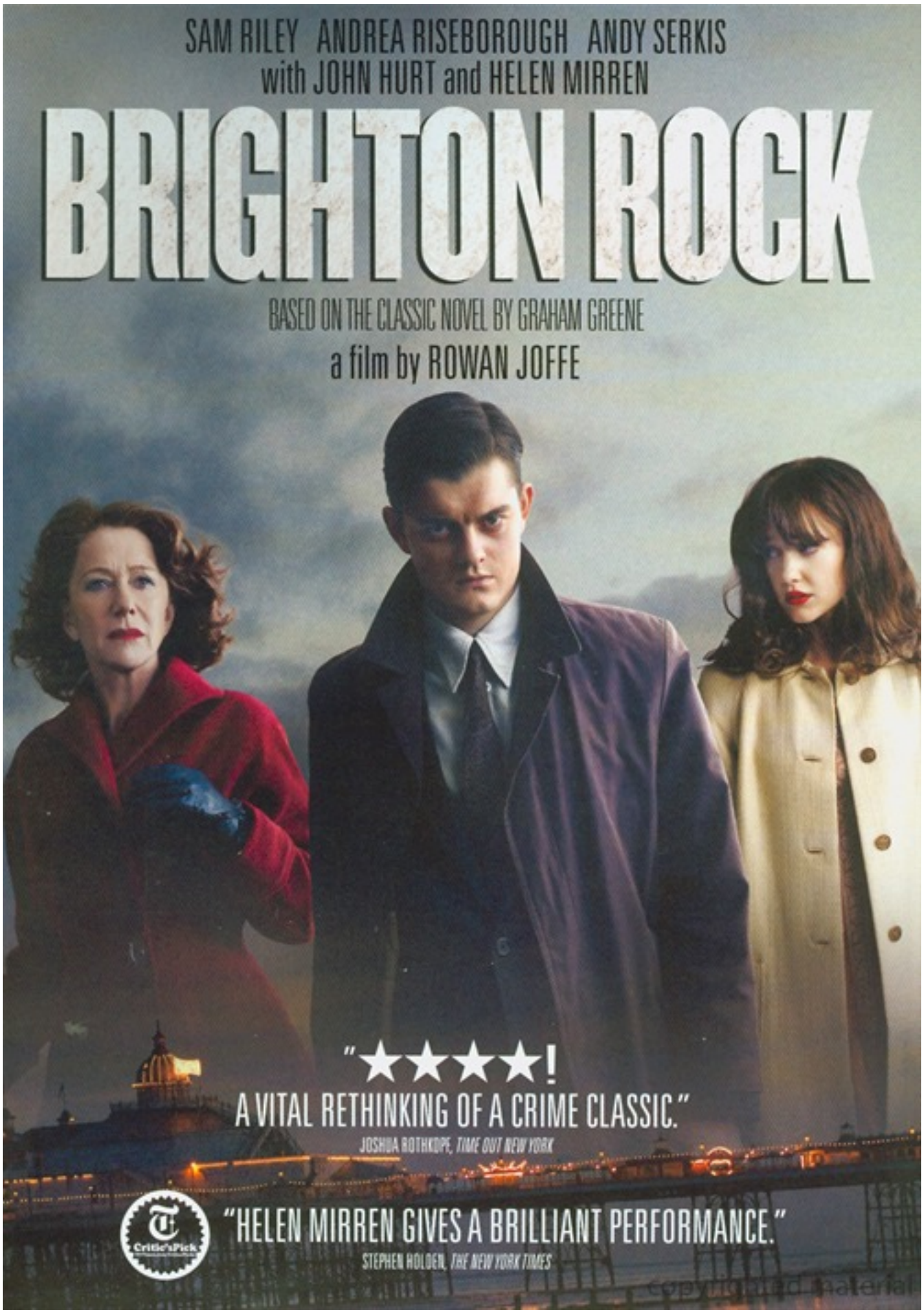
CHICAGO – Graham Greene’s haunting 1938 crime novel doesn’t deserve to be uttered in the same breath as Stephenie Meyer’s tween phenomenon, “Twilight.” Yet in the hands of British filmmaker Rowan Joffe, Greene’s masterwork loses its theological intrigue and becomes a self-conscious melodrama fueled by two grim lovers who could be dead ringers for Bella Swan and Edward Cullen.

Enter Pinkie (Sam Riley of “Control”), a pale-faced sociopath who becomes the leader of his underworld-dwelling gang despite the fact that he’s only 17. He doesn’t fit into modern society, and is an old soul at heart. His dark, brooding persona attracts the lustful gaze of Rose (Andrea Riseborough), a meek waitress with no life to call her own. She has no dreams or desires apart from romancing Pinkie, who treats her coldly and clearly harbors sinister intentions. All that’s missing is a shirtless werewolf to tear the self-destructive duo apart—unless you count Helen Mirren.



DVD Rating: **2.5/5.0**

In all fairness, Joffe’s first theatrically released directorial effort is a handsomely shot, competently made thriller. It just lacks a credible relationship at its center, partly because the miscast Riley is far too old to play a teenager. While the fresh-faced actor displayed confidence and magnetism in “Control,” he appears uncomfortably hollow in this role. Every time he’s acting opposite a veteran actor, his presence is reduced to a mere afterthought. Riseborough is more effective, primarily because she has the look of a mousy Hitchcockian brunette destined to be strangled. When Rose stumbles upon one of Pinkie’s crimes, he marries the starry-eyed dame simply to shut her up. This causes the blood of Rose’s motherly employer, Ida (Mirren), to boil over. There’s a confrontation scene set on a staircase where Mirren gives the pale little shrimp a swift yet delicious verbal smackdown that’s a joy to behold. Since Ida is the only levelheaded character in the picture, she brightens the screen with her mere appearance, and Mirren proves to be as riveting and seductive as ever. Too bad the rest of the film fails to match up.



Brighton Rock was released on DVD on Dec. 27, 2011.

Photo credit: IFC Films

As the film reaches its dramatically satisfying yet rather far-fetched conclusion, viewers may find themselves caring less and less for the main story while developing more interest in its colorful corners. John Hurt and Philip Davis are particularly good in their few meaty scenes, while Andy Serkis exudes a hypnotic, calculating stillness as a crime lord. But in a way, “Brighton Rock” stands as an example of how too much polish can hinder a production. Joffe’s use of symbolism has all the subtlety of a sledgehammer and leaves its indelible imprints in the lighting and production design. Despite Joffe’s audacious decision to update the time period, the film’s mise-en-scène is so classical that it might as well be set in the ’30s. For example, the towering shadow of a fan is cast over an entire room as Pinkie starts to lose his temper. The fan blade slashes around its circular path as events threaten to spiral out of control. All I could think of was Dick Van Patten in “High Anxiety,” framed in the shadow of a web-like window while exclaiming, “I feel like I’m caught in a web!”

“Brighton Rock” is presented in its 2.35:1 aspect ratio, accompanied by English and Spanish subtitles, and includes nearly 70 minutes of interview footage. Like other recent IFC releases, there’s no “play all” feature for the interview gallery, but this collection of sound bites benefits from two major improvements: edited answers and the removal of an obtrusive interviewer. Producer Paul Webster (“Atonement”) dubs Pinkie as one of the great villains in literary history, and says that Greene’s work is inherently cinematic.

Joffe argues that there was room for another adaptation since the 1947 feature suffered from censorship. The young filmmaker says that his film is truer to the book, despite the fact that its time period has shifted from the ’30s to 1964, which Joffe saw as the beginning of “modernity,” and the era when teens were able to “flex their muscles” in society. By setting the story against the backdrop of the Mod riots, Pinkie utilizes contemporary disguises to blend into the crowd, thus obscuring his old-fashioned sensibilities. Riley says that acquiring power over his peers is the real aphrodisiac for Pinkie, much more so than any semblance of romance. Hurt praises the director for attempting to pay homage to the book rather than replicate the original film. And in an all-too-brief interview, Mirren reveals that she was trying to take her performance in a different direction—Joffe wanted her to evoke Mae West, but she was aiming more for Sophia Loren (mission accomplished).

There are also interviews with ensemble members Riseborough, Davis, Nonso Anozie, Craig Parkinson and Sean Harris (sadly, no Serkis). A 7-minute featurette provides no new footage, while 18 minutes of raw behind-the-scenes material offer maddeningly limited perspectives of the production. There’s a prolonged segment where Mirren and Harris perform their pivotal scene, but the actress’s face is obscured by a man in the foreground. Isn’t the cameraman aware of the fact that she’s the most interesting thing in the frame?

‘Brighton Rock’ is released by IFC Films and stars Sam Riley, Andrea Riseborough, Helen Mirren, Philip Davis, Nonso Anozie, Craig Parkinson, Sean Harris, John Hurt and Andy Serkis. It was written and directed by Rowan Joffe. It was released on Dec. 27, 2011. It is rated R.


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