

Blu-ray Review: Middling ‘My Week with Marilyn’ Bolstered by Top-Notch Cast

Submitted by [mattmoviemann](#) [1] on March 22, 2012 - 8:40am

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CHICAGO – Last year’s slate of Best Actress Oscar-nominees was among the weakest in recent memory. There was no clear front-runner since there was no picture worthy of the exemplary actress at its core. From Meryl Streep in “The Iron Lady” to Glenn Close in “Albert Nobbs,” 2011 deserves to be remembered as the year of great female performances trapped in subpar material.

Perhaps the most frustrating misuse of talent is contained within TV veteran Simon Curtis’s feature debut, “My Week with Marilyn,” an adaptation of a memoir written by Colin Clark, who served as Third Assistant Director on the set of 1956’s unremarkable romance, “The Prince and the Showgirl.” The film was most famous for teaming up the unlikely duo of Sir Laurence Olivier and Marilyn Monroe, who would subsequently go on to deliver some of the most acclaimed work of their careers.



Blu-ray Rating: **3.0/5.0**

The unsatisfactory premise of “Marilyn” seems to be built around the question, “Did Clark’s week-long fling with the infamous platinum blonde have some sort of impact on her life and work?” Clark says yes, but I beg to differ. There wasn’t a second in Curtis’s film where I was convinced by its depiction of Clark (played by Eddie Redmayne), who somehow snags his onset position with little to no difficulty. He’s such a go-getter that he somehow manages to obtain Noel Coward’s number out of thin air (I haven’t seen such miraculous persistence since “The Devil Wears Prada”). Clark also manages to dissect the dynamics and intentions of the surrounding cinematic giants with such insightful detail that it seems as if he were an adult narrator reflecting on his past. Redmayne is a photogenic screen presence, to be sure, but his one-note role limits him to endless awe-struck, longing reaction shots where he stands with his lips parted like a sea bass. He’s the Julie to Monroe’s Julia.

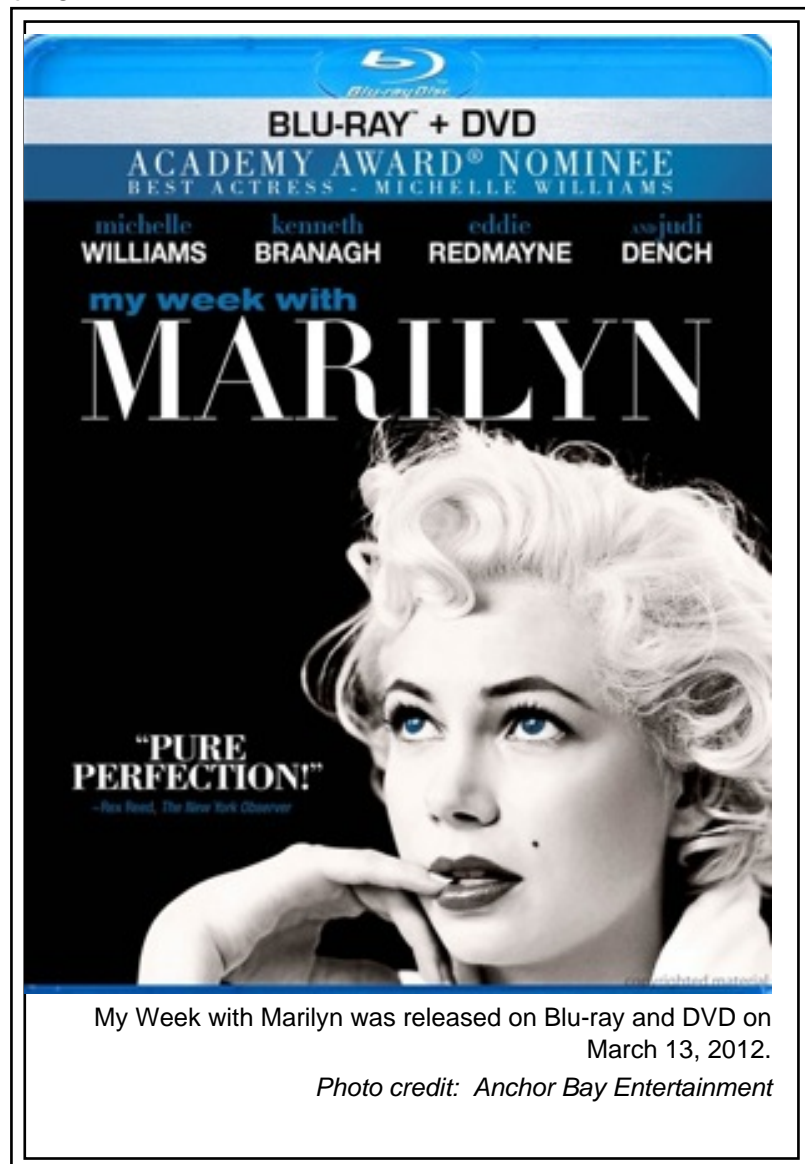


Michelle Williams stars in Simon Curtis’s My Week with Marilyn.

Photo credit: Laurence Cendrowicz/The Weinstein Company

It becomes increasingly infuriating to see Clark's story repeatedly upstage that of Monroe herself, played to the hilt by Oscar-nominee Michelle Williams, who further solidifies her status as one of the seminal actresses of her generation. Though her features don't quite match up with Monroe's trademark voluptuousness, Williams transcends mere impersonation by absorbing Monroe's behavior and mining the psyche beneath. She nails the rhythms and inflections of Monroe's voice, belts out a few numbers while oozing sultriness and captures the calculated wide-eyed innocence that the actress used to mask a deep well of insecurity. It's a remarkable portrayal that makes the film worth seeing regardless of its flaws.

Yet Williams is not the film's sole strength. As the ambitious and often furious Olivier, Kenneth Branagh delves into the waning titan's ego with such exuberant zest that he's a magnetic force of nature whenever he's onscreen. The subplot in Adrian Hodges's script that is clearly deserving of feature-length treatment is the combative "Prince and the Showgirl" set where Olivier, desperate for a comeback vehicle, battled to maintain control over his star, who was doted on throughout the production by her method coach Lee Strasberg (Zoë Wanamaker, who could easily star in "The Edith Head Story" without altering her costume). The sequences focusing on the actual shoot are the most entertaining segments in the picture by far, and are further enhanced by Judi Dench's marvelous turn as Monroe's onset champion, Dame Sybil Thorndike. It's also nice to see Emma Watson excel in a throwaway role that is about a hundred miles removed from mousy Hermione Granger. With so much potential on display, why did the filmmakers feel the need to frame the tale through the perspective of its least interesting inhabitant? Perhaps a sentimental and glossy script such as this is more easily pitchable to producers seeking a surefire crowd-pleaser. Thus, we're forced to see A-list actors contribute their extraordinary efforts to a picture that ultimately amounts to a bouncy trifle.



"My Week with Marilyn" is presented in 1080p High Definition (with a 2.35:1 aspect ratio), accompanied by English and Spanish subtitles and is available in a combo pack featuring Blu-ray and DVD versions of the film. A 19-minute featurette includes an enticing array of archival footage and photos of the actual subjects depicted in the film, but never adequately explores the painstaking preparation undertaken by Williams to prepare for the formidable title role. The actress does reveal her belief that Monroe's iconic persona was a finely honed act, and explains that her initial connection to the screen legend was more of a girl-to-girl understanding sparked by her childhood picture of a youthful and seemingly carefree Monroe. Dougray Scott says that he was pleased to tackle the role of Arthur Miller, since the playwright was the reason he became an actor in the first place (too bad his role is reduced to a walk-on). The featurette is littered with shameless plugs for other Weinstein Company releases, some of which are more credible than others. Williams's Oscar-worthy tour-de-force in "Blue Valentine" deserves to be seen by a wider audience, but I'm sure a better example of Dench's brilliance could be found in something other than "Mrs. Henderson Presents."

The real treasures on this disc can be found in the director commentary track, where Curtis provides historical context for each moment while rattling off some memorable behind-the-scenes tidbits. Dench's scenes had to be shot a full two months prior to principal photography, which makes her seamless interactions with Williams especially impressive. After directing Daniel Radcliffe's film debut in the 1999 BBC production of "David Copperfield," Curtis seemed particularly eager to cast Hogwarts alumni in his first big-screen feature—not only Watson, Branagh and Wanamaker, but also Geraldine Somerville (best known as Harry's mum). Curtis made a point of shooting at the locations where the actual events took place, such as Parkside House and Pinewood Studios. Yet even Curtis speculates on whether young Colin Clark was truly as insightful as he comes off in the text. Perhaps Curtis should've disposed of Clark altogether and started from scratch.

'My Week with Marilyn' is released by Anchor Bay Entertainment and stars Michelle Williams, Eddie Redmayne, Kenneth Branagh, Dominic Cooper, Judi Dench, Julia Ormond, Dougray Scott, Emma Watson and Zoë Wanamaker. It was written by Adrian Hodges and directed by Simon Curtis. It was released on March 13, 2012. It is rated R.



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