

TV Review: David Mamet's 'Phil Spector' with Al Pacino, Helen Mirren

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on March 24, 2013 - 11:56am

- [Al Pacino](#) [2]
- [Brian Tallerico](#) [3]
- [Chiwetel Ejiofor](#) [4]
- [HBO](#) [5]
- [Helen Mirren](#) [6]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [7]
- [Jeffrey Tambor](#) [8]
- [Rebecca Pidgeon](#) [9]
- [Television](#) [10]

CHICAGO – With the larger-than-life acting tics that have invaded most of Al Pacino's performances in the last twenty years, it seemed inevitable that the actor was the only person who could possibly play a notable loon like Phil Spector. In tonight's HBO movie named after the legendary producer, Pacino chews the scenery as one would expect but it's Helen Mirren who steals the piece from the Oscar winner. Both actors are great and Mamet's gift with dialogue remains intact but the plotting and choice of storytelling in "Phil Spector" makes for a final product that doesn't make enough of a statement or tell us much about its title subject.



Television Rating: **3.0/5.0**

The first scene of "Phil Spector" is the best. Linda Kenney Baden (Helen Mirren) joins the defense team of the volatile producer in his first trial for the murder of Lana Clarkson. As she is guided through the defense by Bruce Cutler (Jeffrey Tambor), it becomes clear that their client is in trouble. Not only has he been a controversial L.A. fixture for years but they have girlfriends speaking about his violence in the past, a driver who will testify that Spector said he killed Clarkson, and a culture itching to get the bad guy. There's an even an implication that O.J. getting off makes it more likely that Spector won't. It's a long, fascinating opening about the tough time that anyone would have had in mounting a defense for Spector, who claimed that Clarkson killed herself.



Phil Spector

Photo credit: HBO

It becomes clear relatively quickly that Mamet thinks that Spector is innocent, something I don't think is a relatively common viewpoint. If he doesn't think he's innocent, he at least thinks there was room for reasonable doubt, and a few interesting set-pieces about the lack of blood splatter on Spector's coat and the ease with which Clarkson could have accidentally pulled the trigger when Spector confronted her with a gun in her mouth do raise a bit of doubt.



Phil Spector
Photo credit: HBO

However, it seems to me to be such an odd storytelling structure for a music legend like Phil Spector to make a film about his possible innocence. And it's not like the film is a call for justice, a story of a man wrongly imprisoned. It's not that passionate. It's more of a legal drama than anyone interested in Spector's music might expect and Mamet suggests more than once that it was Spector's personality and behavior that convicted him as much as his crime. I wish "Phil Spector" focused more on the music, the man, the history of its subject rather than such a specific chapter. Mamet's Spector talks a lot about his importance in the music industry but the storytelling framing makes it feel more like ego than history.

Pacino, despite the ease with which he falls into some of his acting traps, certainly isn't bad here, but the film belongs to Mirren. She not only has a bigger role and a more essential arc but it's really her story more than Spector's. We start with her, convinced Spector is guilty, and move with her as she begins to suspect he might be innocent. Mirren also proves to be deft with Mamet-speak, as are Tambor and Chiwetel Ejiofor. While not as dense as his earlier work like "Oleanna" or "Glengarry Glen Ross," most people will be able to recognize the defense team war room scenes as Mamet. It's where the film comes most alive.

Which is a problem. The movie almost sags when Spector comes on screen. It's as if Mamet and his ensemble include the scenes with Phil (other than an explosive one late in the film that illustrates the difficulty in putting him on the stand) as a requirement. As Tambor & Mirren shoot ideas back and forth, the movie has the energy that it lacks when a slightly-menacing Spector, introduced like a Dracula on a hill in his dark mansion, shows off his house to his new attorney.

"Phil Spector" works as a performance piece for the great Mirren (and supporting work by Tambor & Ejiofor). It's worth watching just for her immense talent but the movie's not called "Linda Kenney Baden" and so the fact that her story so eclipses that of her client must be considered a problem. This won't be the final word on the legacy of Phil Spector.

"Phil Spector" stars Al Pacino, Helen Mirren, Jeffrey Tambor, Chiwetel Ejiofor, and Rebecca Pidgeon. It was written and directed by David Mamet. It premieres on Sunday, March 24, 2013 at 8pm CST.



[11]

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