

Film Review: Dark, Stunning Tale of American Dream in 'The Immigrant'

Submitted by [NickHC](#) [1] on May 24, 2014 - 1:36pm

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CHICAGO – Just in time for a national holiday is the release of two films about surviving as “the outsider” in a tumultuous American society. “X-Men: Days of Future Past” isn’t the only movie that opines about how the outsider will survive in America. James Gray’s “The Immigrant” does, too. It’s a film that takes the story of a Polish woman traveling through the course of Ellis Island and deconstructs her tale as an American nightmare.



Rating: **4.0/5.0**

While both films are set in different past periods, they speak to alternative contemporary struggles within America, especially as its citizens and hopeful citizens struggle for their own opportunities in the land of the free.

The title character is played with excellence by Marion Cotillard, a woman who travels to Ellis Island with her sister Magda (Angela Sarafyan) from Poland after witnessing the murder of their parents. When her sister is taken out of commission due to her lung disease, Ewa is alone on the fringes of a country’s entrance, but the nation that doesn’t allow unescorted women into the country. Without her sister, she has to go back to Poland.

Ewa is given her first sense of opportunity by an imposing man who has power because he knows the right people, Bruno (Joaquin Phoenix). While keeping vague the means in which he has such power, he recognizes the problem faced by Ewa, and offers to help her get into America, and into a job that will help her pay for her sister’s bills while she remains in care on Ellis Island. After a night’s sleep Ewa understands what Bruno’s business is, that of creating fantasies for men to ogle at in a seedy underground bar that sells liquor during Prohibition. With a complete look of disillusionment on her face, Ewa is recruited to join in the nude show, dressing up in a long silver garment as Lady Liberty, her own crushed dreams broadcasted on her face.

The exploitation of Ewa’s body takes darker turns, and soon she seeks an escape from a life that tempts her to feel like she is worth nothing. She then finds warmth when she meets a magician named Orlando (Jeremy Renner), who provides her with the opposite feelings of her previous stateside experience.

“The Immigrant” is a thorough deconstruction of America, along with its parts and participants who have collectively constructed a warped ideal of achieving success within a land where everyone wants to get theirs. The instrument of liberty within the pursuit of happiness has become marred by the fantasy within success, and those (like Phoenix’s storytelling pimp, or Renner’s magician) who are trying to preserve its wonder.

“The Immigrant” begins this idea by seeing Ellis Island through a non-American’s point-of-view, taking away the shiny romanticism bestowed on it by American history over time, that sequence from “Hitch” with Eva Mendes’ character finding out her family roots be damned. For “The Immigrant,” Ellis Island is a representation of America’s selective opportunity. Arriving to the shores has no guarantee, especially with the priorities of those in charge. However, its existence is enough to inspire those that something real exists beyond the ugliness. A woman being held at Ellis Island for unknown reasons says to Ewa, “It’s terrible the way they treat us ... like we are nothing.” To which Ewa, the two-time visitor of the island responds with pride, “I am not nothing.”

After leaving the island, Gray’s film begins to unfold with its consciously old-old-old plot line, as direct as a “small town girl living in a lonely world” setup for a film even like “Showgirls.” The sweeping effect of Gray’s film is that he takes this story and its characters and expands their poetic significance to an endless horizon. As it welcomes many different interpretations outside of its literal story hook, “the Immigrant” becomes most fascinating when it examines the institutions that Americans have very direct relationships with as a part of their own survival in America. It expands to cover a vast amount of ideas including the parallels between believing in America’s opportunity and also believing in God, the dark personal relationships borne from necessities to survive capitalism, or even the fascination a country has with the idea of money being made, even if wealth is just the fake backstory for a prostitute. One of Gray’s master strokes is in creating a story that is singular yet similar, but then entirely expansive to cover the country that so inspires this tale. Gray writes with a sad pen in “The Immigrant,” but throughout such tragedy, there is a hope for human connection in the country however sparse the opportunities may be.

"The Immigrant" opened in select cities on May 23rd. Featuring Marion Cotillard, Joaquin Phoenix, and Jeremy Renner. Screenplay by James Gray and Ric Menello. Directed by James Gray. Rated "R"

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Marion Cotillard and Joaquin Phoenix in 'The Immigrant'

Photo credit: The Weinstein Company

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