

Brilliant 'Martha Marcy May Marlene' Offers No Easy Answers

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on October 27, 2011 - 8:37am

- [Brian Tallerico](#) [2]
- [Elizabeth Olsen](#) [3]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [4]
- [Hugh Dancy](#) [5]
- [John Hawkes](#) [6]
- [Martha Marcy May Marlene](#) [7]
- [Movie Review](#) [8]
- [Sarah Paulson](#) [9]
- [Sean Durkin](#) [10]



Rating: **4.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – With a striking lead performance and assured direction from a debut filmmaker, “Martha Marcy May Marlene” has been one of the most acclaimed films of 2011 since its debut at Sundance many months ago. It’s finally now being released around the country, including tomorrow in Chicago, and it’s a work that demands your attention, a film that lingers in the memory as much as any this year. I’ve seen probably a hundred films since I first experienced “MMMM” (a film festival will do that to a critic) and I can’t shake this haunting work, one that increasingly grows in esteem the more I swirl it around my brain. It is undeniably one of the more memorable and intriguing works of 2011.

“Martha Marcy May Marlene” is a story of two families and a girl who doesn’t quite fit in either. Martha (Elizabeth Olsen, younger sister of the legendary twins, giving one of the most striking debut performances in years) has escaped a cult and contacted her sister Lucy (Sarah Paulson), whom she has not seen in two years and with whom she seems to have had a strained relationship before her disappearance. The rest of the film plays out in flashbacks as Durkin daringly alternates between Martha’s life in the cult (where she was known as Marcy May) and her trying to assimilate back into the real world while fearing her former members may be coming for her.



Martha Marcy May Marlene

Photo credit: Fox Searchlight

What allowed this beautiful girl to get sucked into a cult? Durkin doesn’t answer the question directly, offering glimpses of a young lady who may have subconsciously been looking for a father figure and found one in the charming Patrick (John Hawkes, giving a performance every bit as daring — and maybe more so — than his deservedly Oscar-nominated work in “Winter’s Bone”). Patrick may at first seem like a harmless leader and even a helpful one in the way he draws this shy girl out of her shell but his depth of evil is slowly revealed as the role of women in

the cult (as cooks, cleaners, and sex objects) is defined along with how aggressively Patrick trains the men to be able to kill.

And yet “Martha Marcy” is not merely the tale of a girl coming to terms with the horror of the last couple years. Her relationship with her sister and brother-in-law (Hugh Dancy) is nearly as complex and Durkin dares to present a story of a girl with a deeply flawed mother figure (her sister) to coincide with the deeply flawed father figure she just fled. Of course, Lucy is not abusive but Durkin hints at years of emotional differences between the girls and Martha’s sister and brother-in-law struggle to deal with a relative who often acts like a stranger. It doesn’t help that Martha’s increasing paranoia convinces her that the cult is coming for. And she might be right.

It’s a wildly over-used word in film criticism but “Martha Marcy May Marlene” is undeniably haunting. It has stuck with me in ways that most movies fail to do, whether it be a certain shot (and Jody Lee Lipes’ natural but poetic cinematography is stunning) or, more often, a decision made by Ms. Olsen, who gives easily one of the best performances of the year, debut or otherwise. This is an incredibly challenging role in that Olsen was tasked with presenting a woman at various stages of comfort and confidence while also making her transition feel organic. What I mean by that is that Martha can’t be the exact same girl at the beginning of the flashbacks, in the early days of the cult, as she is after escaping and yet it also can’t be a drastic enough difference that it feels melodramatic or disingenuous. And Martha is not a talker. She watches. She thinks. She takes things in. Olsen delivers one of those stunning performances that’s mostly in the eyes and it’s those eyes that I find so haunting.



Martha Marcy May Marlene
Photo credit: Fox Searchlight

I also greatly admire Durkin’s use of the natural world in this piece. If it’s not Olsen’s performance that haunts me when I think of “MMMM,” it’s often a shot of nature — the lapping water outside Lucy’s house or rustling leaves as a young girl runs for freedom. A vast majority of “Martha” takes place outdoors, even after she returns to “normal life,” and it adds a poetic tone to the film like wind blowing through the trees. This is not a hurried film (and people may be turned off by the slow pace at times or lack of melodrama) but I think that’s part of what makes it so haunting.

Durkin also deserves a ton of credit (and Hawkes, Paulson, and Dancy are all excellent as well, particularly Hawkes) for crafting a drama with no easy answers. Without spoiling anything, “Martha Marcy May Marlene” is a film about questions far more than it is one about answers. Don’t go in looking for grand insight into why young people with a lack of direction often find it in the very wrong place. This is not a grand statement film. It’s a character study that somehow, brilliantly, also plays like a piece of poetry.

“Martha Marcy May Marlene” stars Elizabeth Olsen, John Hawkes, Sarah Paulson, and Hugh Dancy. It was written and directed by Sean Durkin. It opens in Chicago on October 28th, 2011.



[11]

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