

## Michael Fassbender Stars in Riveting, Daring ‘Shame’

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on December 1, 2011 - 10:57am

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Rating: **5.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – Steve McQueen’s “Shame” is a daring examination of isolation and addiction with the best performance of the year courtesy of Michael Fassbender and one that nearly matches it from the always-stellar Carey Mulligan. This is dark, confrontational material of the kind that too few major filmmakers are willing to tackle and it will haunt you for days after you see it. Don’t miss it.

Brandon (Fassbender) has a life carefully hidden by routine. He is a sex addict. He no longer gets much joy from sex or masturbation, but they define his existence. And yet his co-workers (including a friend played by James Badge Dale and a possible love interest played by Nicole Beharie) have no idea. He’s not a pervert in a raincoat. He’s a good-looking guy in his 30s who you’d never guess has what is becoming a socially debilitating and dangerous addiction.



Shame

*Photo credit: Fox Searchlight*

The warning signs that Brandon’s sex addiction is defining his life are there early in “Shame” as he ignores repeated, seemingly-urgent voice mails from his sister Sissy (Carey Mulligan). He can’t be bothered when there’s pornography to watch or one-night stands to have. It gets to the point that Sissy has to come visit her brother to get some of his time and ends up sleeping on his couch. The arrival of his sister into his carefully-defined routine ups the stakes for Brandon to dangerous levels, although “Shame” is not your typical “descent into addiction” film. McQueen refuses to play the clichés that could have been found in the piece, instead giving us a much more daring and memorable drama.

Much has been made of the controversial level of nudity in “Shame,” to the point that it received an NC-17 rating from the MPAA. The flesh on display is clearly designed to de-sexualize it. The first time we see both of the central characters, Brandon & Sissy, they are completely naked. We see Brandon walking around his house naked and even urinating. McQueen is taking away all possible titillation at the human body because his central character feels less and less actual passion every day.



Shame

*Photo credit: Fox Searchlight*

The daring thing about “Shame” on a foundational level is the refusal to turn Brandon into a monster. It would have been so easy to make a sex addiction film about a high profile man’s fall from stature but this is not that movie. McQueen brilliantly uses the city of New York, shooting through skyscraper windows and tracking shots like the riveting one in which Brandon jogs down a desolate street. What’s going on behind those doors? Behind the window next to the one through which we’re looking? What is hidden in the gaze of the good-looking guy looking at you on the train? So many films about addiction are designed to be about extreme highs and lows. “Shame” is daring in the way it suggests that Brandon’s story is not unique. It takes something extreme like sex addiction and makes it feel resonant and, most shockingly, probably common in a city the size of New York.

“Shame” is a very visually accomplished film and so credit goes to McQueen there, but this is primarily a performance piece and Fassbender delivers one of the best of his already notable career. The word fearless applies to only a few acting turns a year, if we’re lucky, and it certainly does so here. It’s one of those emotionally and physically baring performances that burns itself into your memory. You won’t forget Brandon. Fassbender makes not only the right decisions here, he makes ones that other actors would have never even considered. There’s not a single false note. Not a single line, movement, or blank stare that doesn’t feel completely in character.



Shame

Photo credit: Fox Searchlight

Once again, Fassbender’s work is almost more notable for what it could have become but didn’t. Playing a sex addict brings certain archetypes to mind but Fassbender gives such an internal performance. Until the final act when he lays it all on the line in a series of scenes that culminate in this work being an easy choice for one of the best of the year. What’s notable about his work and the film overall is that it’s Brandon’s face I can’t shake – not a physical act, but the emotional pain hidden behind his eyes.

It helps to be matched in every way by an actress who should get her second Oscar nomination for what she does here. With much less screen time, it’s a supporting turn, Carey Mulligan crafts a fully believable, three-dimensional counterpart for Brandon. These two clearly have a dark past that’s hinted at but never fully defined. Whatever their past, Brandon took the emotional baggage and went inward, to routine and the pattern of repeated sexual conquest. Sissy went the other way. She feels like a wanderer, someone without a home, and the references to multiple suicide attempts make it clear that she is lost. And yet, just like Fassbender’s work, Mulligan never plays the potential cliché of the role.

“Shame” is not for everyone. It’s dark, complex, adult drama. It challenges the way we think about addiction, sex, and even the people you pass every day on the street. Any one of them could be Brandon or Sissy. Steve McQueen has taken situations that won’t be familiar to most viewers but made them relatable, understandable, and emotionally devastating. It’s one of the greatest dramatic accomplishments of 2011.

*“Shame” stars Michael Fassbender, Carey Mulligan, James Badge Dale, and Nicole Beharie. It was written by Abi Morgan & Steve McQueen and was directed by McQueen. It will be released on December 2nd, 2011 and is rated NC-17.*



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