

Meandering ‘The Master’ Serves Up Powerful After Effects

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on September 20, 2012 - 5:20pm

- [Amy Adams](#) [2]
- [Cult](#) [3]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [4]
- [Jesse Plemons](#) [5]
- [Joaquin Phoenix](#) [6]
- [Laura Dern](#) [7]
- [Movie Review](#) [8]
- [Patrick McDonald](#) [9]
- [Philip Seymour Hoffman](#) [10]
- [Scientology](#) [11]
- [The Master](#) [12]
- [The Weinstein Company](#) [13]
- [World War II](#) [14]



Rating: **4.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – ‘The Master’ is the type of film that invites days of contemplation. It is a film about America, but only a certain type of American. It is a film about the need to belong, but in the end it separates all its characters away from each other. Lead actors Philip Seymour Hoffman and Joaquin Phoenix radicalize writer/director P.T. Anderson’s strange alchemy.

Like Anderson’s “There Will Be Blood,” this film also meanders very slowly in episodes, rather than the beginning/middle/end narrative structure. Except for a certain timeline, the scenes in this film could be thrown up in the air, spliced back together, and still create the same film about what is depicted. There are some amazing sequences, though, especially anything having to do with confronting the relative truth of what The Master is selling. Because this is an original story, it mesmerizes within the provocative filmmaking of P.T. Anderson, but can also be quite chilly in trying to access the story and its characters.

Freddie Quill (Joaquin Phoenix) is a World War II naval veteran that has obviously been mentally affected by the conflict. He is shown in transition to civilian life in a number of psychological tests, hospital time and a series of jobs that he eventually can’t hold. He loves making homemade alcohol concoctions – a holdover from the war – and it is in the midst of a bender that he meets Lancaster Dodd (Philip Seymour Hoffman). Dodd is also known as The Master, a proprietor of a cult-like society called The Cause, which deals in past lives.



Philip Seymour Hoffman as Lancaster Dodd in ‘The Master’
Photo credit: The Weinstein Company

The Master takes a shine to the volatile Freddie, and soon the navy vet becomes part of the traveling entourage that seems to be the core followers of what The Master is preaching. This includes his wife Peggy (Amy Adams) and son Val (Jesse Plemons). Val is the doubter in the group, and challenges Freddie in this discretion. Freddie is fast becoming the enforcer of The Master's word and methods, so much that he seems to be losing what little is left for himself. The path to redemption in the world of The Master is rockier than what is sold.

Hoffman gives his usual brilliant and specific performance as The Master. He is a player in the Paul Thomas Anderson film universe, having done turns in "Boogie Nights," "Punch-Drunk Love" and "Magnolia." In this role as The Master, he is an omnipresent force and is the center of all being, floating above and within the confines of the narrative. An actor like Hoffman knows what to do with this character and material to generate that omnipresence, and the effect that develops from it allows him to capture every nuance of both the piety and carnival barker charade of Lancaster Dodd.

Joaquin Phoenix is an opposing force. His Freddie Quill is unleashed in the story, and his hysteria and actions are somewhat detrimental in keeping with a believable balance and stability. What is most interesting about him, and what is most obscured, is what happened to him in the war. The post-combat effects are apparent, but the horror that proceeds it is never revealed as a shorthand for his ex-warrior persona. The secret regarding what sets him off is part of his unfortunate personality, but having to endure the schizophrenia that results becomes a bit tiresome, especially as Phoenix overplays it.

The American social history of post World War II is well played in defining The Master and what he is accomplishing. Apparently Thomas wrote Dodd as an amalgamation of L. Ron Hubbard (founder of Scientology) and others. The susceptibility of his post-war followers is well understood and documented in the story, especially the wealthy patrons he picks up along the way. At one point, there is trouble with the law regarding Dodd's hucksterism, but he flicks it away in the knowledge that there is a sucker born every minute. The depth and breadth of what Dodd builds as an entity is astoundingly fast, for he provides answers for desperate questions, in an American society changed forever by war. The confrontation between the naysayer John More (Christopher Evan Welch) and The Master is a centerpiece highlight in the film, because it contrasts so fully with what the followers want to believe.



Camera Ready: Joaquin Phoenix as Freddie Quill in 'The Master'
Photo credit: The Weinstein Company

The pacing of the narrative is a problem and distraction, but it doesn't steal any authority from the best scenes. Amy Adams is rather pinched as Dodd's wife, she handles lighter fare better than any character creation. Laura Dern, in contrast, uses her persona very effectively in a short sequence with Hoffman. They riff off each other profoundly, and it becomes a highlight of the last act. The conclusion is bitterly vague, which may or may not help your understanding, depending on how you view the scenario. To sum up, 'The Master' comes in waves, and after that tide recedes the memory does linger.

The elements of the film and its accomplishment brings to mind the old saying, "when the student is ready, the master appears." This aphorism can be extended and expanded to any followers of specific religion or ideology. But once that knowledge becomes accumulated and idealized, it's the aftermath that is worrisome.

"The Master" opens everywhere on September 21st. Featuring Philip Seymour Hoffman, Joaquin Phoenix, Amy Adams, Jesse Plemons, Christopher Evan Welch and Laura Dern. Written and directed by Paul Thomas Anderson. Rated "R"



By [PATRICK McDONALD](#) [16]
Senior Staff Writer
HollywoodChicago.com
pat@hollywoodchicago.com [15]

[15]

© 2012 Patrick McDonald, HollywoodChicago.com

Source URL (retrieved on *Apr 23 2024 - 9:59pm*):
<http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/20002/meandering-the-master-serves-up-powerful-after-effects>

- Links:**
- [1] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/users/hankq>
 - [2] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/movie-review/amy-adams>
 - [3] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/cult>
 - [4] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/movie-review/hollywoodchicagocom-content>
 - [5] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/jesse-plemons>
 - [6] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/joaquin-phoenix>
 - [7] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/laura-dern>
 - [8] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/labels/review.html>
 - [9] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/movie-review/patrick-mcdonald>
 - [10] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/philip-seymour-hoffman>
 - [11] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/scientology>
 - [12] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/the-master>
 - [13] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/movie-review/the-weinstein-company>
 - [14] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/world-war-ii>
 - [15] <mailto:pat@hollywoodchicago.com>
 - [16] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/about#PAT>