

Love is Impossible in Alluring Period Horror 'In Secret'

Submitted by [NickHC](#) [1] on February 23, 2014 - 5:37pm

- [Charlie Stratton](#) [2]
- [Elizabeth Olsen](#) [3]
- [Emile Zola](#) [4]
- [Godzilla](#) [5]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [6]
- [In Secret](#) [7]
- [Inside Llewyn Davis](#) [8]
- [Jessica Lange](#) [9]
- [Martha Marcy May Marlene](#) [10]
- [Neal Bell](#) [11]
- [Nick Allen](#) [12]
- [Oscar Isaac](#) [13]
- [Roadside Pictures](#) [14]
- [The Avengers: Age of Ultron](#) [15]
- [Therese Raquin](#) [16]
- [Tom Felton](#) [17]



Rating: **3.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – If stories of Prince Charmings and the liberation from wicked stepmothers are fairy tales, than “In Secret” is the stuff of nightmares, where marriage is not just a prison sentence, but an unlucky life is as well. Based on the novel “Therese Raquin” by Emile Zola as published in 1867, this film’s element of ownership may be considered an artifact in 2014. But thankfully this adaptation earns its own pertinence, as a dark period thriller with real doses of hormonally fueled bad decisions.

Zola’s title character is played in this latest film adaptation by Elizabeth Olsen, who will soon assume mega-star status considering her upcoming appearances in “Godzilla” and “The Avengers: Age of Ultron”. Therese is a woman whose life is doomed from the day she is abandoned as a young girl by her father to live with her aunt, Madame Raquin (Jessica Lange), and the woman’s sick child Camille (Tom Felton). As years pass, she lives in misery taking care of her super gross-looking cousin, and when the time comes for her sexual maturity and potential to break free, she faces an even crueler fate. Because she is a bastard child, society says she doesn’t have marriage prospects. But she can, however, marry Camille.

After they are married, the three move to the uglier streets Paris to run a store. With Camille sexually illiterate and still disgusting, Therese is miserable but helpless. Until, through one of the family’s domino games, she meets a dashing struggling artist named Laurent (Oscar Isaac of last year’s “Inside Llewyn Davis”), who takes a very sharp and immediate interest in Therese, who is about to explode with her repressed hormones. Soon after they lock eyes, Therese and Laurent begin a very intense sexual affair, sneaking around the store, sometimes engaging in activity when others are around. The two fall in love, dreaming of waking up in the same bed, but can’t be together unless Therese can get out of her marriage. Considering the rules of the time, there is only one way for her to escape the clutches of marriage, and she and Laurent decide to risk their lives, and their own relationship, to take Camille out of the picture. To quote, Andy Dwyer, “[it] does not go well!”



Therese (Elizabeth Olsen) and Laurent (Oscar Isaac) in 'In Secret'

Photo credit: Roadside Attractions

Handling the trapeze act of British accents in a non-British location well, Olsen's key weapon in her take on this story is her sensuality. This isn't new for her, considering how we were introduced to her with her breakout "Martha Marcy May Marlene," in a role with an open sexuality and a freeness of an exposed body. With "In Secret", that aspect is bottled up for a vivid representation of one finally getting to take a sexual stride. Olsen is once again game for anything, in a script that isn't pornographic but creates a very vivid innuendo with its acts. She remains an intense dramatic actress as well, expressing the sad innocence and later the palpable haunted pain within her character. Olsen's performance is one reason that a story from 1867 can still seem like it has something to say, even in 2014.

Olsen makes a sparking on-screen pairing with Isaac, another rising actor who should have been nominated for the type of weight he put behind a type of coming-of-age performance ("Inside Llewyn Davis"). He too has strength of believability with the accent, and makes a strong case to accept him as a creature within this period. In the performance's finest way, he is able to color the "other man" character into a being more complicated than just a sex drive.

"In Secret" has strength in its supporting roles as well. Tom Felton zeroes in on the pity one should feel for Camille, a gross dork but assured simple mismatch for Therese. Jessica Lange continues to chug along her acting revival train (the coals fed by "American Horror Story", apparently). In this film, she shows an impressive manner in creating one way to feel about her initially, and then has the audience feeling completely different by the end. We see her matriarch as Therese's prison warden that she feels she has to be, especially so that Lange's character does not feel alone. But as the story continues, we then pity her, seeing her complete helplessness with Lange's very vocal depictions of pain.



Camille (Tom Felton) and Madame Raquin (Jessica Lange) in 'In Secret'

Photo credit: Roadside Attractions

Melodrama is a heavy force in this story, one of which director Charlie Stratton and his cast are able to manage for the most part. Though the setbacks are not huge, there are a few. The editing can be a bit sticky considering the chunks of development needed behind the story's many peaks, and a metaphor involving a bear harming itself trying to scratch something is extremely heavy-handed. Some melodramatic curves are a bit too sharp (such as a convenient accidental confession in the third act), but thankfully its Olsen, Isaac, and Lange trying to sell these conflicts.

But with Stratton's allegiance to showing a more realistic version of the period, complete with dark lighting and a grasp on presenting real sexuality and real death, the story is alive and raw. Stratton's camera as well, limber and not hesitant for bursts of energy (such as during a wonderfully abrupt scene on a dock), gives it an edge. This is the type of period work that keeps period films interesting in 2014, like last month's "The Invisible Woman" by Ralph Fiennes. To paraphrase what "The Other Boleyn Girl" director Justin Chadwick once said to me, "You don't want to make a film that is spinach."

Considering that we watch stories of romance rooting for center couples to achieve peace in their relationship, "In Secret" is a fairly involving story. When the story and its morality is then turned inside out, its affective elements are still in place. With its anti-"Romeo & Juliet" events leading us to an operatic finale, the centuries-old "In Secret" leaves 2014 audiences with a striking, and certainly tempting, flavor of cynicism to swallow.

"In Secret" opens everywhere on February 21st. Featuring Elizabeth Olsen, Oscar Isaac, Jessica Lange, and Tom Felton. Written and directed by Charlie Stratton, based on Neal Bell's play version of Emile Zola's novel "Therese Raquin". Rated "R"



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- [5] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/godzilla>
- [6] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/movie-review/hollywoodchicagocom-content>
- [7] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/in-secret>
- [8] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/inside-llewyn-davis>
- [9] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/jessica-lange>



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