

Unexpected Lessons for the Student of 'Indignation'

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Rating: **4.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – America was a very different place in 1951, and there are very few people around to tell us about it. That is why reminders of the more confining social order that existed back then is necessary, and is expressed in the film “Indignation.” This is an adaptation of a recent Philip Roth novel, and he was able to articulate the era.

The story is about mental health, but that theme lurks in the background rather than overtly exposed – much like all the hidden societies in 1951 America. It is presented through the stigmas that people put upon themselves while dealing with the tragedy of misunderstanding – whether it is in a undiagnosed bipolar condition or the forcing of religious philosophy upon another person because of a belief that it is the only dogma. This is a multi-textured and multi-layered film, with a cast that delivers these powerful themes with an anguish in having to teach and learn the harsh lessons.

Marcus is a highly intelligent striver in a middle class Jewish family in 1951. His father (Danny Burstein) is a butcher, and is showing signs of unhinging as his son leaves for college, which distresses his mother (Linda Emond). The Ohio school is serving two purposes for Marcus – it is giving him his long desired education, and is deferring his draft into the Korean War.



Olivia (Sarah Gadon) and Marcus (Logan Lerman) Teach Each Other in 'Indignation'

Photo credit: Summit Entertainment.

The transition of Marcus at the school is awkward. The curriculum includes mandatory Christian chapel once a week, and he meets a girl named Olivia (Sarah Gadon), who provides generous – for the time – sexual favors early in their courtship. This leads to a confrontation with the college dean (Tracy Letts), and lessons in decision-making that threatens Marcus and his new life.

This morality tale, tied to levels of mental health that we still don't really understand, is achingly different as a movie narrative. Director (and screenplay adapter) James Schamus is a sure handed storyteller who exposed the themes of the novel early on, and built upon it like a house of cards, complete with the possibility that the structure could collapse at any second. There is a sense of gravitas that is never heavy handed, just part of the transition to manhood that Marcus is experiencing, in a time when people had to grow up faster.

Logan Lerman, a former child actor who has evolved from the Percy Jackson young adult film franchise, through "The Perks of Being a Wallflower," provides the perfect tone for Marcus, who is both stubborn and lost. He is shadowed by Sarah Gadon as Olivia, and she has to perform the delicate balance between recovering a sense of status as a woman in 1951, and being true to the character's nature. There must have been many people like Olivia in less tolerant times, cursed to be placed in a generation where they don't fit, but can't help it.

The centerpiece confrontation in the film is a truly remarkable boy versus college dean face off, where neither combatant gives much ground. In hindsight, yes, the boy is correct about his position, but this is 1951 and standards/practices favored the institutions of power – rights to the individual be damned. Schamus allows this scene to develop in real time, it's almost an one act play in the middle of the story. Letts is astounding here, using a flat monotone and an authoritarian's righteous lack of compromise to deflate the puny student. It is one of the most stunning film scenes this year, and excruciatingly never lets up, until it finally does.



The Law: Dean of Students (Tracy Letts) in 'Indignation'

Photo credit: Summit Entertainment.

The minor characters even have major scenes. Danny Burstein, as the butcher father, has most of his best moments as a voice on the phone with his son, but the slow dissolution of the patriarch's mind is critically played out, so much so that Linda Emond as Marcus's mother – just in the background initially in the film – comes forward in the second most powerful confrontation scene that Marcus experiences, one that his mother knows she must win.

What are our thoughts but random air, generated through a filter of nurturing, socio-economic happenstance and often skewed perspective? In spirit, this is the "Indignation" of being human, the sometimes triumphant and sometimes sad consequence of just being.

"Indignation" opened in Chicago, continuing its limited release. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Logan Lerman, Sarah Gadon, Danny Burstein, Linda Emond and Tracy Letts. Screenplay adapted and directed by James Schamus. Rated "R"



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