

Ethereal 'The Shape of Water' Forms Cinema Magic

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on December 13, 2017 - 2:44pm

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Rating: **5.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – This breathtaking morality and love story, set in a backward age, takes all of its major themes – passion, tolerance, symbolism and thrills – to the highest level. Writer/director Guillermo del Toro has created a masterwork that is part fairy tale, part adult desperation and all cinema magic.

The fairy tale involves a mute janitor, portrayed with mystery by Sally Hawkins, falling in love with a U.S. government prisoner in 1962, who happens to resemble the Creature from the Black Lagoon. The film is also a heart warming tribute to the movies themselves, as two of the main characters share that passion – even living above a movie theater – and who escape their daily grind at the altar of the late show. The movie expresses its era precisely, with misfit characters symbolically standing in at times for the actual prisoner in chains, and they all break free through the energy of love.

Sally Hawkins is Elisa, an orphaned girl who cannot talk, and ends up being a janitor at a U.S. government lab facility in 1962. Her best friend is her gay neighbor Giles (Richard Jenkins), who is a graphic artist and recovering alcoholic, and her best work buddy is fellow scrubwoman Zelda (Octavia Spencer). Their lives are changed when a strange creature is brought to the lab, under the protection of Agent Richard Strickland (Michael Shannon).



Floating: The Creature and Elisa (Sally Hawkins) in 'The Shape of Water'

Photo credit: Fox Searchlight Pictures

But since this is the Cold War, a Russian scientist has infiltrated the facility, Dr. Hoffstetler (Michael Stuhlbarg). The U.S. government intends to dissect the creature, but Elisa (and in a way, Dr. H) falls in love with the being inside the lizard form. After negotiations, Elisa decides to kidnap her new infatuation. The actions she takes will have implications for all the lives around her.

The assembled cast is of performers at the highest levels of their powers, and each gives a jolt of empathy into the depths of their characters. Even Michael Shannon, as the U.S. Agent villain, becomes something else under the touch of his particular talent. Sally Hawkins leads the way, and steals each scene just by mere presence. Her understanding of the mute girl's journey is a step-by-step unfolding into the person she eventually becomes... it is both extraordinary and accessible.

The supporting players are also germane to the story, especially the befuddled sorrow of Richard Jenkin's character of Giles. He represents the closeted gay men of the era, lost in their own justifications. The way he gains dignity again is one of the highlights of the film. Michael Stuhlbarg is another national acting treasure, and his put-upon and reluctant Russian spy has a Chaplin-esque twinge. He is heroic without being a hero.



Giles (Richard Jenkins) and Elisa Have a Plan in 'The Shape of Water'

Photo credit: Fox Searchlight Pictures

The creator of this marvelous movie gift is writer/director Guillermo del Toro, who displayed similar thematic in "Pan's Labyrinth" in 2006. His love of both the movies and the mythos generated in movies comes through as the valentine within, and provide short break highlights that reach beyond a Cold War thriller about a creature kept captive by the U.S. government, and then reaches beyond the beyond. It's that type of pleasure.

Ah, beyond the beyond, what does the writer mean, the reader thinks (if they've gotten this far)? Who knows? It's that bit of warm soul that pops up from time to time when absorbing certain movies, resulting in a special feeling, one that mercifully lingers, and miraculously makes life a little better.

"The Shape of Water" is currently in limited release nationwide, including Chicago. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Sally Hawkins, Richard Jenkins, Octavia Spencer, Michael Shannon and Michael Stuhlbarg. Written and directed by Guillermo del Toro. Rated "R"



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