

## John Malkovich and the Morality of South Africa in 'Disgrace'

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on September 26, 2009 - 7:59am

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Rating: **4.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – In a stark and compelling tale of naked vulnerability, John Malkovich becomes the centerpiece of the continuing battle for territory and humanity within the country of South Africa, in the newly released “Disgrace.”

Based on a novel by J.M. Coetzee, Malkovich portrays David Lurie, a Cape Town university professor who gets caught up in a career-ending scandal involving an affair with a mixed race student. Forced out of his realm, he takes up residence with his estranged daughter, a frontier practitioner living off the unyielding but beautiful country far from civilization.

Reduced to menial labor and an ascetic lifestyle, the professorial Lurie is useless when a gang of rebels raid the modest house, attacking him and raping his daughter. Forced now to deal with both his weakness and the lack of justice in the harsh territory, Lurie must come to terms with his own perceptions and face the reality of an increasing array of post-apartheid circumstances.



Father and Daughter Reflections: John Malkovich and Jessica Haines in 'Disgrace'  
Photo credit: Copyright © Icon Film Distribution

This film is all about symbols and transitions. Malkovich's feckless white intellectual, once so formally and regimentally in power in South Africa, is reduced to a sputtering weakling in the face of tribal brutality. His daughter, played with critical balance by Jessica Haines, expresses the guilt over apartheid by becoming absolutely compliant to the new power overthrowing white ownership.

Malkovich is spot-on as a cold man in need of redemptive intervention. His characteristic acerbic nature is matched perfectly with the callowness of his burnt out academic. The way in which he icily accepts his punishment for his carnal crimes, for example, is a distinct contrast to all the warm humanity surrounding him.



The way Malkovich converts this character from lost soul to a connective presence in his world has the actor working at the height of his powers. The shift is subtle, but naturally evolutionary, and follows through up to a repeat of the apology the university was expecting, but the second time around it is sincere, humble and filtered through a changed man.



Man's Best Friend: John Malkovich in 'Disgrace'  
Photo credit: Copyright © Icon Film Distribution

There are many layers to the film, and one of the major themes is in the relationship between men and women, whether it is the professor dominating his student, his daughter regarding the nature of her attackers or the comparison of coupling with dogs in a cage, all condemned to their own nature.

Director Steve Jacobs reveals a keen eye for the South African countryside, using the isolation of the frontier land to enhance his lost professor character with the same sense. He also effectively distinguishes the warmth of home and the father/daughter relationship before the attack, with how ugly both got afterward. Both living quarters, the daughter and the professor's abode in Cape Town, are cold and uninviting after they've been invaded.

But again the film belongs to John Malkovich, who delivers a character that becomes a whole country, struggling to understand a new set of rules, and in the inevitable progression, a new way of life.

*"Disgrace" has a limited release, and opened September 25th at Piper's Alley Theater, 1608 N. Wells, Chicago. Featuring John Malkovich, Jessica Haines and Eriq Ebouaney, directed by Steve Jacobs. Rated "R"*



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