

Movie Review - The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo

Written by {ga=mitch}

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There has been only one time before now when I have reviewed a DVD viewing of a foreign film that had limited release in the United States. That movie was the Irish indie “Once”, and it was a case where I thought the movie to be so special as to warrant a review so that others who had perhaps not heard of it might give it a try.

Today I will do a second-ever review of a film out on DVD, and this will be the first time ever that I’ve reviewed a foreign language film. The reason for that is that I’m not a huge fan of the standard, avant-garde artsy-fartsy Bergman/Fellini type films.

“The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo” does not fall into that category. Instead, it falls primarily into the “Mystery/Thriller” category, and could probably be described most succinctly as a Goth-Girl “Silence of the Lambs” set in Sweden.

Although that description is accurate, it does not tell the full story of this extraordinary film.

Adapted from the smash hit novel from Stieg Larsson, the film gives us one of the most unique

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characters ever seen on screen in the form of Noomi Rapace's mesmerizing turn as the multi-tattooed, multi-pierced computer hacker Lisbeth Salander. Long after you have forgotten the details of the plot, you will always remember this character and this performance.

The first part of the movie, however, does not contain many scenes with Lisbeth. Instead, it follows a famous Swedish investigative reporter named Mikael Blomkvist, played by Michael Nyqvist. He has just been convicted in court of libel against a powerful and corrupt industrialist, and although he was probably framed, he has no intention of appealing the three month prison sentence he must serve.

With six months to spend before his sentence begins, Blomkvist is contacted by an even more powerful industrialist, Henrik Vanger. The 82 year old man has an unusual request for him; investigate the disappearance and probable murder of his beloved niece; an event that occurred 40 years earlier. Vanger is convinced that Blomkvist has the intelligence, perseverance, and connections to discover what the police could not.

This brings him to Vanger's private island in Sweden, where he meets up with various other members of the Vanger family. It is not a pleasant lot. Henrik has nothing but contempt for the lot of them, and they return his disdain. Making things worse is the knowledge that Henrik is convinced that one of them murdered his then 16 year old niece.

When it appears that Blomkvist is hopelessly stuck in his investigation, he is mysteriously aided by Lisbeth Salander. She had earlier hacked his computer at the behest of Vanger's people in order to determine if he was the right man for the job. Salander became fascinated with the complex but moral journalist, and continued spying on his activities. In helping him out by sending him the answer to a clue he could not break, she made it so that she could be found. This started a very unique and tenuous partnership between the 40 something divorced journalist and the 24 year old emotionally damaged ex-con.

Their adventures in unraveling the mystery sometimes journeys into standard thriller fare, but they still leave the audience guessing. There are no obviously telegraphed clues, nor any use of unrealistically contrived circumstances, which is quite refreshing in these types of films. This one also has a very dark edge; there are dealings with child abuse, rape, Nazi sympathizers, and extreme torture. This is not "Dexter" where there is a sense of humor underlying it all...the images are meant to be disturbing.

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The movie would be very good just on the merits of its plot and the fine acting of Nyqvist as Blomkvist, Sven-Bertil Taube as Henrik, and Peter Haber as Henrik's nephew Martin, the man now in charge of the vast Vanger Group empire. They are all excellent in their roles, especially Nyqvist, who has no problem subjugating himself by playing Blomkvist as a very reserved man of quiet thoughts and deeds, which makes him the polar opposite of Lisbeth.

But it is Lisbeth Salander who makes this film, much like Hannibal Lecter made "Silence of the Lambs". She is damaged beyond all belief. She is blessed/cursed with a photographic memory, which is of extreme value for her work as a hacker/researcher, but a nightmare when she remembers every single detail of all of the abuse she suffered as a child, which drove her to committing a crime as a pre-teen. Now she must report to a parole officer, and when she is told that her current one suffered a stroke, the new one is revealed to be a sadist reveling in using his position to abuse her further. These scenes are shocking in their unflinching brutality, but also in their honesty and how they cut to the core of who Lisbeth really is. But make no mistake about it; this film, and especially these scenes, should never be viewed by children.

There are just so many layers to Lisbeth; unfeeling/caring, honest/deceitful, passionate/frigid...she would be a research psychiatrist's dream. And what makes it all so watchable is the amazing, totally fearless performance from Noomi Rapace, who may just end up duplicating Marion Cotillard's path by taking Oscar gold home in a little seen foreign language film (as Edith Piaf in "La Vie en Rose"). It is one of the best performances I've seen in the past decade, and she steals every scene she is in; much like Anthony Hopkins in the aforementioned "Silence of the Lambs". She is able to continually show the scar tissue of her life, and the solid steel protective exterior she has been forced to put up around herself for her own defenses. But at the same time, Rapace can also show the deep pain that occasionally flickers in her eyes, and the desperate need for some level of human contact, love, and acceptance. It is truly a heartbreaking performance...even when she is mercilessly taking care of someone who deserves it.

Because of this, I am very wary of the David Fincher English language version of this film that will be coming out in 2011. In it, Daniel Craig will play Blomkvist, and relative newcomer Rooney Mara will play Lisbeth. Part of me wants to trust in Fincher, who has no problem going dark and violent, as his earlier films "Se7en" and "Fight Club" can attest. But I am concerned about how they may tone down the dark undercurrents due to "American sensibilities", or that they may try to make Craig's Blomkvist more of a "movie star" role.

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Mostly, I'm highly skeptical that there could ever be another actress that I could accept in the role of Lisbeth Salander. When you watch this film, you will know exactly what I mean.

My Rating: Bernie Kosar (4 footballs)