

The Claim

For *The Claim*, veteran British director Michael Winterbottom tackles an adaptation of a Thomas Hardy novel, "The Mayor of Casterbridge," shifting its provincial English setting to the rugged Sierra Nevada mountains. This shift in place and tenor, if not in time, works splendidly. The Hardy novel concerns a man so possessed--by drink in this case--that he literally sells his wife and daughter to another man for booze, then laments his act and goes on to become a productive, upright citizen (and the Mayor of his town), only to have his wife and now grown daughter return after 18 years. Then, in his efforts to win them back, he encounters only desolation and disaster.

In Winterbottom's and screenwriter Frank Cottrell Boyce's version of this narrative, it is 1867 and located in the California mining town of Kingdom Come which is completely dominated by mayor Dillon (played by Peter Mullan). Imperious and essentially alone, except for his bedmate, the continental bar maid Lucy (Milla Jovovich). We learn in a flashback that Dillon, a fervent prospector, has sold his wife and daughter years earlier to gain a claim on a gold stake, a stake which proves very lucrative and gives him his current money and prominence. Just as the Central Pacific Railroad is surveying a possible route for a track near the town, Dillon learns that his wife, now a widow, Mrs. Elena Byrne (Natassia Kinski), and her daughter Hope (Sarah Polley), have come to town, the former to die (she has advanced tuberculosis, the latter to discover a long-lost father). Though he has hopes to reconnect with those he abandoned in several ways--e.g., he remarries Elena and tries a series of medical treatments to cure her TB--Dillon's overreaching goes unrewarded. His wife dies, the railroad goes elsewhere, his daughter--thought loyal--takes sides with the railroad's surveyor Dagleish (Wes Bentley). His town abandoned and his dreams crushed, he torches his personal mansion and can only comfort himself with an endless sleep in the snow...

Above all, *The Claim* is richly evocative of its particular place and period, though it was shot in Canada rather than in the Sierra Nevada. The movie is very reminiscent of another well-known film epic of the frontier, *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971). The resemblance is basically superficial, however, since Robert Altman's picture was loose, improvisational, and dipped in amber. Michael Winterbottom's *The Claim* is more earnest, tighter, and coated in blue-black--the colors of silhouettes against the snow.

The mood--and the weather--of this new picture may be somber, as the story is somber, but at its best it is as piercing as an icicle. And as somber as it is, it is not bereft of hope (or should I say Hope...).

Another side of its soberness is what could be called its monumentality, the figures and their landscape[e having an almost totemic, ancient air. One scene is literally monumental, as Dillon, to please his newly-found wife, has the entire village assembled to move a massive, but isolated, frame mansion which he has built (a remarkable set, by the way) hundreds of yards in the snow into the town. This imposing structure, impressive as it is, remains fragile in this snowy setting, and it will crumble grandly into flame to mark its--and Dillon's--end.

The above emphasis on the effective chill factor in the film should be not be taken to mean there is *no* warmth to *The Claim*. There is, for example, an extended

sequence in the town's bar/entertainment center, the Paradise Hall, where miners and rail men and their ladies can carouse under Dillon's watchful eye, and even the demure Hope can try out a tune. The movie's real heat, however, comes from its actors, all representing sturdy but soulful folk who carved out a continent. Mr. Bentley as Dagleish (the only lead American cast member in this "American" story) is a flinty yet decent presence, playing nicely off Sarah Polley's Hope, a character both touching and determined, a born survivor whose striking doe-eyes take in everything. Milla Jovovich is quirky and sharp as a take-charge wench, while Natassia Kinski pitifully evokes her opposite, a melancholic whom life has left behind.

The true triumph of *The Claim's* cast, though, lies with Peter Mullan (*My Name Is Joe, Miss Julie*) as Daniel Dillon. We see him go from master of all he surveys--but pinched and pompous--to a man confounded and vulnerable, trying to do the right dance when he's been so long out of practice he can't remember the steps. It's a measure of his performance that Mullan brings out one's sympathy for a character little worthy of it. His final demise, too, is almost biblical, but still restrained rather than histrionic. This fellow has been to hell and back--a couple of times.

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