

Issue 12: Film Reviews

I'm Not There

Dir: Todd Haynes, USA, 2007

A Review by Lawrence Taylor,

I'm Not There (2007), Todd Haynes's kaleidoscopic journey through the life and times of Bob Dylan, is almost impervious to any further plot synopsis, but I shall try.

The oft-discussed story of Dylan's life is told through six deliberately different performances. The first one we are acquainted with is the rambling, restless Dylan, played here by a young black boy, Marcus Carl Franklin. Franklin claims to be Woody Guthrie, the folk singer that Dylan admired most, and he spends his time traveling on trains, spouting worldly rhetoric, and entertaining passers by in his life with song. It is a deft touch by Haynes to make the portion of Dylan where he was most unsure of himself also the actor that resembles him the least of the six.

The next storyline focuses on a young Dylan, this time going by the name of Jack Collins, a folk hero and an activist who feels like he can change the world with his music. This portion is played by Christian Bale, who forces himself into a shell to play the reclusive and timid young folk singer. At the same time, Heath Ledger plays an actor playing Dylan (Collins) in a film version of his life. The film version focuses on Dylan's failed marriage to Sarah Lownds. Ledger does an equally solid job with this dense material as does Bale with his segment of the story, and Bale returns later as Pastor John, representing the time in Dylan's life where he found religion. All of this may seem too convoluted to follow, but it is actually more difficult to explain than to watch. Once you allow yourself to be put into the world of these actors, the switch between actors and the forward momentum the picture builds upon is fairly easy to get into.

And then, there is the meat of the picture, the storyline that everyone has been talking about. It is, of course, the turn by Kate Blanchett as Dylan. Here, she plays Dylan as Jude, the wayfarer wearing, bushy-headed misanthrope that most of us remember. This is when Dylan was trying to escape his own celebrity amidst a circle of friends and drugs. Blanchett is amazing, without a doubt, but it helps that she performs in the most pivotal and interesting time in Dylan's life. Her first appearance as Dylan is at the infamous New England Folk Festival where he went electric and angered his most devoted fans. But this is merely one way in which Dylan defied expectations. As Jude flirts airily with a socialite in a garden, dopes it up with the Beatles, harasses a journalist, and chats it up with poet Allen Ginsburg (David Cross), the tone of the film around Blanchett begins to grow more and more surreal, more dreamlike, as if we are traveling down a rabbit hole and losing any semblance of identity, with Dylan or even the film itself. Images and scenes begin to escape the frame of any sort

of reality. Blanchett, hidden behind those signature black wayfarers most of the time, is still able to give the most honest, fulfilling, noteworthy performance of the six as she slumps around, spouting off at the mouth and using those shades to try and hide what everyone thinks they see in him. I especially enjoyed the wordplay between Blanchett and David Cross as Ginsburg. Cross does a spot on impersonation, at least visually, of Ginsburg. Dylan's music is performed by various artists, but none of them, I believe, are by the actors themselves.

The fifth Dylan is a narrator of sorts, played sparingly by Ben Wishaw, who inserts a few poetic lines throughout the film as we travel along with the rest of the players. And the sixth, and most confounding in terms of style and flow of the film, is played by Richard Gere as Billy, the version of Dylan that became a hermit after his motorcycle accident. It was also no coincidence that at about that time Dylan played Billy the Kid in the Sam Peckinpah film *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* (1973). With everything going in the same direction, the scenes with Gere seem taken out of another film altogether. The circus atmosphere and splashes of color seem to throw everything I had experienced to that point into a fit of uncertainty. But perhaps that was Haynes's idea all along. As the entire point of the film is to show how Dylan, in the face of public perception, would flip everything on its head and become something nobody expected, so Haynes might be doing the same with the structure of his film. Nevertheless, this last segment felt tacked on.

After helming the heartbreaking period drama, *Far From Heaven* (2002), it is quite a departure for Todd Haynes to take on a bit of surreal filmmaking with this picture. While this may be too dense of a film for many to get into, it is sure to be a film that will be revisited periodically from time to time. And, with the variety of techniques, themes, and ideas, it is also sure to be a staple with the more eccentric film studies professors at universities across the country.

What Haynes is attempting with *I'm Not There* may be more admirable than what he has achieved. The screenplay, while invigorating and well conceived, relies too often on poetic speech in order to vault the Dylan mystique beyond humanity. Visually, the film is engrossing, if not always linear. As a whole, the picture feels like a construct of smaller, more interesting pieces that may have worked on their own as a film. However, just as this is nearly impervious to synopsis, it may also be immune from any sort of true criticism regarding the structure and tone. This is the very definition of experimental filmmaking, something you used to see all the time. In recent years, experimental film has not found its footing, but Haynes may be able to change that with this picture. It is also a very personal film about the nature and the lack of identity that hits more than it misses.

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