By PATRICK HALL
The Wilson Post

Like its two main characters, "The Master" is enigmatic and engaging, but its message is lost in the wake of two outstanding acting performances and provides more questions than answers.

Written and directed by **Paul Thomas Anderson**, "Master" is the story of World War II Naval veteran Freddie Quell (**Joaquin Phoenix**), an alcoholic drifter wandering the country following his discharge from the service, and intellectual cult leader Lancaster Dodd (
Philip Seymour Hoffman
), as they collide and their relationship fumbles through alongside the growth of Dodd's cult movement "The Cause."

First and foremost, Phoenix is phenomenal in his major acting return since his "meltdown" of a few years ago. Quell is an enigmatic disaster, destroying every situation he enters from a job as a department store photographer to a social outing with cult followers. His alcoholism shows no signs of soothing any pain but merely adds to his violent nature.

Hoffman delivers an extraordinary performance as Dodd, a.k.a. Master, who is jovial and charismatic, although when his cult is questioned, his anger always finds a way to briefly erupt. When he meets Quell, he sees him as the subject through which he can prove his theories.

The film's most tense and outstanding scene involves Quell and Dodd sitting across a table, as Dodd administers Quell's "processing." As Dodd fires off probing personal questions, Quell unblinkingly stares back at Dodd, answering each one.

Dodd has a particular taste for Quell's ability to distill liquor from just about anything, ranging from paint thinner to torpedo fuel on a Navy vessel and some substance from a medicine cabinet.

The film’s most engaging aspect is the nature of Dodd and Quell and how they interact. Phoenix displays Quell with a stooped posture, a constant sneer of the upper lip and squinted eyes. Hoffman portrays Dodd with a bright yet stern face and an inviting personality that attracts others to his Cause.

While giving a speech early in the film, Dodd speaks of lassoing and ensnaring a fierce dragon that he teaches to “stay on command” but then must teach to “roll over and play dead.” Quell is Dodd’s fierce dragon that he must ensnare, teach and ultimately cure of his animal nature. The film portrays the process in a plot that never really hints at where these two will end up.

Once Quell stays at Dodd’s side and at times, violently lashes out at those who opposed his Master’s beliefs, Dodd soon realizes he must use Quell as a tool to teach his followers. But whether he is successful is debatable. Of course, the metaphor of Dodd commanding the dragon is potent, in the film’s third act it becomes an afterthought.

What attracted the two opposites to one another is unclear, although at times I felt it could have been homoeroticism, but I can’t be sure of that conclusion either.

The film drifts along, churning like the ship’s wake that is a recurring image and a beautiful one at that. Quell is aimless and apathetic, unable to fit in anywhere, while Dodd continues to command his followers even when holes in his writings are exposed.

Anderson should be commended for his outstanding direction and the photography is nothing short of spectacular. But unfortunately, his writing this time leaves something to be desired. Unlike his last outing, 2007’s “There Will Be Blood,” Anderson simply lets the story drift into the distance, seemingly, never-ending.

I keep coming back to the image of the ship’s wake, and thinking how Dodd cuts through life with clear direction while Quell lies on the ship’s deck in a drunken stupor.

Like Dodd’s Cause, the beliefs and message of “The Master” are a mystery but eloquently conveyed, even if the words lead you to no real answers, but maybe that’s the point.

When Dodd defends his beliefs by speaking of fighting a battle “trillions of years old…yes, trillions, with a T,” he firmly stands on that belief, but like his detractor, you’re left clueless about what it all actually means.

“The Master” is rated ‘R’ and is playing in limited theaters with a runtime of 2 hours 27 minutes.

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