

Climbing Jacob's Ladder

Horror film muddled by flashbacks and plot twists

by Robb Frederick
The Collegian

As wounded American soldiers scream in the background, Jacob Singer races through the Vietnam jungle, only to be met with the flash of a bayonet that is thrust and twisted through his midsection.

Jacob carries the memory and pain of that moment out of the jungle and into his life in the states. But Jacob returns from the jungle with more than his share of personal nightmares, for his demons have taken a very real form.

These demons, and the psychological madness they create, provide the basis for director Adrian Lyne's latest film, *Jacob's Ladder*.

The film is driven by a rapid-fire series of flashbacks, jetisoning viewers from Vietnam to New York, from the reality of life to the equally vivid hell of Jacob's innermost fears.

Jacob (Tim Robbins) first notices the creatures as he rides the subway home from his job at the post office. A sleeping homeless man shuffles in his seat, revealing a withering flesh-colored tail.

When Jacob is almost run

down by another subway train, he notices faceless specters staring out the train's windows and waving from the car's rear door.

In addition to these visions, Jacob is plagued by memories of his broken marriage and the death of his youngest son.

Just when these visions bring Jacob to the brink of madness, a fellow veteran calls explaining that he is also being haunted by the demons. This testimonial, emphasized by the friend's sudden unnatural death, inspires Jacob to get to the bottom of the situation.

Lyne shows no mercy as he directs viewers through Jacob's search for sanity. Jacob always finds himself in abandoned areas, such as locked-up subway stations and empty roads and corridors. These scenes, emphasized by mercilessly close camera angles, provide a chilling example of claustrophobic fear.

This technique is particularly successful when Jacob is placed on a rickety gurney and wheeled down a bloody corridor littered with severed limbs. When Jacob reaches the end of the corridor, he finds himself strapped to a table as an eyeless doctor prepares an injection.

The operating room supplies a

vision of Jacob's hell, and the effect is chilling.

As the haunted Jacob, Robbins successfully breaks away from the comic roles he mastered in *Bull Durnham* and *Cadillac Man*. Elizabeth Pena's Jizzie, although barely developed, shines as the film's only stable character.

Lyne's directorial style succeeds in frightening viewers, but the numerous flashbacks that propel the film are too confusing to follow. The viewer is never certain whether any given scene is really happening or merely a neurotic vision of Jacob's fears.

Even after the reason for Jacob's trauma is explained, Lyne throws his audience into uncertainty.

For a majority of the film, the complex plot twists and subtle biblical references carry viewers further into the hellish memories of Jacob Singer. Near the film's end, however, it is too difficult to distinguish between reality and insanity, past experience or hallucination.

Jacob's Ladder could have lived up to its potential if Lyne had given his audience just a little more substance to work with.

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When it came out, this controversial film was called "sort of a lesbian western." It's about two women in love, and it is by virtue of the fact alone an unusual movie for mass distribution in a society that is still greatly disturbed by the thought of people of the same sex loving each other. Romantic, lushly scenic, and in some aspects deliberately conventional, the film is probably still the only lesbian love story to have been widely shown in American theaters.

Discussion immediately following, led by Penn State-Behrend students Diana Ziemniak and Sally Meister.

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Sex scenes darken White Palace

Critic believes NC-17 rating more appropriate

by Christi Luden
The Collegian

Another Pretty Woman?

No, I don't think so. Although some of the same elements are present (rich man and poor woman, falling in love, trying to fit into different lifestyles, etc.) the new release *White Palace* just doesn't have what Gary Marshall had in *Pretty Woman*.

James Spader plays Max Baron, a rich business man whose life is upset by his wife's death. Now, still a young man in his mid 20's, he spends all his time with good friends and a nagging mother.

Although many women want to snag Max, he's still pining over his dead wife. Still pining, that is, until Nora Baker steps into his life.

Nora, played by Susan Sarandon, is a rugged looking middle-aged waitress in a hamburger joint called White Palace. She's poor, sloppy, and tough.

Nora, like Max, has lost a loved one. Her son supposedly died of leukemia, but we later find out what really happened.

The two meet in a bar one evening after Max leaves a friend's stag party. Although

extremely intoxicated, Max resists Nora's advances and attempts to go home. But, Nora misses the bus and persuades Max to take her home.

Their hot and heavy relationship starts here. Too drunk to drive, Max spends the night at Nora's. Although his intentions are only to sober up, Nora's are quite different.

I can not believe the hard core sex contained in this R-rated movie. After the initial scene shock that created an unbelievable tenseness in the audience, Max turns into a nymphomaniac.

Director Luis Mandoki takes a great storyline and makes a futile attempt to vary it by adding the vulgar sex scenes.

I'm sure the film could never measure up to it's thematic predecessor (*Pretty Woman*), but Mandoki's idea of adding the variations is despicable. The scenes he creates would fit more appropriately under the new NC-17 rating.

However, I can't judge the whole film based on those incidents. There are some good points.

The theme itself is varied a bit. Two unhappy people holding on to dead loved ones whose lives cross and discover love again. Both benefit. Both let go of their

pasts. Both find the happiness they deserve.

The age difference also affects the film. The young twenty-year-old Max has the perfect, storybook life with another young woman. Nora is an older woman. She shows her age through her rigid appearance and her experienced actions.

The class difference is also entwined throughout the film. Max has a difficult time bringing Nora to meet his high society friends. When he finally does, her bitter attitude towards life ruins any chances of being accepted.

Spader is the perfect, sweet boy-faced man that Max Baron needs to be portrayed as. He's intelligent and successful, but naive, and his soft spot is visibly noticeable in several delicate scenes concerning his dead wife.

Sarandon is also the ideal older woman. She's got the old-looking face and mature body, but possesses a teenage innocence that causes her excitement about gifts and Max's youthfulness.

Although I am not impressed with the overemphasized sex in *White Palace*, it isn't a horrible film not worth seeing. It's delicate and moving, but be prepared for those tense moments when breathing ceases in the theater.