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*The Handmaid's Tale*

*An excellent movie and things are said in this movie that don't usually get said in Hollywood movies*

BY CHRIS MAIER

**T**he *Handmaid's Tale* is an intense, powerful and painful movie based on Margaret Atwood's book of the same name. The book is sort of a feminist 1984 — Atwood's response to the "It can't happen here" mentality. Set ten or 15 years in the future, the movie shows a country — part or all of the US — called the Republic of Gilead.

**Cinema**

Apparently the result of a coup by the religious right wing, Gilead is a religious autocracy in which men (ranking, straight, Christian, white men) carry all the power. Gays, people of color, and dissenters are sent to the colonies (whole sections of the country that serve as concentration camps) to shovel toxic waste.

Women have become mostly infertile thanks to toxins, and so women who can bear children are forced to do so, under a rigid and ritualistic system whereby they are hired out as handmaids. Fertility is the handmaid's responsibility — should she not conceive, she is sent off to the colonies.

Atwood explored the permutations of a society based on religious backlash, and peopled her book with complex, realistic characters. Harold Pinter's script is much more faithful to the book than I expected it to be, with some few exceptions, and the power of the book is really present in the movie. The power that Hollywood's changes dampens is rekindled by the sheer intensity of the visual images.

The rulers of the new society live in upper middle class neighborhoods not unlike the Southwest hills, and the ongoing war is fought in working class neighborhoods not unlike Southeast Portland. During indoctrination, the handmaids sleep in a high school gym. The ritual ceremony by which the Commander attempts to impregnate Kate takes place in a suburban bedroom on a French Provincial canopy bed. And the pep rally/execution which all women are required to attend is held in a small town football stadium. The effect of the tyranny and cruelty in such familiar settings is harrowing.

My primary complaint has to do with a piece of the book left out of the movie. The book is set within a historical frame that makes it clear that the Republic of Gilead was a short-lived historical phenomenon, and that Kate, the main character, had a strong impact on the downfall of the Gilead regime. The movie doesn't have that historical perspective, and as a consequence the audience doesn't know that the rebels win, doesn't know that Kate did make a difference.

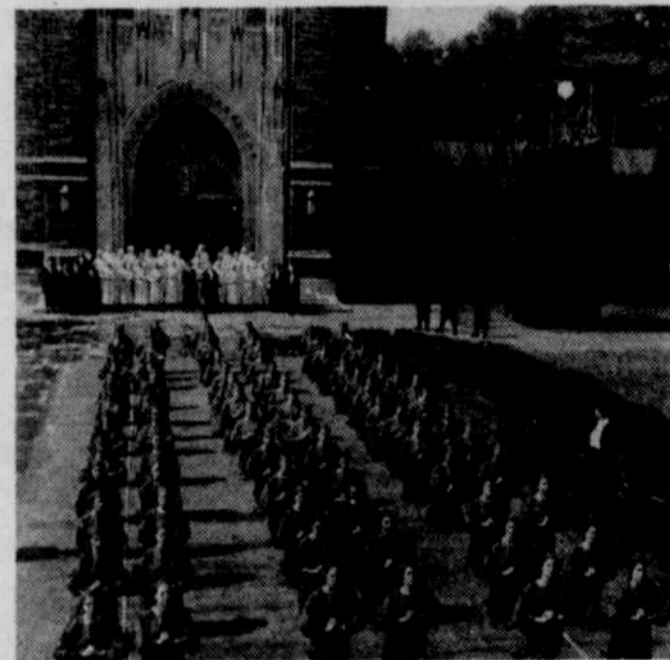
In other words, the movie is a lot more depressing than it needs to be. The book was painful but hopeful — the movie doesn't have as much hope, and that makes it harder to watch.

My only other complaint has to do with the fact that it is, after all, a Hollywood movie. The movie puts a lot of stress on a love affair that to my knowledge didn't happen, not romantically, in the book. The emphasis on this affair ends up making Kate seem much less powerful, and it gives her some socially correct motives for escape — her love for her man and their baby. It's been awhile since I

read the book, but it seems to me her motive for escape was self-preservation. I wish our culture didn't think it was so awful for a woman to have a motive that isn't other-centered.

Natasha Richardson, playing Kate, handles a difficult role well. Basically a prisoner of war, the character must walk carefully to survive. Richardson does a good job portraying a practical, intelligent, but fallible woman in a horrifying situation.

My favorite character (of course) was Moira, a lesbian convicted of "gender treachery" and allowed to live only because she is still fertile, who becomes Kate's friend on the way to training camp. Elizabeth McGovern, a somewhat unexpected choice for the role, plays it really well, with a smart ass bravado that gives the movie most of its few light moments. Toward the end of the movie, her joking acceptance of some really unacceptable events is heartbreaking.



The Commander, played by Robert Duvall, is the kind of guy you hate to hate. Duvall has given us some of screendom's most brilliantly played scumbuckets, and he hasn't let us down in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Duvall's complex performance really adds to the movie — it would have been really easy to make the Commander someone you love to hate, and obvious, unmitigated asshole. But the movie would have been a lot weaker.

Faye Dunaway does a brilliant job with the role of Serena Joy, the Commander's wife and a former TV evangelist. She's a bitter woman who worked hard to help form the new society without realizing how much she would lose — her own fame and power. Dunaway plays Serena Joy with a repressed fury that is truly scary.

The Commander's chauffeur and Kate's lover is played by Aidan Quinn — gorgeous and sympathetic, as always. He is perfect, almost predictable casting for the role and he performs it well, but I got the feeling he wasn't exactly pushing the limits of his abilities.

*The Handmaid's Tale* is not a movie you will like. I do suggest that women who go see this movie go with someone they trust. It's a movie about a culture that ritualizes rape, and it is not easy to watch.

I am not saying don't see the movie. See the movie. It's an excellent movie and things are said in this movie that don't usually get said in Hollywood movies.

If you haven't read Atwood's book, you should. I personally have never read another book that was so apocalyptic, so painful, and yet so hopeful. I don't know how she does it.



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