

Remember *The Bonfire of the Vanities*?) Well, breathe a sign of relief, because this movie is (nearly) as lyrical and affecting as the novel.

The Hours boasts a veritable dream team of a crew and cast. Stephen Daldry of *Billy Elliot* fame was reeled in to direct by producer Scott Rudin (*Wonder Boys*, *The Royal Tenenbaums*), while David Hare (*Plenty*) adapted the screenplay. In a move that communicated serious expectations for this film, the cream of the crop of leading actress were hired: Meryl Streep as Clarissa, Julianne Moore (who also plays a suffocating '50s housewife in the queer-themed *Far from Heaven*) as Laura Brown and Nicole Kidman as Virginia Woolf.

Nicole Kidman as Virginia Woolf? I know, I rolled my eyes, too. But not only does she pull it off, she practically channels the writer, who was in her mid-30s when she penned *Mrs. Dalloway*. Kidman is nearly unrecognizable in the flawless makeup, and you'll get a kick out of suddenly recognizing her in a turn of her mouth or a couple of quick syllables. Of the three, she's the standout—it's a career-peak, award-winning performance.

The always-rewarding Ed Harris plays Richard, a man who's seen and had enough—of his past, of his disease. Harris is sublime, stumbling around a cluttered, filthy apartment, voicing haunting ruminations.

Daldry directs all this with a slow and steady pace, allowing ample screen time for

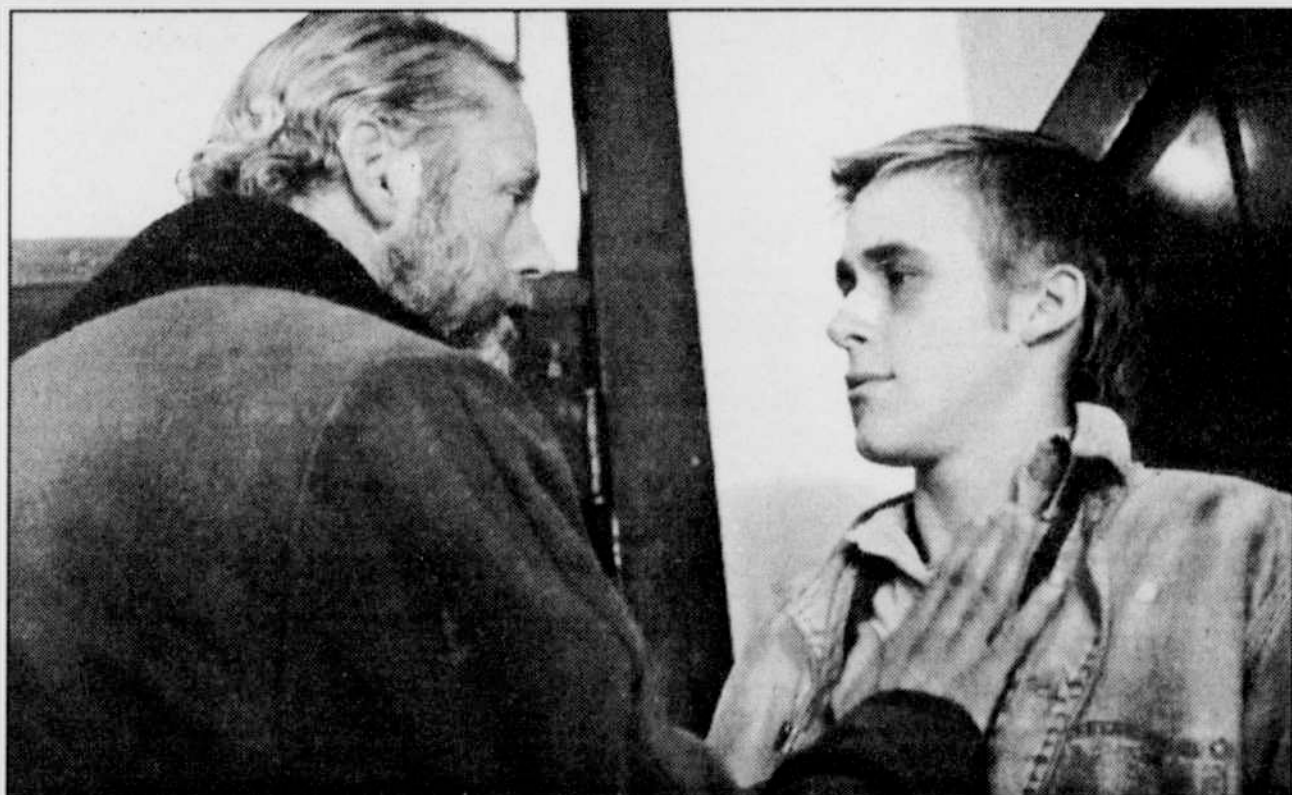
characters to convey inner conflict and desire often missing from hurried productions. This is key to the film's successful adaptation of Cunningham's modernist approach.

The eclectic scenery forced by three time periods and starkly contrasting locations is perfectly executed, grounding the film's visual certainty. Critics have dissed the musical score as overbearing; don't believe them. Philip Glass, composer of *The Truman Show* and the recent *Nagoyatsi*, indeed induces rousing orchestrals and opera, but it all works exactly how and where it's supposed to. It's a sweeping kind of movie; it needs a sweeping kind of score.

But adaptation is a tricky business. Even allowing for a completely different art form to tell the same story, the movie's main flaws are what it chooses to change about Cunningham's book. Filmmakers take an intense scene of vulnerability away from Richard's former male partner and give it to Clarissa. This is, of course, Streep's Oscar moment, but it's like finding a foreign object in the celluloid, and it renders the character of the ex (nicely played by Jeff Daniels) rather useless. The film also gives away its secrets too soon for no detectable reason, destroying some of the potential thrill of its final moments.

Still, although these are more than quibbles, *The Hours* is a lovely, beautifully acted and honestly emotional film. It's (almost) perfect. **JM**

ALSO PLAYING



Gil and Roy traverse a murky path of friendship and family in *The Slaughter Rule*

THE SLAUGHTER RULE

Hollywood Theatre, Jan. 17 to 23

"My father told me if I was hard enough, I'd never break. He lied. Everything breaks." So says Roy Chutney (Ryan Gosling), whose father, an abuser whose recent death is not mourned by the depressed teen-ager or anybody else, was better at dispensing bad advice than hugs.

Roy, freshly cut from the football team, has an estranged mother and an indifferent girlfriend. Living in a nowhere rural town in snowbound Montana, he appears ready to break himself.

Enter Gideon "Gid" Ferguson (David Morse), a smiling, bearish middle-aged guy who delivers papers and is trying to cobble together a six-man bush-league football squad. He enlists Roy and his best friend, Tracy Two Dogs (Eddie Spears), a Blackfoot Indian who also has an abusive dad.

Gideon becomes a kind of father figure to the boys—but there's a hitch. Rumors swirl around this lovable, charismatic guy; it's said he caused the death of another young football player in a different town and that he's "queer."

It doesn't help that Gid refers to himself as

a "mother hen" and uses every opportunity to expand his presence in Roy's life. Gid is emotionally direct and demanding in a way that increasingly disturbs Roy and encourages the charges of "Roy's fuck buddy."

Just who is Gid? "I ain't a man that wants other men," he says, with what sounds like absolute honesty. "I just like bein' in their company."

Yet when he talks about his "other boy" who died, he wrenchingly refers to his loss of "my boy, my beautiful boy!" Gid's character here and throughout is a bracing mix of raw self-exposure and tantalizing mystery, beautifully realized by Morse.

The film succeeds superbly by making Gid a mass of complexities rather than the usual chicken hawk stereotype and by its compelling treatment of Roy's struggle to trust and to accept love, even from an unlikely source.

Directors Andrew and Alex Smith, twin brothers, based this brilliant first feature on their own experiences as part of a rural Montana "men's league" run by an overly devoted coach renowned for doing "cup checks." They recall their relationship with him as "fleeting but haunting," precisely the mood that pervades *The Slaughter Rule*.

—Gary Morris **JM**

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