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FILM

Let's talk about sex

Alfred Kinsey biopic has a disturbing timeliness

BY GARY MORRIS

Director Bill Condon made waves in 1998 with *Gods and Monsters*, an imaginative biography of gay Hollywood director James Whale. Six years is a long time between features, but *Kinsey* was well worth the wait.

This biopic of Alfred Kinsey, the famed bi sex researcher of the 1940s and '50s, is excellent on all counts. All the actors are first-rate, but Liam Neeson particularly deserves an Oscar for a gripping, absolutely grounded performance in a difficult role. It's not easy finding the human being in a single-minded zealot, but Neeson does it.

Kinsey's name once drew shudders from the bluenoses and snickers from sophisticates, both of whom scoured his groundbreaking books like 1948's *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* and 1953's *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* for naughty bits. But Kinsey was no pornographer, nor (despite claims by the lunatic right that persist today)

did he encourage any kind of nonconsensual relationships. Above all he was a scientist who believed sexuality could be studied and explored like any other human trait. He railed against the absurd repressions in American society, against "morality disguised as fact." And he was adamant in insisting that homosexuality was as normal as heterosexuality at a time when such statements amounted to blasphemy.

He practiced what he preached, too. He and his wife, Mac, had an open marriage that sometimes involved sharing the same man. Of course, he suffered from attempts to suppress his work—including charges of communism during the Red Scare days and the loss of a crucial Rockefeller Foundation grant that funded

extent, the lives of his sex research team. Neeson perfectly captures the impatience, bullishness, zealotry and blind faith of this man as he takes on a whole culture of ignorance. How ignorant? Some of the questions students ask for his "marriage" class include "Can you get syphilis from a whistle?" and "Can't oral copulation be injurious?"

But as he finds out, people are less predictable than wasps, the subject of one of his textbooks. For one thing, there are always going to be casualties. Kinsey's son is embar-



Laura Linney and Liam Neeson measure up in *Kinsey*

assed and alienated by the frankly sexual dinner table conversation. And disaster strikes when members of his research team ignore his rule to avoid sexual relationships with each other. But, typical of the contradictions of the man, he breaks this rule, too, succumbing to a seduction by his fetching assistant Clyde Martin (Peter Sarsgaard)—though seduction may not be the right word, given Kinsey's lingering glances at Clyde's nude body after a shower.

The film focuses intensely on the "marriage of equals" between Kinsey and Mac, a relationship as much intellectual and spiritual as sexual, as Kinsey feels he must live the kind of life of openness and maturity he argues for. Mac's vacillating moods as her

husband pulls her into this uncharted territory, which threatens to bring not only shame but possibly jail time, are convincingly conveyed by Laura Linney.

In addition to fine performances and a compelling story line that jumps all over the place without losing the viewer, *Kinsey* has a disturbing timeliness. The atmosphere of repression it shows seems to have returned with a vengeance.

With crazy Christians now fighting even such taken-for-granted bene-



Kinsey's sex research team: From left, Dagmara Dominczyk, Timothy Hutton, Julianne Nicholson, Peter Sarsgaard, Heather Goldenhersh and Chris O'Donnell

fits of modern society as birth control, not to mention gay rights, the film makes it clear that we could use another Kinsey. **JM**

GARY MORRIS is a Portland free-lance writer whose hobby is unsticking the pages of his copy of the *Kinsey Report*.