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movies BY LOIS WADSWORTH

Alexander (Colin Farrell)
rides into battle with his
troops.



WARNER BROS., 2004

Enigmatic Bore

Oliver Stone disappoints with a brittle hero.

ALEXANDER: Written and directed by Oliver Stone. Co-written by Christopher Kyle, Laeta Kalogridis. Produced by Thomas Schuhly, Jon Kilik, Iain Smith, Moritz Borman. Executive producers Matthias Deyle, Gianni Nunnari, Fernando Sulichin. Cinematography, Rodrigo Prieto. Production design, Jan Roelfs. Editors, Tom Nordberg, Yann Herve. Costume design, Jenny Beavan. Composer, Vangelis. Stunt coordinator, Gay Powell. Historical advisor, Robin Lane Fox. Starring Colin Farrell. With Angelina Jolie, Val Kilmer, Anthony Hopkins. And Rosario Dawson, Jared Leto, Christopher Plummer. Warner Bros., 2004. R. 175 minutes.

A film that runs nearly three hours and spans the bloodier years of the early fourth century B.C., *Alexander* is a cinematic enigma. It's possible that writer/director Oliver Stone's long interest in the youthful, ambitious Alexander the Great blinded him. Because Stone forgot what he has always known — that a hero is one whose human flaws bring him down to earth. Dark and light; light and dark. Otherwise, the audience gets bored, restless. And the hero has a long fall into obscurity.

Woefully miscast as a boy who became a warrior without growing up first, Colin Farrell's Alexander leads a mighty army that captures most of the known world in a whirlwind campaign. Strangely though, Farrell's eyes aren't those of a battle-seasoned military commander and king. Even near his death at age 32, he still seems a petulant lad who wants everything his way — a charming boy, a puer.

Stone's decision to out Alexander's historically accurate bisexuality may discourage Farrell's limited expression of emotional depth. Perhaps the actor was uncomfortable acting loving with Alexander's lifelong friend and lover, Hephaestion (Jared Leto). But I can imagine an experienced actor with greater self-confidence such as Billy Crudup (*Jesus's Son*, *Almost Famous*) simply rejoicing in the part of the ancient king who loved a boy but married women. Farrell holds back, and his embarrassed tentativeness in the love scenes with Leto makes me feel as if I'm seeing something I shouldn't.

Where is the Oliver Stone of *JFK* or *Platoon*? The risk-taker, the creative intelligence behind telling a story in images you couldn't stop watching? *Salvador* and *Born on the Fourth of July's* principled, passionate rebel? Much more entertaining, the gaudy glamour of *The Doors* caught the feeling of an era, while the historically accurate details

in Alexander fail to make us care.

Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* was fabulous. Russell Crowe reflected the soul of the lead character, and he never looked silly in his short tunic. But these guys in *Alexander* do. Their short, pleated tunics are costumes, and don't you forget it. This matter of clothing points out what unconscious obstacles such a toga-and-sandals movie has to overcome, not only with the audience but also with the actors. Farrell's face looks pinched in almost all of the film's publicity shots. He scowls, and he squints his eyes, not in a Clint Eastwood-like, measuring sort of way, but as an angry, out of place, 21st century, creature-comfort guy. Spoiled? Maybe. Miserable, for sure.

As Alexander's mother, Olympias, Angelina Jolie represents another casting problem. Jolie energizes the snake-charmer, evil mother Queen because she can act, but she's too recently a girl herself (in *Gia* and *Girl, Interrupted*) to have a grown son. The movie math doesn't work. Further, the poorly written role she is required to play can only be operatic, a caricature.

His fiery, possessive mother is only half of Alexander's problem. The other half is his father, Philip of Macedonia (Val Kilmer), a brutish king and former military leader with one good eye. Philip takes Alexander to a grotto where cultural icons such as Achilles adorn the cave walls. He gives the boy a history lesson wrapped as a cautionary tale about those who have been touched by the gods. But Alexander's budding ambition knows no limits.

Some critics have taken Stone to task for his own ambition here. His earlier films were all "ambitious," and they were frequently about flawed, ambitious men, such as *Nixon*. But *Alexander* seems to be aiming for a different glory. *LA Weekly's* Scott Foundas says Stone wants respectability now, while *The New York Times's* Manholia Dargis says this character fulfills Stone's self-serving revisionism as a "psychologically addled but fundamentally decent despot."

Regardless, this is not the Alexander of text books nor of romantic historical novels but a hybrid character, born of a great writer and director whose aim is only temporarily, I hope, off-target. *Alexander* is now playing at Cinemark and Cinema World. Not hopelessly bad, the movie is for the stalwart only. **EW**