



Ain't That a Shame

Fassbenderover and don't stop till you get enough

SHAME: Directed by Steve McQueen. Screenplay by McQueen and Abi Morgan. Cinematography, Sean Bobbit. Editor, Joe Walker. Music, Harry Escott. Starring Michael Fassbender, Carey Mulligan, James Badge Dale, Nicole Beharie, Alex Manette. Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2011. NC-17. 101 minutes. ★☆☆☆☆

In 1995, a young, relatively unknown director by the name of Todd Haynes achieved the seemingly impossible: He turned a story about a mousy, middle-class woman suffering from multiple chemical sensitivity into an operatic work of minor tragedy. On its surface, *Safe* appears to be one of those flat, one-note "issue" movies that audiences feel morally obligated to see — a joyless civic duty. And yet, thanks in large part to a fantastic star turn by Julianne Moore, Haynes transformed *Safe* into a subtle, complex and deeply felt existential mystery full of ethical ambiguity and psychological peril. Never has a can of hairspray held such misty, abysmal menace.

The most astonishing thing about director Steve McQueen's latest "issue" film is how pitilessly aggressive and poker-faced it is in its pursuit of rectitude. *Shame* is shameless: Like a drone honed in on a moving target, this movie — a fictional exposé on the wages of sex addiction — tolerates no moral flip-floppery, no ethical fug. It just grinds and grunts and grimaces its way to an ineluctable conclusion. *Shame* is everything *Safe* is not: obvious, predictable, unobtrusive, voyeuristic, ham-fisted and insultingly heavy-handed. Where Haynes tiptoed, McQueen stumbles every time — and considers it a triumph. This is not art. It is a warning label, *Reefer Madness* in the Age of Viagra.

Brandon Sullivan (Michael Fassbender) is a young, successful, taciturn but charming sub-executive living and working in New York. With his chiseled, aquiline good looks, steely gaze and thin-lipped grin, Fassbender is a prefabricated denizen of that cold, neon-blue Manhattan of the mind — that same hellish, depopulated cinematic Gotham that gave us Christian Bale in *American Psycho*. Brandon is anally retentive but genitally expulsive: His days are organized strictly around opportunities to get his rocks off, whether that be a romp with a one-night stand, a roll with a hooker or a quick yank at work in a locked stall. His hard drive is choked with porn.

Brandon's married boss, David Fisher (James Badge Dale), is an overgrown frat boy given to ecstatic bouts of sexual bonhomie and homoerotic ass slapping. David admires Brandon's way with women, and enlists him as wingman in his overeager pursuit of a little barfly pussy on the side. Enter Brandon's sister, Sissy (Carey Sullivan), a damaged, couch-surfing waif who happens to be — of course — a musician with suicidal tendencies. Sissy, suffering a particularly bad streak, convinces Brandon to let her crash for a while at his apartment.

As a director, McQueen — whose feature-length debut, *Hunger* (2008), was inspired by Bobby Sands' IRA hunger strike in 1981 — reveals a strong eye for detail and an admirable willingness to let the camera linger, as when Sissy, in close-up, sings "New York, New York" to its final yearning note. (McQueen also seems to want a lot of credit for granting us prolonged peeks at Fassbender's pendulous ding-dong.) The problem is that McQueen can't seem to turn his technical expertise toward anything resembling authentic emotion: His characters are ready-made and stamped out rather than developed, and every dramatic crisis is semaphored like an iceberg approaching the Titanic. Abetting this forgery of art is Harry Escott's score, a melodramatic mélange of soaring menace that sounds like John Williams on ecstasy.

Like *Crash* before it, *Shame* is a kind of fixed liberal litmus test that bludgeons the viewer with answers at every turn. The point of the movie is not to think, but to react with disgust at the humorless litany of explicit symptoms shoved like dog shit in your face. At the heart of the problem is the issue of opportunism executed in bad faith: McQueen has made a film about sex addiction, when he should have made a film with a sex addict in it. He was trapped from the beginning, leaving himself with no choice but to demonize his subject within a context of no context. Compare *Shame* with movies of a similar thematic vein — *Last Tango in Paris*, *Looking for Mr. Goodbar*, *Drugstore Cowboy* — and it becomes clear how literally wrongheaded McQueen's approach to filmmaking is. You can't also eat the cake you don't even have.

Shame opens Friday, Jan. 20, at the Bijou; info at bijou-cinemas.com

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AN ECOLOGY OF MIND	4:50 7:10 9:40	2:25 4:50 7:10 9:40	2:25 4:50 7:10	2:25 4:50 7:10	4:50 7:10	4:50 7:10	4:50 7:10	4:50 7:10
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