

Dying is an art and Paltrow is a true artist

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By Nicole Beckley

The first frame of "Sylvia" focuses on a half-hidden face and we hear Gwyneth Paltrow say: "Dying is an art, like everything else I do it exceptionally well." With this we know that director Christine Jeffs's film about the life and suicide of poet Sylvia Plath (Gwyneth Paltrow) is not going to be a happy film. And there will probably not be a secret surprise ending.

"Sylvia" is crafted largely as a love story, explaining the relationship between the titular poet and her poet husband, Ted Hughes (Daniel Craig). From the first time they meet, in a crowded dance hall, their relationship is somewhat volatile – boy meets girl, boy steals girl's earring, girl bites boy. Obviously, they are in love.

Jeffs takes the historical events in the authors' lives and turned them into a beautiful fiction. Jeffs heroically tackles the supremely difficult task of making a movie about someone who dies a tragic death. She employs lighting that is both subtle and beautiful, and costuming that plays perfectly into revealing the passage of time as their life events unfold.

Sylvia and Ted challenge each other and keep one another on their toes. Plath needs Hughes and he is largely her teacher, introducing her to the wonder of words. The film strives to convey the impact and importance of poetry, even going so far as to liken poems to explosions. "Just imagine if a sonnet went off accidentally," Sylvia remarks. Poetry, she would have us believe, bears the same relation to her generation as free styling does to ours

The film follows the couple as their relationship develops. As Hughes experiences writing success, he and Sylvia decide to get married. Sylvia's disapproving mother, played by Paltrow's real life mom (Blythe Danner), frowns upon her marriage to Hughes, foreshadowing his sexual indiscretions and cautioning him to "be good to her always," in a note that echoes throughout the film; the tone becomes even darker as she reveals Sylvia's past suicide attempts. We begin to see that the confident Sylvia who has graced the screen has another side.

When Ted takes a teaching job, attracting many female admirers, Jeffs builds a menacing undertone which haunts Sylvia, as she becomes ever-skeptical of his fidelity. Paltrow becomes tense and cold, perfectly capturing the emotional conflict Sylvia must have felt within herself. She becomes paranoid and subtly maniacal, almost driving him to the extra-marital affair that ensues.

What Jeffs does so beautifully, so poetically, is integrate Sylvia's family life without having it negatively affect the picture or the story. It is there and it is relevant, but it doesn't take precedence over the main idea of the film: Sylvia lived more than she died. Paltrow drives the film with her inspired portrayal of the self-tortured poet. She keeps a perfect doubting, contemplative look about her for the entire film, and it's no wonder that she is already earning Oscar nom buzz for the performance. Paltrow is nothing short of sublime.

The success of "Sylvia" lies largely in that it is depressing. Apart from the poetry, there are only a few truly outstanding pieces of dialogue, but as a whole, the picture never falters. Jeffs slowly unwraps her story in a way that is both heart-wrenching and intriguing. But when all is said and done, it is truly Paltrow that gives "Sylvia" life.

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