

# THE PRESTIGE

*Are you watching closely?*

by Megan Elliott

“Are you watching closely?” That’s the oft-repeated line in *The Prestige*. And unlike your average Hollywood thriller packed with big stars (in this case, Christian Bale, Michael Caine, Hugh Jackman, and Scarlett Johansson) this is a movie that deserves – in fact, demands – to be watched closely. Like the magic tricks performed by the film’s characters, *The Prestige* takes the ordinary – a seemingly simple tale of murder and revenge – and turns it into something extraordinary. *The Prestige* might be a murder mystery, or the story of two talented artists struggling to outdo each other. Perhaps it’s a cautionary tale of the pitfalls of unchecked greed and ambition. Or it might be about something else entirely. Like any good magician, *The Prestige* never quite reveals all of its secrets.

This much is clear from the beginning: Two aspiring conjurers work under the tutelage of Cutter, a master illusionist (played by an understated, but brilliant, Caine). Bale is the brooding, lower-class Alfred Borden, and Jackman is the more polished and well-to-do Robert Angier. The two are colleagues, not friends, and it’s obvious early on that Borden has a propensity for both cruelty and risk-taking that Angier seems to lack. When a tragic, on-stage accident results in the death of Julia, the magician’s assistant (and Angier’s wife), the simmering tension between the two apprentices boils over into an epic feud that spans ten years and two continents. Angier blames Borden for Julia’s death, and the devastated widower’s quest for revenge soon turns into a pitched battle between two extremely gifted artists. The stakes are raised with each new trick, and each magician becomes obsessed with not only proving his own superiority, but also completely destroying the other in the process.

Angier, bruised by grief and disappointment, is initially the more sympathetic contestant in this fight, and Borden’s endless deception and occasional callousness seem to make him an easy villain. But, as even the most novice magician knows, appearances can be deceiving. Everything is turned on its head when Borden unveils an astonishing new trick called “The Transported Man.” It’s this illusion that will prove to be the undoing of both men. While Angier is able to develop his own version of the trick, and perform it to packed houses, he remains uneasy, convinced that Borden is not forced to rely on the potentially humiliating ruse he himself must employ to make the illusion work. Angier’s mounting fixation on unseating his rival takes him to Colorado Springs, where he meets with real-life inventor Nikola Tesla (played by a nearly unrecognizable David Bowie). Tesla counsels Alfred against the dangers of becoming enslaved to a certain goal, telling him, “I can recognize an obsession – no good will come of it.” Nonetheless, he agrees to help the magician, providing a fascinating



foil to Angier in the process, especially considering that in his lifetime Tesla was a bitter rival of the more successful Thomas Edison. Though the importance of Tesla's many scientific achievements was eventually recognized, in his time he was dismissed as a crackpot, and he ultimately died penniless. Angier meets an even more unpleasant end.

*The Prestige* is unmistakably the work of director Christopher Nolan. It's hard to imagine another director handling the material, which was adapted from a 1995 novel by Christopher Priest, with as much style. The film retains all of the director's trademarks – the twisting plot, a dark ambiance, and tortured lead characters haunted by their past. In *Memento*, Nolan told the tale of an amnesiac detective attempting to discover who murdered his wife. That film began at the end of the story and went backward from there, revealing clues and details along the way. *The Prestige* has a similarly elliptical plot, deftly moving from the present to flashback scenes, exposing some facts and keeping others under wraps. The audience is forced to constantly remain on its toes. Imagine if indie film auteur David Lynch made a genuine Hollywood movie and you might get the idea of what watching *The Prestige* is like.

Nolan was also responsible for the hugely successful *Batman Begins*, also starring Bale and Caine. Like that superhero flick, *The Prestige* explores how a desire for revenge can mutate into an obsession. In *Batman Begins*, the title character's relentless pursuit of vigilante justice teeters on the edge of being criminal; in *The Prestige*, Angier's attempts to even the score between himself and Borden send him straight over that precipice. The results are, predictably, disastrous.

The dark and mysterious subject matter of *The Prestige* is echoed in the look of the film. The atmosphere of Victorian London is evoked with a palette of

somber colors (the sun rarely shines in *The Prestige*), and the scenes in the theaters and vaudeville houses recreate the lost glamour and decadence of turn-of-the-century spectacle. But though this is a period piece, it is not a stale costume drama. All the actors are in top form here, and even the bit players shine, especially Johansson as the beautiful, and slightly duplicitous, Olivia, and Andy Serkis (best known as Gollum in the *Lord of the Rings*) in the memorable role of Tesla's assistant.

Overall, *The Prestige* is a clever and well-crafted mystery. We know (or rather, we think we know) from the film's first scene that Angier has died while performing a final, show-stopping version of "The Transported Man." But was it an accident, or cold-blooded murder? And if it was the latter, is Borden, the man imprisoned for the crime, truly responsible? Those who expect the answers to those questions to be neat and logical might be frustrated by *The Prestige*. Some of the film's premises stretch the bounds of believability, and the machine Tesla creates for Angier does serve as a sort of *deus ex machina*, which some viewers might see as a bit of a cheat. But once you realize that *The Prestige* is a movie that is mainly about performance and deception, its resolution makes more sense. Today, the kinds of performances that wowed Victorian audiences have largely been replaced by the visual trickery of cinema itself. Tesla's inventions (represented in the film by the electric light so central to film projection) are a new kind of magic, where old-fashioned sleight-of-hand has been replaced by the marvels of modern technology. And though the latter kind of magic is grounded in scientific principles, it still has the power to both fascinate and deceive. In the end, *The Prestige* reminds us of both the beauty, and the danger, of a good illusion.