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ON FILM



Robert De Niro

"The Last Tycoon"

Tom Allen

The Elia Kazan-Harold Pinter adaptation of *The Last Tycoon* leaves one more with the impression of a sweepingly romantic Irving G. Thalberg film than of an uncompleted F. Scott Fitzgerald novel full of shimmering nuances. The alchemy, whether purposeful or not, in which the stylistic heritage of the main character has become more important than the author's content, is both precarious and welcome.

Elia Kazan still knows how to make movies. While *The Last Tycoon* remains as fragile and tentative on screen as it exists in print, Kazan has made a film about a dominant '30s Hollywood character in a grand '30s Hollywood romantic style. The narrative pace and control so firmly based in emotive instincts (as contrasted to the analytic coldness of the 1974 *The Great Gatsby*) are alone worth the price of admission—just to experience again.

Fitzgerald was undecided as to how directly head-on one should confront the studio head, Monroe Stahr. As in *Gatsby*, he very nearly throws the reader head over heels in affection for a wise, wounded narrator (Nick/Cecilia in the opening chapters) who maintains a sad, emotional distance from the fated title character.

But Kazan and Pinter have jettisoned the intermediary Cecelia to a minor, highly sympathetic role in their *The Last Tycoon* and have cast their lot unequivocally with Robert De Niro's command performance as the tragic Prince Royal of Hollywood.

If De Niro Stahr remains in the shadows at the opening of *The Last Tycoon* while the gears of his studio kingdom busily whirr away, it is only to complete the symmetry of a film that fades into shadows rather than tackle the resolution of a novel unresolved by the death of the author. Otherwise, De Niro, slender, sensitive, gaunt, his hands pocketed, his feet splayed to balance a head cocked in attentiveness, must command the screen in reverent empathy just as surely as *The Taxi Driver* was engineered to command the screen as a repulsive automaton.

The Last Tycoon splits down the middle like the last five chapters of the Fitzgerald novel, but DeNiro/Stahr dominates both sections. He is the aging Boy Wonder nursing the news of his own impending death, but still running a vast studio as a personally owned cottage industry. And he is the lone, ascetic rabbi inhabiting the inner sanctums of an art-deco office, a sumptuous ranchhouse and an uncompleted cabana, smitten by an enigmatic English woman with the face of his deceased wife.

The film preserves Fitzgerald's ambivalent attitude of awe and wry pain towards Thalberg/Stahr. Thalberg was a perfectionist who could raise mediocrity to assembly-line class. While it was doubtful in his aborted career that he would ever again turn loose directors like Von Stroheim and King Vidor the way he did in his earliest tenure at Universal and MGM, it had to be admitted that he fostered rare adult themes and serious literary strains in his MGM films. And, fortunately, while Fitzgerald could soak in the mythic tales that abounded after Thalberg's death, he himself never had to toil in

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Thalberg's mass-production screenwriting stables.

The scenes in *The Last Tycoon* where we see the background producer as the creative font and prod of studio films are among the most perceptive, worldly-wise depictions of filmmaking in any film about Hollywood. They are ornaments studded throughout the rising action of the plot—DeNiro/Stahr passing judgment on rushes carefully fashioned for the film; soothing star egos in the understated, zany casting of Jeanne Moreau and Tony Curtis as Greta Garbo-John Gilbert types; psyching up writers bewildered to find themselves in a word factory.

Pinter and Kazan have seized especially on one confrontation between Donald Pleasence, as a confused screenwriter, and Stahr, as a master of verbalizing a film scene, as their credo of Stahr's life as existing on a fantasy line between reality and the screen. The scene is their main ticket to exit an unresolved plot with a flourish.

They are less successful, however, with a late cameo by Jack Nicholson, who is foolishly brave to walk on screen cold after De Niro has been stroking his comforting embers for an entire film. The Nicholson business about union unrest among the screenwriters is also part of the unfinished plotting that Fitzgerald had not yet shaped and which would have been better left out of a film seeking a rounded symmetry.

Where *The Last Tycoon* works wonderfully well is in its unabashed renaissance of a romantic screen magic: first, at a vigil-light distance through the admiring eyes of the rebuffed teenager Cecelia played by Theresa Russell, the latest screen "discovery" of Kazan to be loaned from Lee Strasberg; and, secondly, through the immediacy of Ingrid Boultong's depiction of Kathleen Moore, an enigmatic Botticelli goddess capable of melting into an embrace or of delivering a forceful, Daisy-like rejection of a pining lover.

The Last Tycoon in book and film is most memorable and best realized in its depiction of an ill-timed romance between a solitary prince of industry and an elusive, outsider princess from the real world. For this crux of feeling, Kazan has wrested new imagery, and that is his personal triumph.

In a moment of privileged generosity, like a scene ripped from *The Marquise of O.*, he allows Cecelia one