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A Hard Look at Movie-Making

'Last Tycoon' Captures the Essence of Fitzgerald

"The Last Tycoon," a lush and thoughtful film (at the Regency II), is the best movie about the process and logistics of manufacturing motion pictures I can remember. That includes "The Bad and the Beautiful," "Sunset Boulevard" and certainly last year's unsatisfactory "The Day of the Locust."

Three elements, perhaps four, contribute to the style and polish of this film: Robert DeNiro's fine central performance; the intelligent direction by Elia Kazan; the sensitive, if slow-moving, screenplay by Harold Pinter.

A fourth element is probably F. Scott Fitzgerald, on whose unfinished novel Pinter based his script, particularly Fitzgerald's fascination with the movie-making process.

Fitzgerald was a relatively unsuccessful screenwriter in the 1930s, but during his tenure, especially at MGM, he picked up more knowledge of filmmaking than any other American writer of his rank. He poured this into "The Last Tycoon," which no doubt would have been his finest work if completed.

Together Kazan, Pinter and DeNiro have captured the essence of Fitzgerald, his romantic view of a hard-working dream machine, a big studio, and its creative production chief, Monroe Stahr. Fitzgerald patterned Stahr on the late Irving Thalberg, the luminous "boy wonder" in MGM's so-called golden years.



DeNiro is Stahr, the mysterious, nervous, energetic, essentially lonely moviemaker who is working himself to death (Thalberg died at 37). Stahr is the last tycoon of his type, a creative force with the clout of an executive, at odds with the studio's money men because he insists on making an unprofitable prestige picture now and then.

DeNiro dominates the screen.

He is the story — so much so that he reduces his fellow players (Robert Mitchum, Tony Curtis, Ray Milland, Jeanne Moreau, even Jack Nicholson) to what appear to be cameo roles.

This is a picture for movie buffs. At least for some movie buffs.

I liked it, was moved and



Roberto DeNiro (as Stahr) and Ingrid Boulting in a love scene from "The Last Tycoon"; Jack Nicholson (above) plays an Eastern left-wing union organizer in the film

fascinated by it. But it does move slowly. There is a love scene that runs ten minutes between Stahr and a girl (newcomer Ingrid Boulting) whom he pursues mostly because she reminds him of his dead wife. This is Pinter's doing, and some viewers may get edgy at the film's snail-pace and at Pinter's characteristic silences.

The love scene does strengthen

the character of Stahr by moving in on his shyness and uncertainty when dealing in emotions beyond those of slam-bang big moviemaking.

I found Boulting just too ethereal a creature (that Giotto-like face) to so strongly captivate a man who works closely with the likes of Shearer, Crawford, Jean Harlow and Garbo. And Jeanne Moreau, hardly a Hollywood type, seemed badly cast as an aging superstar.

Jack Nicholson, who is never bad, turns in a stirring brief appearance as an Eastern left-wing organizer seeking to form a union of writers. Mitchum plays the cynical head of the studio who hates Stahr's guts and talent.

Tony Curtis is the male superstar with problems — impotence, among other things, which the father-figure Stahr somehow takes care of, as he does just about every other emergency in his dream kingdom.

"The Last Tycoon" is a low-keyed film that attempts to take Hollywood seriously. DeNiro's performance, certain to win an Oscar nomination, may be an idealization of Thalberg, but so was Fitzgerald's Stahr.

This is by no means the perfect movie. It is an honest interpretation of Fitzgerald, rare in itself in films, which I found thoroughly absorbing.

—William Hogan