



FILM: **BIRDMAN** (*The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance*)

FDG RATING: 3.2 ☺☺☺☺
Film Discussion Group (FDG) Scale is 1-5 (5 is best)

Alejandro González Iñárritu: *Director,*
Michael Keaton: *Actor: Riggan Thomson*
Emma Stone: *Actress: Sam, Riggan's daughter*
Edward Norton: *Actor: Mike Shiner*

DATE: November 23, 2014

DISCUSSION SUMMARY: **BIRDMAN** (*The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance*)

The film, *Birdman (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance)*, throws us into the midst of Riggan Thomson's bizarre mid-life crisis as he struggles to redeem his credibility as a serious actor after deciding he was wasting his talent being the famed and commercially successful super hero, Birdman. Filling the claustrophobic scenes with Riggan's progressively fragmented persona, an imagined alto-ego Birdman creature, a ridiculous method actor who takes staged reality to the extreme edge, a grating percussion musical score, and Inarritu's brilliant almost surreal cinematic style, it's easy to understand why some viewers would detest the film and others be completely mesmerized.

Michael Keaton has an amazing performance as Riggan Thomson, as he questions and forces us to confront the essence of self worth, the meaning of success, and the confusion between reality and fantasy. Riggan has quit the superhero role although his alter ego birdman creature says it is a mistake to leave, and taunting, calls him a coward for not returning. He is engrossed in adapting, producing, directing, and acting in a serious theater production of Raymond Carver's *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* to prove he is a credible, talented actor and reclaim his self respect.

The invasively close camera angles drive these seriously introspective themes to the forefront. Is success as a fantasy superhero a false affirmation of an actor's talent? Is a noteworthy career an indication of personal success? Is success measured by the recognition of others? (The review of a single eminent theater critic will determine if Riggan is a success or failure.) Is success now measured by the number of Facebook friends, followers, tweets and retweets? Does making the unreal as real as possible (making a performance absurdly real) make an actor or play more meaningful? Riggan is trading a fantasy movie role for a serious theater performance grounded in reality because he is convinced that "performing" reality is more meaningful although he has refused to do reality TV shows which is ironically, the ultimate reality performance. The dichotomy and contradictions of reality versus fantasy was underscored in the dingy, crowded, back stage corridors, and stair wells, revealing the very seedy, unglamorous reality of stage productions. And in the humorous scene when Riggan is briskly walking in his underwear down the streets behind the theater trying to get back in after accidentally being locked out and fans recognize him (stripped of any costume, clothes, or makeup) as Birdman. The episode immediately becomes an Internet viral video sensation and his social media savvy fresh out of rehab daughter proudly declares that "Believe it or not, this is power." (Or is it just popularity, the slutty cousin of prestige, as stated by Edward Norton's character.)

All of us appreciated the originality of this film, and the unique cinematographic style, but the disjointed pacing and desperation of the main character caused some of our resident reviewers to feel puzzled, disconnected and uncomfortable. One even got a headache and another severely detested the film. Others found the film intriguing and totally engaging. A few wanted to like the film because the acting was exceptional but just couldn't relate to the characters. The quote, supposedly by Susan Sontag, that Riggan has pinned to his mirror in his dreary dressing room sums up the essence of the main thematic question: "A thing is a thing, not what is said of a thing." By the end of the film, Riggan has finally accepted this premise.

On a scale of 1 to 5 (5 is the best), our collective rating for this film was 3.2 including a single passionate, soaring 5 that balanced out a diving, rotten egg 1.

Reference Notes:

Huge praise to cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki, who filmed the movie as if it was one single shot. Why did GONZALEZ INARRITU select Raymond Carver's play, What People Talk About When They Talk About Love, as the play that Riggan is attempting to stage? (Innarritu's reply in an interview) "Carver is one of my favorite writers. I thought that an attempt to do a play based on Raymond Carver's story would be stupid. That an ignorant guy that doesn't belong to theater chooses to do this, is a bad great idea that Carver would like. The theme flows into what Carver wrote about. What is love? The elements of that story allow us to project and reflect itself through Michael's character's own quest. He became the same guy they talk about in that story, so desperate to be loved. It was terrifying with Carver, though. I knew that Tess Gallagher, the poet and widow of Carver, ... was very tough... I sent her the script, with a letter, and we knew that if she said no, ... We could have another play, but it wouldn't have been the same. She loved it, and now she has become a great friend of mine. She's this beautiful 70-year-old woman, and at the premiere in L.A., she gave me the last shirt that Raymond Carver wore. I treasure it. She said that Raymond Carver would be laughing about this. So it was very important that Carver story be the subject of the play."

What is the meaning of the subtitle? GONZALEZ INARRITU: "That subtitle came later. What happens to this character is, he is an actor and to be most successful, he has to be not himself. That is the most incredible set of contradictions, the idea that you have to be not yourself in order to be good. In the moment that Riggan Thompson tries pretentiously and ignorantly to prove he is something that he is not, when he surrenders to that, when the critic says I will kill you, when his daughter rejects him and he realizes he has lost everything, in that moment right before that climactic act onstage, he is not acting. He is real and that is why the critic responded to his performance. He broke the rules of the game. And by surrendering to his reality, he gets to the unexpected virtue of ignorance. There was beauty in it."



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See you at the movies!

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