



## FILM: **THE SHAPE OF WATER**

FDG RATING: 4.0 ☺☺☺☺○

Film Discussion Group (FDG) Scale is 1-5 (5 is best)

Guillermo Del Toro: *director, writer*  
Sally Hawkins: *actress, Elisa*  
Octavia Spencer: *actress, Zelda*  
Richard Jenkins: *actor, Giles*  
Michael Shannon: *actor, Col. Strickland*

DATE: January 21, 2018

### DISCUSSION SUMMARY: **THE SHAPE OF WATER**

The Shape of Water is not a film for everyone as evidenced by one discussion participant whose friends threatened to Unfriend her for taking them to the film. But those of us who are a fan of Guillermo's cinematic style, are ready to embrace whatever monster he brings to the screen. In The Shape of Water, it is a mute, human shaped, aquatic creature, once worshiped as a god in the Amazon rain forest, captured and brought to a hidden, highly secret government research lab in Baltimore during the 1960's Cold War era. The diabolical U.S. military hero, Colonel Richard Strickland, who is in charge of the research team studying the creature, is convinced his supernatural capabilities can give America an edge in the space race. He repeatedly tortures the creature he keeps chained in an aquatic tank, planning to dissect the it to learn how it can breathe in and out of water. The team's Russian scientist pleads for mercy on the creature's behalf claiming The Amphibian Man should be kept alive to be studied. (Is he really a Russian spy?)

Some of us reluctantly went to see the film, expecting to be turned off by the sci-fi, fantastical elements, but instead were quickly emotionally engaged with the intriguing main characters, each an outcast of society. Sally Hawkins perfectly transforms into the character she portrays, Elisa, a young woman with no family, mute, both vulnerable and strong, but because of her inability to speak, she regards herself as "incomplete," something less than fully human. She is a night janitor at the lab with her best friend Zelda a married African-American woman whose chattiness makes up for Elisa. Elisa's other close friend and confidant is Giles, a gay, struggling "has been" advertising artist who lives down the hall.

Not only do we feel empathy for Elisa, Zelda and Giles, but also for The Asset, as the creature is called, who appears to have a gentle, mystical nature with healing powers. The love story begins with Elisa's simple curiosity as she finds herself alone at night in the lab and tries to communicate with the creature with gestures, then basic sign language. She senses an immediate kinship, even intimacy, with the aquatic man who cannot speak, except through grunting sounds and yet seems to have feelings and a desire to communicate. Unobserved, she continues to spend nights sharing her hard-boiled eggs with him, playing records on a portable phonograph, and teaching him rudimentary sign language.

Guillermo surrounds us with magical, theatrical, nuances to make it easier to suspend reality. For example, Elisa and Giles live above a theater and together spend hours watching musicals on TV. And if we think back to the film's opening scene of a blue-green underwater world, with a woman floating in what looks like a drowned Atlantis. The image is otherworldly, magical, mythological, setting the scene for everything that follows while the narrator's words foreshadow Elisa's fate: "about what happened to the princess without a voice."

Guillermo admits the Shape of Water is a tribute to Old Hollywood, monster movies (Creature from the Black Lagoon) but this time the creature is not despised, doomed to loneliness and despair but instead is the film's romantic hero. In addition to Russian spies and a mad scientist, we see Guillermo's other beloved movie genres peppered throughout as a nod to film noir, wonderful light hearted dance musicals, escape capers, Jean Cocteau's Beauty and the Beast romance, and the elegance of silent films.

The film's themes strongly resonate with today's reality where people are still marginalized because they are different causing isolation and loneliness. Racial politics is rampant, and the rhetoric of those in control is less meaningful than the expressions of those whose speech is restrained. Guillermo purposely turns preconceived notions upside down. When the film momentarily interjects contemporary real-life events, (the African-American couple told they can't sit at the counter, the news footage of fire hoses turned on actual civil rights marchers), we are catapulted to the real world which isn't where we want to be.

Our real world has its own monsters represented purposefully, ironically, by the U.S. military hero, Colonel Richard Strickland, who is in charge of the research team studying the creature. An all-American, white, married, Bible-quoting proud Christian who brutally tortures the creature, in the name of science and national security; he is the caricature of the menacing, evil villain.

Political, cultural, and societal commentary is woven into the tender love story. Almost all of us enjoyed the film, appreciating its creative originality, intriguing characters (even if exaggerated to the point of caricature as in the villain), superb performances, absorbing cinematography, and meaningful themes. The dreamy scenes of Elisa dancing and singing are especially touching. Even those who dislike fantasy in films came away smitten. One discussion participant especially liked the message that love is blind acceptance in any form. The Shape of Water is a reminder that there are many ways more powerful than words to communicate; judgmental exclusionary bias is society's monster; and pure acceptance-love is what we should strive toward to create a kinder world. Wondering about the meaning the film's name, one idea is that since water really doesn't have a shape, mankind needs to be more fluid and accepting.

Except for one viewer who understandingly found the film just too unbelievable, there was nothing wishy washy about all the other scores of 4 or 4.5. Cumulatively, we gave The Shape of Water a solid 4 on our scale of 1 to 5 (5 is the best.)



See you at the movies! Adriane Dedic, [adedic@pacbell.net](mailto:adedic@pacbell.net)

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