The Illusionist: The filmmaker, in fact, can't have it both ways

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The Illusionist, directed by Neil Burger, screenplay by Burger from a short story by Steven Millhauser

The Illusionist is an attractively done piece of work, that leaves a relatively small impression. Based on a short story by American writer Steven Millhauser (who won a Pulitzer Prize for his novel *Martin Dressler*, published in 1996), Neil Burger's film traces the fate of a young man who becomes a brilliant magician in part as an act of social revenge.

As a boy, the future trickster was forcibly parted from his love, a girl from the aristocracy, because of his humble social rank. Years later, having reinvented himself as a "master of the dark arts," he appears in turn-of-the-last-century Vienna. The seemingly impossible, uncanny feats of "Eisenheim the Illusionist" (Edward Norton) make his performances a great success.

They even attract the presence of Crown Prince Leopold (Rufus Sewell), whose fiancée, the lovely Sophie von Teschen (Jessica Biel), turns out to be the young lady who was torn from "Eisenheim's" arms years before. Further darkening the situation, the prince is reckoned to be a brute, perhaps responsible for the death of a previous potential bride.

Eisenheim, in a number of ways, earns Leopold's ire, who becomes increasingly determined to expose him as a fraud. The magician, for his part, loathes the prince, both because of the latter's betrothal to Sophie and, presumably, out of a certain social antipathy. Leopold sets a policeman, Chief Inspector Uhl (Paul Giammati), to keep tabs on the illusionist. Eisenheim, contrary to the urging of his manager (Eddie Marsan) and the warnings issued by Uhl, keeps pressing and provoking Leopold. He proposes to Sophie that she break from the prince and come away with him. Tragic events ensue.

Certain things in *The Illusionist* are interestingly, if somewhat self-consciously done. In his magic act, Eisenheim smolders with resentment. At a certain point, he seems consciously resolved to undermine the monarchy, or at least the ambitions and standing of the crown prince. He is also presented as something of an artist, performing on a bare stage in his shirt-sleeves. His shows are brief, but concentrated dramas of a sort, during which he takes apart and reassembles elements of the material world, or pretends to.

Burger, who, according to an oft-quoted Internet biography, "studied fine arts at Yale University before transitioning from painting to experimental film in the late '80s," has carefully brought Millhauser's story to the screen. Shooting the film in Prague, the work's creators have made an effort to recreate the appropriate look and atmosphere.

The actors, one suspects, enjoyed making *The Illusionist* and many spectators will enjoy watching the film because it is done with a certain amount of style and taste. And that's not an entirely small thing, in a culture dedicated for the most part to encouraging vulgarity and crudity. However, refinement is hardly everything in art.

Burger's comments about his film are not especially impressive. He told an interviewer (www.ugo.com): "What I try to do is have the magic be less about 'how he does it' and more about the uncanny sense that nothing is what it seems. I like that moment when you come face to face with something incomprehensible or unexplainable. I was more interested in astonishment, mystery, and awe."

And: "All of the illusions are based on real illusions. I wanted a real methodology to everything that happens in the movie. The movie walks a fine line. On one hand, you can read it as that it's all a trick. On the other, it's supernatural. All the way down the movie, I

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want either logic to work. You can take either logic and run with it."

In fact, it isn't possible for either "logic to work" and that's *The Illusionist*'s chief failing and why it only leaves a small impression. Two mutually exclusive films co-exist here that cannot cohere. If Eisenheim is truly capable of defying the laws of nature, that's one thing. This is a piece of fiction and characters can return from the dead, chat with demons, time travel, dematerialize, or do anything else they like, if it serves a legitimate artistic and thematic function.

Burger indicates a fashionable interest in the blurring of "illusion and reality," but if Eisenheim's astounding acts are genuinely other-worldly, then they are not illusory. (If everything in the world is merely an illusion and objective reality impossible to determine, then to speak of a distinction between illusion and reality is clearly meaningless.) In any event, a story about such a figure would have a definite logic of its own.

However, if the magician is a "fake," a mortal who cleverly deceives his audience through sleight of hand, through cleverly diverting its collective attention, through optical, cinematic or other kinds of illusion, then that is a different matter. And probably a more interesting one.

Burger, however, has placed Edward Norton in an unfortunate position. He's a fine actor, but the *possibility* that his character is in touch with the other-worldly makes his performance self-important and self-serious. We are apparently to take for good coin his exhausting efforts to make spirits appear and disappear. This becomes tedious, without a hint that he's a "fraud." His relationship with Sophie never comes to life. Again, is this a master conman or a 'prince of darkness'? It makes a difference. Because the question is never answered, the love affair remains emptied of content, an abstraction the spectator is expected to accept on faith.

The more earthly relations are more interesting, particularly those between Uhl and Leopold. The ambitious, cynical policeman is the prince's tool. The latter holds out before him the possibility of promotion and real political power. But Uhl is also somewhat honest, which may prove his undoing. His trajectory, in fact, resembles more closely that of the artist: an individual driven beyond his own conscious beliefs or aims, who uncovers certain unpleasant truths. In this, and in Giammati's performance, the film is convincing.

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