

My Week With Marilyn: Another look at the postwar American film icon

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Directed by Simon Curtis; written by Adrian Hodges, based on the memoirs of Colin Clark

My Week With Marilyn from British director Simon Curtis is based on the diaries of the late film documentarian and writer Colin Clark, which offer a gentle, offbeat picture of Marilyn Monroe.

An encounter between Monroe and Clark took place when the movie actress came to England in 1956 to act in a film directed by and co-starring the legendary British actor, Laurence Olivier. Curtis's movie is an honest recounting of the brief liaison between Monroe and Clark. That it is more than a charming trifle is in large part due to the talents of Michelle Williams, who plays the film icon.

Monroe is thirty and newly married to playwright Arthur Miller (Dougray Scott) when she arrives in London with the latter to star in Olivier's (Kenneth Branagh) movie, *The Prince and the Showgirl*. Included in her entourage are her possessive producer and business partner Milton Greene (Dominic Cooper) and even more possessive acting coach Paula Strasberg (Zoë Wanamaker)—film industry types who attach themselves to an artist undergoing commodification.

The 23-year-old Colin Clark (Eddie Redmayne) is the son of famed art historian Kenneth Clark, a close friend of Olivier and his wife Vivien Leigh (Julia Ormond). Family connections aside, Colin employs pluck and determination to convince Olivier that he will prove an asset and becomes the latter's third assistant director, or "gofer."

The cast includes not only Olivier, but other acting legends such as Dame Sybil Thorndike (Judi Dench), trained in the rigors of classical repertory theater. Olivier is impatient with Marilyn, who for the most part is technically unschooled ("Just be sexy, isn't that what you do?") and whose terror in the face of acting royalty is allayed somewhat by pills, alcohol—and guru Paula ("Think about the things you like ... Frank Sinatra, Coca-Cola"). Marilyn's chronic tardiness makes Olivier begin to regret his choice of leading lady.

On set, Paula is ever present to assist Marilyn with the [Lee Strasberg] acting Method. Irritated, Olivier quips, "Find your method, it's your own madness." His judgment is harsh: "Trying to teach Marilyn how to act is like trying to teach Urdu to a badger." An aging Leigh anxiously—jealously—watches the cultural clash from the sidelines, while Dame Sybil plays the sympathetic doyenne and reminds Olivier that Marilyn knows better than he how to act in front of the camera. Thorndike is no delicate flower, having walked the picket lines in the 1926 general strike at a time when "we were all Bolsheviks."

Marilyn's difficulties are compounded when a frustrated Miller leaves for New York ("I can't work. I can't think. She's devouring me"). Intelligent and resourceful, Colin senses Marilyn's pain and offers the beleaguered star some solace and refuge from the studio scene. "Thanks for being on my side," says the superstar. In the end, Olivier, who is approaching 50, reveals that he wanted to "renew" himself in the beautiful Monroe ("Pure instinct. She's astonishing. It's what makes her great. It's certainly what makes her unhappy"). He acknowledges that she is the heart of his film and radiates a light that eclipses all else.

It is interesting that first-time feature filmmaker Curtis, a veteran creator of British television movies, was able to enlist the skills of a number of extraordinary actors. Branagh embraces his character and thankfully stays on the sunny side of caricature. Redmayne is riveting as the smitten confidante and Dench steps gracefully into Thorndike's shoes. But other gifted performers, such as Ormond and Emma Watson as Colin's love interest, are underused and awkward in their attempts to occupy themselves. And the duration of Derek Jacobi's cameo can be measured in seconds.

My Week With Marilyn, in reality, revolves around the performance of Michelle Williams. A lesser actor, even by a few degrees, would have sunk the project. Her recreation of the legend is physically astonishing. But it is her internal mechanisms that power the film, despite a linear script. Williams' Marilyn is endearing, but so is Williams herself.

With delicacy and unerring intuition, she uncovers mysteries and makes Marilyn more discernable and human.

Equally important is the fact that Williams and the filmmakers are clearly trying to convey something about the destructive nature of contemporary celebrity. Williams is personally familiar with its attendant burdens and often tragic results. Monroe once said: “Hollywood is a place where they’ll pay you a thousand dollars for a kiss and fifty cents for your soul.”

Although *My Week With Marilyn* is an appealing film, Williams’ very indispensability underscores its limited approach to both Marilyn Monroe’s allure and personality and the period the film treats. Monroe’s life and career were bound up with postwar American culture, a multifaceted and perplexing topic, to say the least.

There is a passing reference in *My Week With Marilyn* to the menace threatening Marilyn and Arthur as they arrived in England. The anticommunist witch-hunters were breathing down Miller’s neck and he was initially denied a passport (“All those pain-in-the-ass New York intellectuals are reds”). Without Miller, Olivier could not have Marilyn.

Around that time, Miller was called to testify by the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) demanding he reveal the names of alleged Communist Party writers with whom he had associated in New York in the late 1940s. He refused to inform and was eventually convicted of contempt of Congress, although he was later cleared. Marilyn supported her husband through the ordeal, even buying each member of Congress a subscription to a publication whose focus was free speech rights.

In turn, Miller was legitimately concerned that the Hollywood studio system was exploiting his wife by marketing her as a sex goddess. Enormous pressures were bearing down on the couple, dubbed by the media as “Beauty and the Brain.” Marilyn’s insecurities, depression and self-destructive tendencies began to get the upper hand.

Even so, it is notable that Olivier’s *The Prince and the Showgirl* proves Marilyn to be a brilliant comedienne and savior of the stodgy and otherwise questionable film. Olivier once told a family friend: “In the flesh, this star quality is almost more than one can take.”

An in-depth discussion of the Monroe phenomenon is beyond the scope of this review. An astute and instinctively anti-establishment figure, the performer was eventually defeated and demolished by the entertainment industry. However, she demonstrated considerable principle on a number of occasions. During a screen actors’ strike in 1960, Miller continued to work on the script for John Huston’s *The Misfits*. This was a blow to Monroe’s image of Miller, whom she believed to be “the champion of the working class.” The couple divorced in 1961; Monroe died, at 36, in

August 1962.

What was behind her enduring quality as a personality? Commentator Phil Jones (on *Knol*) observes that “Post-war America seemed to take a step backwards for women ... Throughout the late 1940s and 1950s marriage rates increased, the move to the suburbs flourished and the Baby Boom began. The physical reshaping of America impacted women as ‘the migration to the suburbs physically separated women from the workplace.’ This left American women with conflicting thoughts on their position in the world.”

While officially accepting and even embodying some of the values of a stagnant and reactionary time, Monroe also stood out against them, with her physical charms, acting skills, empathy, ability to laugh at herself and democratic sensibility. In her own distinctive fashion, she challenged the conformist values of the day and represented something compelling and disturbing.

Furthermore, when her traumatic and poverty-stricken childhood became public knowledge, far from shunning her, “People empathized with the young starlet as many of them recalled their own financial struggles through the Depression and war years,” says Jones.

With her thin skin and hunger for acceptance, she was always looking for a protector. As *My Week With Marilyn* demonstrates, there was no lack of men who risked being devoured to answer the call. Miller once said to her: “Bewitch them [the public] with this image they ask for, and I hope and pray you won’t be hurt in this game, nor ever change.” Unfortunately, his wish did not come true, and Curtis’s movie gives us some inkling as to why that was the case.

One of the most poetic comments about Monroe comes from Cecil Beaton, a British photographer who took one of her favorite photographs of herself in New York in 1956:

“She had rocketed from obscurity to become our post-war sex symbol, the pin-up girl of an age. And whatever press agency or manufactured illusion may have lit the fuse, it is her own weird genius that has sustained her flight. Transfigured by the garish marvel of Technicolor cinemascope, she walks like an undulating basilisk, scorching everything in her path ... Perhaps she was born just the post-war day we had need of her. Certainly she had no knowledge of the past. Like Giraudoux’s Ondine, she is only fifteen years old, and she will never die.”



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