

HBO's *Phil Spector*: David Mamet's mythological tale

James Brewer
4 May 2013

Written and directed by David Mamet

HBO Films released *Phil Spector* on March 24, the latest in a series of docudramas produced by the cable television network. The recent work focuses on the relationship between legendary record producer and songwriter Phil Spector (Al Pacino) and Linda Kenney Baden (Helen Mirren), his hard-edged attorney, during his 2007 trial for the murder of actress Lana Clarkson.

In an interview posted on the HBO web site, Mamet says he became inspired to do a film on the case after viewing *The Agony and the Ecstasy of Phil Spector* (2009) by Vikram Jayanti. The documentary is constructed around a long interview with Spector about his court case and his musical career.

Spector's first trial, on which Mamet's film is based, was declared a mistrial in September 2007 after the jury failed to agree on a verdict. He was convicted of second degree murder in May 2009 after a second trial and sentenced to 19 years in prison, a sentence later affirmed by higher courts in California.

In a career that began in 1958, when he was still a teenager, Spector (born in the Bronx, New York in 1939) had a great influence on popular musical styles and production. Between 1960 and 1965, he produced more than 25 Top 40 hits. Spector worked with a remarkable list of groups and individuals over the years, including The Ronettes, The Crystals, Darlene Love, Ben E. King, Gene Pitney, The Righteous Brothers, Connie Francis, Ike and Tina Turner, The Beatles, John Lennon, George Harrison, Dion, The Ramones, Leonard Cohen and many others. There are few comparable figures in the history of music recording.

Spector's trademark was the so-called Wall of Sound, a dense, layered approach that he labeled "Wagnerian," and which, at its best, exercises a powerful emotional impact on the listener. "Be My Baby," recorded by The Ronettes (1963), is one of Spector's most renowned efforts. Brian Wilson, of The Beach Boys and one of the more remarkable musical figures of the period, once asserted that the tune was

the greatest pop record ever made and reportedly listened to it many times a day.

However, Spector also suffered from serious emotional problems, which apparently became more severe as the years passed. The decline in interest in his particular musical contributions and approach in recent decades cannot have helped the situation. His mental instability became increasingly well known as his dysfunctional and failed relationships were made public.

Spector's success and wealth enabled him to live like a recluse in a gated mansion on a hill—with more than 30 rooms—in Alhambra, California called Pyrenees Castle. It was there that Lana Clarkson, 40, died of a gunshot in her mouth on February 3, 2003.

Spector was fond of keeping guns around. Several women testified in depositions that he pointed loaded pistols at them, including his first wife, singer Ronnie Spector (of the Ronettes).

Mamet speaks of seeing Spector's "fall from grace as a mythological story rather than a news story." He envisions the reclusive Spector's story as that of a monster who lives in a castle, as in "Beauty and the Beast."

As the film opens, we hear the Righteous Brothers' "Unchained Melody," one of Spector's most famed productions. Mamet puts up a disclaimer in a title: "This is a work of fiction. It's not 'based on a true story.' It is a drama inspired by actual persons in a trial, but it is neither an attempt to depict the actual persons, nor to comment on the trial or its outcome."

This statement may be necessary for legal or other reasons, but it is obviously untrue. Mamet has every intention of commenting on the Spector trial and its implications, as he has made clear in a host of interviews.

Mirren's masterly performance accounts for a good deal of the film's interest. We see her traveling directly from the airport to the offices where a trial preparation area has been set up. She meets attorney Bruce Cutler (Jeffrey Tambour), who is bowing out and trying to convince Linda to join the case.

Spector's popular musical prowess serves as little more than a backdrop to the story. When Linda tells Cutler that Spector is a "freak," Cutler counters, "He's a genius. He transformed the whole music industry." But in what Spector's genius lay is largely left out of the picture. Mamet apparently expects the viewer to take that on faith.

The scene of Linda's first meeting with her new client, in whose guilt she still believes at this point, is staged in a somewhat overblown manner. The attorney is driven to the gates of the mansion, where signs warn of dogs. It is raining heavily. She is told by Spector's large bodyguard, "He prefers that you walk."

Linda walks warily across the courtyard under her umbrella and arrives at the heavy front door. Pushing it open, she finds herself in a darkened, empty hallway, ending with three doors. A fairy-tale, the lair of the monster ... In their first, uneasy conversation, Spector rattles on about Abraham Lincoln, the Kennedys and others. Does he see himself as another American martyr?

Spector's defense case is made more difficult because of his reputation. Public sympathy lies with the victim—an attractive, but struggling actress, perhaps looking for a breakthrough contact with a celebrity like Spector.

This seems to be one of the issues intriguing Mamet, the unhealthy relationship between "celebrities" and their fans in America. It is an important subject, but it is not clear that he adds much. In the end, one feels the writer-director wallows in as much celebrity worship and fascination as the next person.

Misanthropy, as always, pervades Mamet's work. The crowd outside the mansion screams for blood. One is left with the distinct impression that the population is to blame for the celebrity culture, not the media, not the state of political life in America, not the general degradation of life in a decaying society.

The "mob" cannot see Spector's inner beauty, his artistic sensitivity. Why does he hide himself? Spector claims to Linda that he isn't "standoffish," he is inaccessible and always has been.

The prosecution's case relies on public opinion—"the mob" against the monster. As Linda quips before deciding to take his case, "They let O.J. [Simpson] go, they let Michael Jackson go. They're not going to let him [Spector] go. They're going to try him for the murder of O.J.'s wife and they're going to convict him."

There is a point to be made here, and extending sympathy to those like Jackson, and Spector, trapped by their fame (or onetime fame), is legitimate. However, simply to take the "celebrity's" side versus public hostility is not the answer either. The whole problem has to be seen in a different light, and Mamet is not capable of that.

Through her interaction with Spector and her consideration of the facts, Linda changes her mind. This is the dramatic crux of Mamet's story. While she doesn't become entirely convinced of his innocence, she takes the case based on what she describes as a reasonable doubt of his guilt. Mamet describes his film as "coming to grips with what is reasonable doubt." The Clarkson family has sharply criticized the film, arguing that Mamet suppressed evidence that pointed to Spector's guilt.

The last lines in the film belong to Linda: "Why does the monster live in a castle, why does the minotaur live in a cave?" She answers her own question, "To keep himself from doing harm." The allegory, which is the essence of the drama, is simplistic and unsatisfying. And, in any case, the previous emphasis in the film is on the harm the public does to the celebrity, not vice versa.

Mamet's implies strongly that Spector is convicted largely because he is a freak, an unattractive personality, a recluse (and given that this is Mamet, there is the implication of anti-Semitism). Much is made of Spector's arrival at court on the day when he is to testify sporting an outrageous afro. According to Mamet's script, this decides Linda against putting him on the stand. In other words, the logic goes, the public could not tolerate Spector's appearance and personality, so he could not get a fair trial.

There are intelligent and interesting moments and performances here. However, one is also obliged to note Mamet's apparently selective sense of injustice. The WSWS made the point in 2011 that right-wing defenders of IMF Chief Dominique Strauss-Kahn, who was charged with sexual assault of a hotel chambermaid (and who, unlike Spector, may have been the victim of politically-motivated entrapment), "have blinded themselves to social conditions in the US, so enamored have they been by 'free market' propaganda." Such people hadn't "cared to notice that more than 2.2 million people—the overwhelming majority treated as cruelly as Strauss-Kahn [or Spector], or worse—are currently incarcerated in the human rights nightmare known as the United States." Mamet, who publicly announced his support for corporate capitalism in 2008, belongs in this same category.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact