

BY PETER TRAVERS  
**Movies**

**SLAVE AND MASTER**  
Joaquin Phoenix, Philip Seymour Hoffman

# Far From Heaven

'The Master' takes on religious cults and kicks off the fall season on a creative high other movies must fight to beat. Knock yourselves out

## The Master

Philip Seymour Hoffman, Joaquin Phoenix

Directed by Paul Thomas Anderson

★★★★

I BELIEVE IN THE CHURCH of Paul Thomas Anderson. Hollywood films give you zilch to believe in, tying up their narratives with a tidy bow so you won't leave confused and angry. Anderson refuses to do the thinking for you. His films mess with your head until you take them in and take them on. No wonder Anderson infuriates lazy audiences. What a roll call: *Hard Eight*, *Boogie Nights*, *Magnolia*, *Punch-Drunk Love*, *There Will Be Blood*.

*The Master*, the sixth film from the 42-year-old writer-director, affirms his position as the foremost filmmaking talent of his generation. Anderson is a rock star, the artist who knows no limits. Fierce and ferociously funny, *The Master* is

a great movie, the best of the year so far, and a new American classic. No way is it the kind of cinematic medicine you choke down like broccoli. Written, directed, acted, shot, edited and scored with a bracing vibrancy that restores your faith in film as an art form, *The Master* is nirvana for movie lovers. Anderson mixes sounds and images into a dark, dazzling music that is all his own.

As the fictional story of Lancaster Dodd (Philip Seymour Hoffman, never finer), a 1950s cult leader who mentors disturbed World War II Navy vet Freddie Quell (Joaquin Phoenix in the performance of his career), *The Master* doesn't flinch at taking on the business of religion. Scientology? You be the judge. The names have been changed to ward off fanatical unrest. No matter,

It's the human element that bleeds onscreen. Acting doesn't get better or go deeper than the performances delivered by Hoffman and Phoenix.

Hoffman's Master is the founder of a movement called the Cause, much like L. Ron Hubbard founded the church



**DIRECTOR ON DECK** Paul Thomas Anderson sets up a scene for Phoenix.

of Scientology as an outgrowth of his book *Dianetics: The Modern Science of Mental Health*. Both interrogate potential converts at length to help them relive traumatic events from their past and maybe past lives

so they can clear their souls of toxicity. What Scientology calls "auditing," the Cause calls "processing" and the outside world calls brainwashing morphs into scenes of nearly unbearable tension in the hands of Anderson, who admits to using the beginnings of Scientology as a "backdrop" for the film.

Anderson doesn't shy away from the sins committed in the name of faith, but he also sees the attraction of finding a ready-made family in a religious movement. The search to belong and the price you pay for the privilege echo through Anderson's work, and it's the soul of *The Master*.

You can feel the ache inside Freddie from the moment Anderson intros him in the South Pacific dry-humping a babe his Navy buddies have built out of sand. Freddie's diagnosed "nervous condition" escalates when he takes a job as a photographer in a department store, where he screws a model with scary intensity and beats the crap out of a hapless customer.

Time out to honor the astonishing look of *The Master*. Projected in the large-frame 70mm process Anderson favors, the film engulfs you. High praise to genius cinematographer Mihai Malaimare Jr. (*Youth Without Youth*, *Tetro* and *Twixt*), whose visual poetry is matched by Jonny Greenwood's haunting, hypnotic score. For their enthralling work alone, you'd follow *The Master* anywhere.

Freddie stows away on the yacht carrying the Master to New York and featuring the shipboard wedding of Dodd's daughter Susan (Jillian Bell). Dodd's wife, Peggy (a quietly devastating Amy Adams), sniffs trouble from the moment she eyeballs creepy Freddie. Dodd (rhymes with God) sees the danger too, but he likes the cocktails Freddie whips up with potentially lethal paint thinner. He also rises to the challenge that boozy, mercurial, violence-prone Freddie presents as a convert.

Hoffman can lift his resonant voice to command attention or lower it to a velvet whisper, both equally mesmerizing. But it's what the guru tries to conceal — his secret smile, his sudden wrath, the connection he feels with Freddie's feral

heart — that make his portrayal monumental. Hoffman excelled in four of Anderson's previous films, but his tour de force here as a do-gooder-turned-silky-charlatan tops them all.

Phoenix completes this out-of-the-box love story by embodying Freddie as a raw, exposed nerve. The son of an institutionalized mother, Freddie forms a relationship with Dodd that seesaws from devotion to rabid doubt. He has the same reactions to the much younger girl (Madisen Beaty) he left behind. Then there are Freddie's twisted sexual fantasies, notably Dodd dancing among naked female disciples. Freddie freaks out when Dodd's son Val (Jesse Plemons) casually mentions that Dad is "making all this up as he goes along." His animal-like breakdown in a jail cell makes Robert De Niro's raging bull seem mildly miffed. Phoenix wears the role like a second skin; he's a volcano in full eruption. You can't take your eyes off him.

*The Master* moves into its final phase when Dodd, like Hubbard, shifts his operation to the English countryside. He phones an invitation to the wayward Freddie, a last chance to align the prodigal son with the Cause. "He's past help," Peggy sternly tells her husband. Adams deserves serious award attention for the subtle authority she brings to this so-called dutiful wife. As for the startling intimacy when Dodd, alone with Freddie, sings sweetly, "I'd love to get you/On a slow boat to China/All to myself alone" — yikes!

In its intricate dance of loyalty and betrayal, *The Master* stays seductively enigmatic. Is Freddie past help? Anderson proves allergic to glib answers. But he makes certain we see ourselves in the way Freddie is drawn to and repelled by institutions (God, country, love, money) that demand absolute allegiance. The emotional damage we do to appease loneliness proves a bigger theme than exposing the evils of cults. Yet the film is flush with an Anderson kind of hope. What he celebrates about humanity in *The Master* is an essence that's untamable. The description sure as hell fits Anderson and his powder keg of a movie.

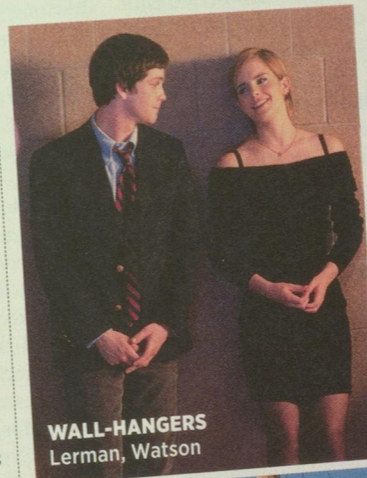
## The Perks of Being a Wallflower

Emma Watson, Logan Lerman, Ezra Miller

Directed by Stephen Chbosky

★★★

ODIOUS COMPARISONS TO J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* emerged when Stephen Chbosky's young-adult novel *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* was published in 1999. Erase the thought. Chbosky's semi-autobiographical treatment of



**WALL-HANGERS**  
Lerman, Watson



**COP REALITY**  
Peña (left), Gyllenhaal

his high school days was good, just not that good.

The film version, written and directed by Chbosky himself in a rare but welcome instance of Hollywood actually thinking an author might know something about his own book, is a modest but distinct pleasure. Chbosky is clear-sighted about the harsh realities of sexual identity, drug use and mental illness, but alert to the scars left by emotional wounds.

Logan Lerman (*3:10 to Yuma*) excels as Charlie, the smart but socially inept freshman. The novel was done with letters, but Lerman is quite adept at catching the right tone of voice for a character who's

still not over a friend's suicide, and a traumatic experience with an aunt (Melanie Lynskey).

It's an unwritten rule that every wallflower needs advisers. Charlie's older sister (a lovely turn from Nina Dobrev of *The Vampire Diaries*) lends a sympathetic ear. And Paul Rudd brings warmth and nuance to the English teacher who befriends Charlie, within limits.

But Charlie needs help on the inside of this Pittsburgh high school circa 1991. Enter Samantha, a pretty, poised senior possessed of natural cool. She's played by Emma Watson in her first major foray out of Hogwarts. Naturally Charlie aims his misplaced affection straight at her. Watson, sporting a spot-on Yank accent, makes a dream girl to die for.

But *Perks* is stolen, head to tail, by Ezra Mill-

## End of Watch

Jake Gyllenhaal, Michael Peña, Anna Kendrick

Directed by David Ayer

★★½

THERE'S AN INDISPUTABLE level of commitment in this Los Angeles cop drama. Writer-director David Ayer, who did the acclaimed script for *Training Day*, grew up in South Central. And he's a stickler for detail. *End of Watch* has the feel of an uncensored reality show as Officer Taylor (Jake Gyllenhaal) and Officer Zavala (Michael Peña) work the Newton neighborhood for the LAPD. We see the action through the lenses of hand-held HD cameras operated by police, gang members and assorted surveillance devices. With a camera mounted on his chest, Gyllenhaal shot much of the film himself, since his character is working on a documentarylike film project. Ayer keeps things unnervingly in your face. It's a dizzying sensation, which drives some audiences nuts. If that sounds like you, end this watch fast.

The plot smacks of day-old TV cop show. Taylor and Zavala are caught between battling drug cartels that make them targets when they seize drug money from a local gang. But Ayer raises the bar with a script that bristles with life. Unlike Denzel Washington's dirty cop in *Training Day*, Taylor and Zavala hold their moral balance. Zavala, the family man, is excited when Taylor thinks of settling down with the right girl (a scrappy Anna Kendrick).

Don't panic. Action is the key here. Gyllenhaal and Peña spent five months doing ride-alongs to cement their bond with gritty authenticity. You hear that a lot from actors. This time it works. Gyllenhaal, beefy and bald for the role, invests Taylor with a core of intelligence as imposing as his brawn. And Peña is just the guy you'd want watching your back.

The pact these guys make in case one of them is paralyzed smacks of tear-jerking, but these actors are too good to wallow in it. *End of Watch* gives you the savage whoosh of being on a job that can get you killed. Sins of cop clichés can be forgiven when a movie pays honest tribute to police on the line.