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THE LIVES OF HAMILTON FISH



Year Released: 2014
MPAA Rating: Unrated
Running Time: 85 minutes
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One of the problems in being a film critic is looking at the endless parade of independently produced movies and seeing very little that stands out in terms of arresting visual style and provocative emotional substance. Mercifully, there is Rachel Mason's "The Lives of Hamilton Fish," a film now coming into view that is so boldly innovative in its technique and so profound in its concept that it is wholly appropriate to yell "Hallelujah!" in joy over its arrival.

"The Lives of Hamilton Fish" is a rock opera, but it also a psychological thriller. And it is also a brilliantly cruel commentary on the media's fascination with the most morbid stories, as well as a wise commentary on the self-imprisoning aspects of obsessive behavior.

The film is inspired by the front page of a New York newspaper in 1936 that ran side-by-side obituaries of two men with the same name. One of the men was Hamilton Fish II, a once-powerful political leader and a member of one of America's most prominent families. The other man was also Hamilton "Albert" Fish, a convicted felon who was executed for the murder of a 10-year-old girl. Outside of the coincidental intersection of their obituaries, there is no evidence that either man had any knowledge of the other's existence.

Mason, wearing male garb, plays the newspaper editor that printed the obituaries. The editor becomes the narrator that details the unhappy lives of both men, showing how each became isolated from the wider world. The political Fish withdraws from public life after the death of his beloved wife (who is shown in flashback sequences). Despite attempts to reach her via séances, Fish becomes a recluse in his plush, overly upholstered mansion, living in shadows. The criminal Fish, warped from childhood abuse in an orphanage, veers into madness that drives him to assault and kill young Grace Budd. But he shares society's revulsion of his actions – he becomes a monster of self-pity, anguished over his crimes yet unable to stop the violence of his behavior.

"The Lives of Hamilton Fish" consists of more than 20 deeply complex songs composed by Mason. In a highly risky move, Mason sings the entire score, with the other actors miming her vocalization. It is a disconcerting effect, but it ultimately makes sense as the editor transforms from an impartial journalist into a wild-eyed voyeur, tracking the two men through their rooms with spidery stealth while giddily recalling their respective journeys into doom. Since the editor is the one spinning this tale, it makes sense for the editor's words to come out of every character's mouth.

In another seemingly risky move, Mason has the main cast members wear jagged blocks of boldly hued paint across their faces. This might look odd at first, but then it becomes apparent that everyone in the film is wearing their own Mark of Cain to separate themselves from the world – including the editor, who is never seen interacting with another person, preferring to cradle the typewriter used to write the two obituaries and to clutch the newspaper clippings relating to each of the disastrous life turns impacting both men.

A great deal of the power in "The Lives of Hamilton Fish" comes from the three central performances. As the felonious Fish, Bill Weeden gives an astonishing emotional tour de force, alternating between a seething seediness as a loner viewing his surroundings with contempt to a wild-eyed horror as a predator who realizes too late that he has destroyed himself while tearing apart those around him. In contrast, Theodore Bouloukos' role as the political Fish is more sedate, but the actor brilliantly plumbs the tragedy of a lost love to present a once-proud man who walks through rooms and hallways while struggling to recall the glory of his existence. Yet Bouloukos manages to retain the dignity of his character, whereas Weeden's character never possessed a modicum of dignity. In several jolting shots, Weeden is seen angrily viewing Bouloukos from a distance, whereas Bouloukos is unaware of anything but his grief – and neither is aware of the often grand surroundings where they wander. (Mason filmed this production in such grand metro New York locations as the Morris-Jumel Mansion, Jersey City's Brennan Court House and Untermyer Park in Yonkers.)

And then there is Mason. As a singer, she possesses a mesmerizing voice that passionately knits together the tapestry of tragedies. As an actor, her full-throttle performance as the overly enthusiastic editor is utterly electrifying – her character's obsessive recounting of what transpired goes into a mania that could be seen as a symbol of the media's throbbing hunger for anything tied to heartache and misery.

A shout out needs to go to a small, single-scene role that is turned into a larger-than-life burst of dramatic fury: Geo Wyeth as a convict who is wrongly imprisoned and pleads for justice. Wyeth brings an explosion of physical and psychological anguish to this relatively brief part, yet the sheer force of nature of the actor's talent is breathtaking.

Mason has been screening "The Lives of Hamilton Fish" at special exhibits where she performs the score live while the film screens. I have not been to one of these performances – I saw the film as the closing feature in this year's New England Underground Film Festival, and watching this extraordinary work on the big screen is the most invigorating movie experience I've had in a very long time.

I am so in awe of Mason and her glorious achievement. I sincerely wish that other festivals would book this film and that film distributors would get into a knock-down brawl to fight for the acquisition rights. "The Lives of Hamilton Fish" is a work of artistic and intellectual genius – in my book, this is the very best film of 2014.

Posted on October 16, 2014 in [Reviews](#) by [Phil Hall](#)



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