



**Monday, March 21, 7:30 pm**

Reviewed by Monica Castillo | RogerEbert.com | Rated R | 125 Mins.

Benedict Cumberbatch is perhaps not the first actor that springs to mind when thinking of casting a Western, but under the direction of Jane Campion in her stellar drama “The Power of the Dog,” he’s just what the movie needs. Covered head-to-toe in dirt for most of the film, he embodies a character in a masculine crisis. He has a constant need to prove he’s the roughest, toughest leader in a wolf pack of cowboys, possibly to hide his adoration and affection for the long-gone man who taught him more than just how to ride a horse. Phil (Cumberbatch) dominates the pecking order of any room he’s in through cruel remarks and an irreverence towards authority. His eyes are cold as mountain air; his face is a stone façade against the world; his tongue is as sharp as a snake fang. Gone are the quirky and endearing characters that Cumberbatch has played in the past. Here, coiled like a predator in wait, Cumberbatch is perhaps more fearsome than as his deep-voiced villains in “The Hobbit” and “Star Trek Into Darkness.” He moves through the movie like an unsheathed knife, cutting anyone unlucky enough to get close.

Cumberbatch’s Phil is the rough and tumble Remus to the movie’s kinder Romulus, his brother George (Jesse Plemons). Where Phil is calloused and mean, George is gentler and more soft-spoken, often at the mercy of his brother’s teasing. At a stop at a restaurant, Phil harshly taunts Rose (Kirsten Dunst), a widow running the joint, and her son Peter (Kodi Smit-McPhee), who Phil bullies until Peter walks off the job and leaves his mother in tears. George reaches out to comfort her, and ends up falling for her. This enrages Phil, who takes the loss of his brother to a woman quite badly. He steps up his intimidation of Rose and Peter, like intensifying heat with a magnifying glass. That is, until Peter tries to spend more time with Phil. The unlikely camaraderie unlocks a number of secrets and hidden intentions, changing everyone’s relationship to each other.

Using New Zealand for 1920s Montana, writer/director Campion sets this quiet-yet-angry Western against a harsh background that’s both beautiful and imposing. For Peter, it presents a hardened masculinity he must learn to overcome. For Phil, this windswept nature is an escape from the life of privilege he wants no part of. It is on the back of a horse that he found himself, and it is on those cow paths, mountain passes, and hidden rivers that he learned to disguise his desires.

Campion’s adaptation of Thomas Savage’s novel of the same name strips out many details from the book and takes it back to its rawest in-the-moment elements. Backstory is filled in quickly and briefly in dialogue, if it’s ever filled in at all. There are no flashbacks, just a few scenes of characters sharing their past with each other. Campion and her cinematographer Ari Wegner write whole character studies in their close-ups. From this perspective, we get a

sense of what the cast may never verbalize. It’s in the pained and panicked look on Rose’s face when she begins drinking after another round of Phil’s harassment. It’s in the steely glares Peter shoots Phil when he’s being picked on. It’s in George’s downward gazes at the floor, knowing he is helpless to stop his brother’s torments. It’s in the rage on Phil’s face as he realizes his tight-knit relationship with his brother is coming to an end with George’s marriage to Rose. It’s an approach Campion has used in her earlier works like “An Angel at My Table” and “The Piano,” the latter of which follows a main character, Ada (Holly Hunter), who cannot speak, but uses her face and sharply gestured sign language to get her point across. There is no doubt when Ada has something to share in “The Piano,” and through Phil’s movement, body language and reactions, Cumberbatch also speaks volumes with every scowl and every defiant smile.

Many of Campion’s movies also focus on shifting power dynamics between characters: who has power, who loses it, and how they gain it back. Sometimes, this is in the form of women fighting to be heard, like in “Sweetie” or “Bright Star.” But in “The Power of the Dog,” Rose’s entrance into the family is perceived as a threat, a challenge to established order. Phil extends her no kindness, slyly creating a toxic environment that poisons her, in order to retain power over his brother, their business and who is in charge around their stately mansion. She’s like an existential threat to him: she represents the sex he doesn’t desire and someone he doesn’t yet have under control. The truce between Phil and Peter unnerves Rose more, afraid of the influence he may have on her son. She loses herself in the bottle, just as Peter stands up to Phil’s bullying. It’s a riveting dance between them all, waiting to see how it all will end once the music stops.

Speaking of the music, “The Power of the Dog” contains some of the best use of music in a movie this year. Jonny Greenwood’s work underlines and emphasizes many of the actions playing out on-screen. String compositions twist and turn as sharply as the movie’s plot, like a jagged undercurrent pulling our emotions in certain directions. The sounds of sweet violins sour, while softer notes swell into intense waves. The changes are quick, a nod to the tense dynamics between the brothers, the widow, and her son. Many of the songs use plucked strings to create an air of uneasy anticipation, as if cantering into danger. Rows of violins join in to heighten this uneasy feeling, almost awakening our fight or flight response. The music doesn’t stray too far from the prototypical Western sound yet adds these extra layers of foreboding throughout.

“The Power of the Dog” revels in this suspenseful place much like Phil prefers working with cattle than dealing with high society. Though the movie starts at a gentle pace, it doesn’t stay there long. There is so much layered desire, hatred, and domination that soon comes rolling out to disturb everyone’s uneasy peace. The game of wits between Phil and everyone else is a chilling one to watch, and it’s exactly the kind of end-of-the-year movie to finish things with a bang.

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# PARALLEL MOTHERS

Monday, March 28, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by Barry Hertz | The Globe and Mail | Not Rated | 120 Mins.

Pedro Almodóvar just about saved my soul. During the height of yet another Ontario lockdown – schools closed, cinemas and restaurants shut down, a whiff of god-not-this-again hanging thick in the winter air – I received a screening link to the Spanish filmmaker’s latest work, which was initially set to open in Canadian theatres at the beginning of the new year. (It’s finally making its way here this weekend.)

I was both fairly sure what Parallel Mothers might be, and eager to be surprised. Thankfully, Almodóvar delivers on both fronts – as Almodóvar should almost always be entrusted to do. Part tear-stained Technicolor melodrama and part furious cultural excavation, Parallel Mothers rests somewhere near the mid- to upper-tier of Peak Almodóvar. There are slight, barely perceptible cracks in its foundations, but mostly this is rock-solid cinema that will give you renewed life. It is all the more impressive given that it arrives from a filmmaker who, nearly five decades in the game, remains at the height of his powers.

Indeed, there is a sense of career-long catharsis watching Parallel Mothers, as if the filmmaker has been patiently waiting to tell this story since he first picked up a camera. (A fictional poster for the movie appears in the background of his 2009 film Broken Embraces.)

Certainly, there are familiar Almodóvar-isms: desperate women, twists of fate, and an unceasing fascination with mothers, mothers, mothers. But for the first time in the director’s filmography – work that was birthed in the hedonistic heyday of La Movida (“The Happening”) that followed Francisco Franco’s death – Almodóvar is directly confronting the chaos of the Spanish Civil War, and the shadow it continues to cast over his country’s psyche.

As the title implies, Parallel Mothers tells two tales concurrently. The first involves photographer Janis (Penélope Cruz), who befriends the teenage Ana (Milena Smit) in the hospital while they both await the deliveries of their first-borns. Years later, Janis and Ana reconnect, but only after tragedy has struck both women.

While this drama, tinged with elements of both black comedy and psycho-sexual thriller, plays out, Almodóvar keeps returning to Janis’s long-held quest to unearth the remains of her great-

grandfather, who was “disappeared” by Franco-affiliated rebels. Eventually, a story about motherhood becomes a story about cultural memory, with Almodóvar gleefully but respectfully mixing the themes together until they coalesce into one singular treatise on the responsibility we have to recognize, and never forget, our own mistakes.

Throughout Parallel Mothers, Almodóvar runs the risk of derailing his drama by insisting to keep Spain’s painful history at the forefront. Does he want audiences to become lost in one of his signature melodramas – set-designed with eye-popping detail and acted with red-hot intensity by a cast of regular collaborators – or does he want to shake his countrymen from what he views as a sort of societal amnesia? Both, actually, and somehow he pulls the balancing act off.

There is even a moment mid-film in which he addresses the tension that he himself created, with Ana confronting Janis over her obsession with finding the bones of a man who’s been dead for decades. “You have to look at the future,” Ana says, “otherwise you’ll just open old wounds!” The thing is, opening old wounds – albeit of the personal, not societal, nature – has been Almodóvar’s specialty forever.



Cruz, whose presence here marks her seventh time working with Almodóvar, goes beyond typical excellence. As Janis confronts traumas both contemporary and historical, the actress must portray both victim and crusader, all without falling to pieces. It is a remarkable performance that should live in the hall of Almodóvar’s many great women on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Relative newcomer Smit, meanwhile, acquires herself well as the fragile Ana, especially given that she must face off against a cadre of Almodóvar’s favourite actresses (not only Cruz, but also regulars Rossy de Palma and Julieta Serrano).

Toward the film’s end, when Janis and Ana stare directly at the histories of their own shared lives and the history of their country, Parallel Mothers’ twin purposes merge into something just shy of profound. It is a moment, and movie, that just might save your soul, too. In Spanish with English subtitles.

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**Monday, April 25, 7:30 pm**

Reviewed by Karen Gordon | Original CIN | Rated R | 127 Mins.

The Worst Person in the World starts as a rom-com, snapping with all of the familiar tropes: flirtations, neuroses, well drawn, sometimes annoying lead characters, off-beat humour and charm. It ends in a much different place.



On the surface, it's a simple enough premise: a young woman transitioning into adulthood, trying to find her place in the world. But in the hands of Norwegian director Joachim Trier, The Worst Person in the World is at one level a social satire about love, identity and relationships, and at the same time, a warm and deeply poignant look at the imperfect way life can creep up on us.

The film arrives in theatres, with a stack of nominations, including two Oscars (Best International Feature film and Best Original Screenplay) and two BAFTAs (Best Film Not in The English Language, and Best Leading Actress for Renate Reinsve). It was a buzz film at Cannes where it debuted in competition for the Palme D'Or, and Reinsve won the Best Actress award.

The Worst Person in the World centers around Julie, (Reinsve), a woman in her late twenties living in Oslo. She's smart, beautiful, and determined to do something with her life that will measure up to her ideals.

Simultaneously driven and drifting, she keeps changing her mind about her career path, and takes a job in a bookstore while she figures things out. She meets Aksel, played by Anders Danielsen Lie, who is the author of a series of popular graphic novels. There's big chemistry.

He's in his mid-forties and worries about their age difference, and how they're at different stages in their lives. But that doesn't deter Julie. In fact, it seems to appeal to her. They move in together, settle into their relationship, and debate having children.

Then, Julie crashes a party and meets Eivind (Herbert Nordrum), who is closer to her age, but, also in a relationship.

At heart, The Worst Person In The World is a character study about Julie navigating her way into adulthood. The film covers four or five years in her life. The time frame isn't specifically noted on screen. Rather than marking time in a linear way, Trier, and his longtime writing partner Eskil Vogt, have divided the film into chapters, which gives the film the freedom to jump into points in her life.

Julie is a great modern character. Connected and distracted by technology, she feels like the world is her oyster, with many options on the table. She has a range of interests and talents and is constantly shifting her attention.

She's impulsive and yet, we get that she's not frivolous, nor is she irresponsible. She wants to live authentically, to be true to who she is, but does she even know that that's what she wants? She's searching for something she can't quite define, and is aware that she hasn't found it yet.

Reinsve is superb. Julie is so alive and sparkling that you can't take your eyes off her. She's full of contradictions. On one hand free spirited and searching, and yet, she slides into some very conventional choices. And because of Reinsve's beautifully calibrated performance, we get the sense that even when Julie is momentarily aware of those contradictions, she buries them. The character could be maddening, but because of Reinsve's embrace of her character, we root for her.

Reinsve's performance has been rightly recognized. But she's well matched in the film - in particular by the actors who play the two men she's involved with in the film. Nordum is lovely as the warm, soft hearted, Eivind, who is both fascinated and puzzled by Julie.

The film's soul, however, comes from Anders Danielsen Lie, who plays Aksel. His relationship with Julie, with the world and with himself, grounds the film. Like Reinsve, he's an internal actor, and you can see what the character is thinking in his subtle reactions.

As a filmmaker, Trier is interested in exploring modern life, through characters and relationships. He's an insightful and skillful story teller.

And that's important here. The Worst Person In The World often has a slightly satirical tone to it, at Julie's expense. But it never descends into caricature. It's not possible to reduce Julie to a stereotype of a self-absorbed person using other people for her own ego gratification.



No matter where he takes us with the story, Trier doesn't ever diminish his lead character. Julia wants to live an authentic life, to find a place in it where she can be genuine for herself and others. The story here is broader and deeper.

Some people transition smoothly into adulthood, marriage, kids, jobs. But some of us spend our lives, or part of our lives searching for that genuine place. The Worst Person In The World talks about the cost of that search.

Trier reminds us that becoming an adult, being authentic and happy, is often a process of trial and error. Failure (often self inflicted) and loss are inevitable. And yet, how beautiful is the life ahead with all its potential and promise. In Norwegian with English subtitles.

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directors of all-time."

--*The Hollywood Reporter*

Monday, March 21 at 7:30 pm

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"Every shot, every narrative beat, every decision  
exudes not merely confidence, but the touch of a  
master."

--*David Jenkins, Little White Lies*

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## PARALLEL MOTHERS

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## THE WORST PERSON IN THE WORLD

A film by Joachim Trier

"One of the best romantic films of recent times."

--*Awards Watch*

Monday, April 25 at 7:30 pm