

ANATOMY OF A MURDERER - IN 'MONSTER,' CHARLIZE THERON MAKES AN INCREDIBLE TRANSFORMATION INTO A HOOKER WHO TAKES GRISLY VENGEANCE ON MEN

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'Monster'

THREE STARS out of 4 stars

Rated R; violence, sexual themes and situations, nudity, alcohol and drug abuse, language

1 hour, 48 minutes

At the Main Art Theatre, Royal Oak

If those who applauded the retribution doled out against male pigs in "Thelma and Louise" allowed that inclination to be taken to its logical end, they might end up character witnesses for **Aileen Wuornos**, whose killing spree is recalled with cool detachment in "Monster."

"Monster" doesn't begin to explain Wuornos, much less defend her, but it does let us look at circumstances that may have provoked the drug-addicted highway prostitute (who spent her formative years in Troy) to kill her johns.

Wuornos was executed in Florida in 2002, having confessed to killing seven men; she remained at large as long as she did in part because of a belief that women simply didn't become serial killers.

In an impressive feature debut, director Patty Jenkins, who also wrote the matter-of-fact script, barely addresses why law enforcement took so long to bring Wuornos to justice. Instead, it concentrates on how Wuornos' need for love contributed to her facility for killing without crushing guilt.

(If you are interested, there are numerous books about the Wuornos case, as well as Nick Broomfield's scary-funny documentary "The Selling of a Serial Killer," whose first-person interviews were used as evidence at her trial.)

This sad pathology, be it accurate or not, is convincingly and confidently laid on the table by Charlize Theron, an actor who has too often been consigned to playing women in jeopardy and girlfriend roles.

She may have taken on this part to prove she is something more than a long-legged pinup -- something that is abundantly clear to anyone who saw her in "The Cider House Rules," "The Yards" or even a trifle like "Mighty Joe Young." Regardless of her motivation, however, Theron's work here stands with that of Jennifer Connelly, Hope Davis, Naomi Watts, Cate Blanchett and Charlotte Rampling as one of the best female performances of 2003 (when the movie opened in New York, Los Angeles and San Francisco).

Moreover, Theron is almost equally matched by Christina Ricci, who may be getting less attention for her role because she has played passive manipulators like Selby Wall in the past.

It is Wall -- who has been sent to live with an aunt by her fundamentalist father -- who approaches the bloated and suicidal Wuornos in a trashy Florida gay bar after Wuornos has stumbled in from the rain, looking like something the cat would have dragged in. But she is rebuffed: Wuornos belligerently proclaims she is not a lesbian.

Yet she ends up spending the night in Wall's bedroom; clearly, Selby's father's plan to keep her away from corrupting influences has failed. Soon Wuornos, who has been hooking since she was 13, is back turning tricks in order to pay for a hotel room she and Wall can share.

The primary conflict in "Monster" is not Wuornos' guilt over committing murder -- an act to which she is originally driven after a sadistic customer brutally beats her. Rather, it is about her selling herself to men, which she continues to do only to keep the passive yet demanding Wall in Cheetos and out of the control of her family.

To justify the killings, Wuornos convinces herself that all men are dangerous predators, an assumption challenged by a shy and awkward customer she allows to live (Pruitt Taylor Vince) and a straying husband she does not.

Much has been made of Theron's physical transformation, which saw her putting on not just De Niro-type weight but pounds of splotchy, mottled makeup and the requisite bad teeth and other white trash trademarks.

That achievement might be more rightfully claimed by make-up artist Toni G. Theron is less De Niro than the Martin Sheen of "Badlands" or the Scott Wilson of "In Cold Blood" (who, with Bruce Dern, has a supporting role here), playing a discarded American drifter who clings to hope provided by someone at least as psychologically twisted as herself.

I have no idea if "Monster" is the real story of Wuornos, who, before she was executed, renounced homosexuality and became a born-again Christian. But I know that Theron and Jenkins made me believe it was all too true and, in the process, made clear the irony of the film's title.

The line between a morally challenged mess and a monster, this film argues, is in the eye of the beholder, and, of course, the executioner.

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KILLER GREW UP IN TROY

Patty Jenkins' film "Monster," opening in metro Detroit today, recounts the case of **Aileen Wuornos**, who spent her formative years in Troy before moving to Florida, where she was executed in 2002 for murder.

Wuornos, who was 46 at the time of her execution, confessed to killing seven men and was called "the damsel of death" by her prosecutors. She claimed to be a highway prostitute and police said she was an alcohol and drug abuser who robbed to make ends meet and buy gifts for her lover.

She withdrew from Troy High School after her freshman year in 1971 and moved to Florida in the mid-1970s. According to court records, she was abandoned at birth by her parents, raped before she was a teen and gave birth to a son before she had a driver's license.

As an adult, she reconnected with an old friend from Troy High School, who said she prayed with Wuornos the night before her execution. The friend, Dawn Botkins, later scattered Wuornos' ashes in rural Lapeer County.

From Associated Press accounts of Wuornos' execution and Free Press staff reports.
Caption: Photo AP/Newmarket Pictures

Bruce Dern plays a man who befriends a serial killer played by Charlize Theron.

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