

Theron Holds ' Monster ' in Her Grip

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INSPIRED BY the real-life story of Aileen Wuornos, the prostitute who was executed **in** 2002 for the murders of several men **in** the late 1980s, " **Monster** " is an okay movie made nearly great by one great thing: the bravura, mercilessly watchable performance of Charlize **Theron** .

Her bombshell beauty buried under a mop of greasy, bleach-damaged hair; freckled, blemished and badly windburnt skin; a severe overbite; a reported 30-pound weight gain; and eyebrows plucked into oblivion, **Theron** doesn't just look the part of the lowlife loser on the skids. She tears into it with a ferocity that, **in** a movie filled with unpleasant people doing unfortunate things, is positively chilling. To the extent that anyone can get inside the head of another, especially someone convicted of doing such terrible things, **Theron** does, with abandon. She ultimately may not make Wuornos understandable (and this is more the film's fault than the actress's), but **Theron** accomplishes the near impossible by making **her** character, corrosive temper and all, sympathetic.

Was Wuornos -- whom writer-director Patty Jenkins depicts as a killer whose crimes escalated from self-defense after being raped by a brutal john to cold-blooded execution -- stupid and naive about men, or the victim of childhood sex abuse, bad luck, worse choices, poor impulse control, or, as **her** only male friend, Tom (Bruce Dern), suggests, simple "circumstance"? Is it all of the above? Or was she a sociopath, plain and simple?

We can't ever really know, can we? And the film, try as it might, with poetic allusions to a Ferris wheel that terrified Wuornos as a little girl (the film's double-edged title is actually taken from Wuornos's name for the traumatizing ride), never really answers that question. This, of course, is a problem endemic to most films about notorious criminals. Despite performances that are often quite good (Macaulay Culkin as Michael Alig **in** "Party **Monster** " and Val Kilmer as John "Johnny Wadd" Holmes **in** "Wonderland" come most immediately to mind), the majority of films of this ilk trade, at least **in** large part, on the luridness of the acts perpetrated by their subjects. Sex and death are a potent, if nutritionally empty, cocktail, **in** other words.

As "Wonderland" did **in** its depiction of the touching, complex relationship between Holmes and his estranged wife, " **Monster** " attempts to enrich and humanize Wuornos's sordid saga by playing it as a love story of sorts, focusing somewhat less on the actual murders and virtually not at all on the criminal investigation, instead examining the relationship between Wuornos and Selby Wall (Christina Ricci), a young woman whose parents have sent **her** to Florida, hoping that she will be "cured" of **her** homosexuality by living with a conservative Christian aunt (Annie Corley). While **Theron** imbues Wuornos's increasingly bloody reprisals toward **her** customers, most of whom seem merely to serve as convenient targets for **her** volcanic rage, with a kind of insane logic, it is **in** Wuornos's tender, desperate dealings with **her** lover that the character seems most human and most like us.

Despite Wuornos's monstrous behavior, and despite "**Monster**'s" inability -- or perhaps unwillingness -- to make sense of it all, **Theron** ultimately leaves us with a character who, like John Hurt's grotesque John Merrick in "The Elephant Man," isn't, beneath all that Hollywood makeup, so unrecognizable after all.

MONSTER (R, 111minutes) -- Contains obscenity, physical violence (including sexual assault), sexual encounters and frank discussion of sexuality. Area theaters.

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