



FILM REVIEW: "Leaving Las Vegas"

Ben Sanderson, who is an alcoholic, is the hero of the movie "Leaving Las Vegas." His heroism is accomplished without romanticism and in the face of the full physicality of end stage alcoholism. This extraordinary feat is accomplished by the terrific director Mike Figgis, who offers us a look at a human being struggling with many demons; the most powerful, but not the only one, is demon rum. Unlike most other movies about human pathology, addiction and self destruction, "Leaving Las Vegas" doesn't patronize the characters or the audience. Figgis won't allow us to reduce Sanderson to a dysfunctional caricature — the bitter pathos of "The Days of Wine and Roses" is thankfully absent. Instead we have a man struggling to love and maintain a sense of honor, however diluted, while he deliberately drinks himself to death. Ben Sanderson chooses his fate and through that choice Figgis allows us to witness his character's complexity and to accept his improbable authenticity.

The storyline of the film is deceptively simple. Sanderson, having washed up in an ocean of alcohol in the movie business, burns his bridges and all his possessions, and leaves Los Angeles for Las Vegas, a place he will never leave. Once there he checks into a seedy motel and proceeds to systematically drink

himself to death. He estimates this task will take four weeks. Along the way he meets a prostitute, Sera, and falls in love. The rest of the film portrays Ben and Sera's relationship on its vertiginous course during the final weeks of his life. Nicholas Cage as Ben offers one of the great film performances of the last two decades. He inhabits the spacious character fully, allowing us to see all the contradictions and passions of a man in a headlong pursuit of both death and love. Elisabeth Shue is equally brilliant as his companion and would-be lover. Her directness and lack of acting mannerisms render her performance chillingly authentic. Together, their intensity of purpose melts our initial skepticism that a film about a such a sad and depleted subject could be compelling.

"Leaving Las Vegas" turns hedonism on its head— lush scenes of a glimmering, phantasmagoric Las Vegas at night are interspersed with scenes, both inside and outside the casinos, of the misery and banality that necessarily accompany a direct, 24 hour pursuit of pleasure. Streetwalkers, drunks, vicious mobsters and rapists, suggesting all varieties of pain, humiliation and death are the leitmotif of Las Vegas; Figgis acknowledges the desperation at the heart of the town. Surprisingly the dark side of Las Vegas

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and its mindless pursuit of distraction serve to underscore the essential decency and potential for happiness of Ben and Sera's relationship.

The riveting nature of the film comes not from the plot (the ending is clearly foretold from the first scenes of Ben crashing around Los Angeles in full alcoholic fettle), nor is it from our hope of his redemption through sobriety (Ben tells Sera early on, "You can never, never, never ask me to stop drinking"). We are pretty sure, even though the film offers a momentary quickening of hope when the two declare their love, that Ben will allow nothing to save him. Instead the film's power comes from its refusal to equate Ben with his pathological behavior. Popular psychology promises that to know a person's label or dysfunction (I'm an alcoholic, drug addict, compulsive overeater, codependent and so forth) allows us to obtusely dismiss all his or her complexity, contradictions and capacity for surprise. It is the utter predictability and implicit reductionism in these labels (alcoholic, prostitute) that this film, like all great art, rejects. Ben is a man who is drinking himself to death; he is also a complex, fully realized character whose humanity makes his devolution all the more tragic.

Ostensibly about alcoholism, suicide, and the exploitation of women, "Leaving Las Vegas" forces us to look beyond these tragedies and celebrate the vibrancy and nourishing potential of human relationships. The film reminds us that we are ineluctably social animals— Ben needs

to be with Sera even as he tries to destroy all human connection; Sera comforts him as he is dying regardless of the pain their relationship has caused her. The last scene in the film is immensely moving, as Ben and Sera connect intensely in the minutes before his death. Though deeply damaged, the characters as played by Cage and Shue demonstrate the strength of the human spirit. This is especially true for Sera, who during the course of the movie survives the brutal domination of a pimp, a gang rap by college students and a heartbreaking relationship with Ben. The film's story is told by her, who begins and ends the film, perhaps appropriately, talking to an unseen therapist.

"Leaving Las Vegas," which won the New York Film Critics Award as the best film of 1995, courageously leaves us with an uncomfortable ambiguity which it never offers to resolve. This is a rarity in mainstream films and, like Ben and Sera's relationship, it deserves to be celebrated. □

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