

A Home(r) Worth Fighting For

A *The Odyssey* Review

By: Adam Dombrow

It's been a *long* time since I first experienced what I consider to be amongst the greatest one-two punches in literary history: Homer's epics *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. As a writer, encountering these two works (probably *way* earlier than I should have, mind you) was a truly transformative experience. Those two works really showed me the beauty of words—regardless of the language—and how poetry can be this amazing, long form *thing*. *The Odyssey* (in my opinion) is the quintessential hero's journey story.

Since *Batman Begins*, I have had the utmost faith in Christopher Nolan. For my money, he was the first director to really seem to understand that *Bruce Wayne is Batman's mask*, not the other way around. This understanding of the character's psychology, coupled with his undeniable filmmaking chops, had already cemented Nolan as one of my all-time favorite directors. Hot off the heels of *Oppenheimer*, I heard Nolan was getting ready to tackle the tale of Odysseus and his decade long journey home: I was giddy with excitement!

The wait is over, and Nolan's take on *The Odyssey* is here, and man, is it a feat of cinema!

Nolan has demonstrated time and time again that not only can he handle **BIG** movies, but that he handles them with the finest regard to detail, and characterization. In order to adapt *The Odyssey*, in my opinion, you virtually have to also figure out a way to adapt *The Iliad*, and do so with strict time constraints. Nolan masterfully does that here, choosing to focus on telling Odysseus' story *starting* with the Trojan horse, and the sacking of the city of Troy. While it did bum me out a little to *not* get to see *all* of the events of *The Iliad* through Nolan's masterful

vision (I need the *entire* story Christopher, c'mon!) his using the Trojan horse to eventually become a much bigger metaphor is what sets him apart from other filmmakers.

The *Odyssey* is pound-for-pound one of the most visually stunning films I have ever seen. It harkins back to a time of big, studio cinema, like Wyler's *Ben Hur*. It really reminded me of how I felt the first time I saw *Saving Private Ryan* to be honest: not so much like "oh I'm just watching a re-enactment of D-Day", but like "oh, *this is what D-Day felt like*"! I'm actually mad that my theater couldn't put The *Odyssey* on Screen X, because I think it would be maybe *the only* movie actually worthy of the treatment. Seriously, there isn't a screen big enough to contain this movie, but the larger the screen, the more incredible the experience is going to be for you!

Although we are only midway through July, I'm prepared to say that longtime Nolan collaborator Hoyte Van Hoytema could very well win his second Academy Award for Cinematography. Right now, for my money, it's a two man race between Hoytema and Greig Fraser for *Project Hail Mary*. In all honesty, Hoytema may just deserve the award more, as the cinematography of The *Odyssey* is truly *all-encompassing*: Hoytema basically has to film virtually every *style* of movie for this film—including what will probably be the closest we ever get to a Nolan Creature Feature—and he does so displaying the utmost mastery of the craft. The visuals that are meant to be scary *are scary as hell*, and really make you reflect on how wild the adventure truly is!

I would be remiss if I didn't touch upon The *Odyssey*'s **fantastic** score by Ludwig Göransson. Göransson is in the same boat as Hoytema in terms of having to score virtually every style of movie here. As far as which composition I thought went the best with what was going on

on the screen, I would probably go with “Hades”: it’s just an incredible blend of sorrow, with the exclamation mark being these sweeping *strike* sounds. To really get a taste of the full breadth of Göransson’s score though, Odysseus’ self-titled theme is where it is at!

So much of the early criticism surrounding the *Odyssey* had to do with Nolan’s casting choices. I, for one, fully trusted Nolan from the jump—say what you want about him but the guy knows how to put together an ensemble cast! I do understand the criticism *to an extent*: it can *feel* like you’re being slighted when a director makes a casting decision that completely goes against your idea for what a character *looks* like, but we as film watchers need to understand that the way a character *looks or doesn’t look will never determine a performance!* I mean seriously, people were all up in arms (specifically racists and transphobes) about the casting of Lupita Nyong’o as Helen of Troy (wait until they realize they get her in a dual role) and Elliot Page (when they didn’t even really know who Page was going to play!) being *whoever*; I’m here to help you put your fragile little egos aside when I tell you that, despite both actors being **amazing** in their roles (especially Page, whose spectre *looms* throughout the entire film), **they have very little actual on-screen time, so you whiners can shut up and go see the movie and not feel like you will come out completely tainted, or any other weirdo ass feeling you types feel!**

Now, with that bit of nasty business out of the way, we do need to talk about the performances in *The Odyssey*, because I think come awards season, you are going to see *a lot* of them get recognition. Let’s start with the leading man, Matt Damon. I will admit that I am *not* one of the biggest Matt Damon fans (I *still* say his name every time like the puppet from *Team America: World Police*) aside from a few of his performances, but he is **incredible** in this movie.

Odysseus is such an intricate character (this movie *really* made me realize that): he's proclaimed for his cunning in battle, but that cunning comes at such a tremendous cost (more on that in the wrap up), and to be able to display that on-screen is paramount to how the audience will react to the character. Nolan here almost does his best to make the audience *dislike* Odysseus, but Damon makes that impossible. I might still give a slight edge to the homie Ryan Gosling for best actor in *Project Hail Mary*, as he had to do the vast majority of the heavy lifting in that movie solo, but this is honestly the best acting Damon has done in my opinion since *The Departed*, and if he were to win best actor, I wouldn't *at all* be upset about it!

There is a certain knock against Nolan that he "doesn't know how to properly write female characters". I will say that, while I do feel that criticism might be a little overblown—really *none* of his movies are female centric, so there is that—I wouldn't necessarily argue against the notion that Nolan makes movies for dudes. I am glad to say that, without question, Nolan won't be hearing that criticism this time around, as Anne Hathaway's portrayal of Penelope (and by extension, I think, Nolan's drafting of the character) is among some of the finest work of her *entire* career! Hathaway's Penelope rivals her performance as Fantine in 2012's *Les Misérables* in terms of emotional depth (now I have to go listen to her rendition of "I Dreamed A Dream"). I thought for a long time about what to say made Damon's performance so great in this movie, and I think a lot of it is the pain that his eyes convey; for Hathaway, I think the pain is conveyed in how she shapes her mouth during scenes—it sounds weird, I know, but seriously, watch her scenes with Tom Holland and focus on her mouth. I don't know, maybe I'm weird. Either way, weird or not, Hathaway is brilliant in *The Odyssey*.

The other two performances worth mentioning belong to Robert Pattinson, and John Leguizamo. Pattinson plays the perfect smarmy, chicken-shit "heel" here in Antinous. He's so

devilishly diabolical, and so downright snivelingly unlikeable, that he completely utilizes *all* of his screen time making you despise him! Nolan really seems like he brings out some of Pattinson's best work, but Pattinson is criminally underrated anyways, so it's always good to see him get his flowers. Leguizamo turns in the performance of his career here as blind swineherd Eumaeus. He completely plays up the blind aspect, but the real genius in his performance rests in his complete devotion to Odysseus. Leguizamo is almost tasked with being the film's moral center—his character basically dictates to the audience what is right, and what is wrong, and his mistreatment at the hands of the hall of Penelope's suitors will make you thirst for vengeance!

Special kudos have to go out to Charlize Theron and Samantha Morton, both of whom turn in worldbeater performances, but just aren't given enough time. For her part, Theron portrays Calypso with this quiet, haunting elegance, which is very indicative of the character. Morton's turn as the magical, vengeful Circe is a real scene stealer, despite getting a boon (shout out to my *Hades* fans) by some incredible effects. I wish that we got to spend more time with Circe, as her character is truly fascinating!

I would be remiss if I didn't give Zendaya some props as well; she almost *never* does *anything* for me, but I felt like she fully embodied an often forgotten aspect of Athena—the caring protector, whose wisdom is more important than her combat prowess.

The one thing I want to close this review mentioning is that I feel Nolan does something with his vision of The *Odyssey* that I don't really know is adequately encapsulated in the original text: he makes Odysseus' journey home more of a meditation/reflection on the horrors of war, and how war transforms even the most righteous of participants. I won't give it all away, but I did mention the significance of the Trojan Horse earlier, and what it eventually comes to

represent to Odysseus. I urge *all* viewers to think deeply about the “invasion of the people from the sea” subplot as well. These, I feel, are Nolan's true chef's kisses concerning this movie: a similar meditation on war to the one from his previous film *Oppenheimer*.

The *Odyssey* is a cinematic masterpiece, which harkins back to a time of filmmaking that has almost largely been forgotten except for CGI-laden superhero flicks. It **deserves** to be seen/*marveled over* on the largest screen possible, and come awards season, it *will* no doubt be one of the most discussed entrants!