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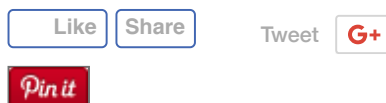


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SIMON MAGUS

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By *Erica Abeel* ([Http://Www.Filmjournal.Com/Taxonomy/Term/93](http://www.filmjournal.com/Taxonomy/Term/93)) Nov 1, 2004



Reviews

It's a promising concept: the magic and mysticism of a Yiddish fairy tale wed to a realistic story of 19th-century Polish Jews struggling for survival. But somewhere between idea and execution, *Simon Magus* went awry. Despite its fine cast, this first feature by British writer-director Ben Hopkins is more clumsily realized than many a misfire in recent memory. The film's confused style is announced with the credits, which appear haloed by cheesy pulsating lights punctuated by images of larval looking creatures in burrows.

Simon Magus (a character inspired by a marginal figure in the Bible and played by Shine's Noah Taylor) is the village outcast in a Talmudic community in late-19th-century Poland. Disheveled, dirty, his sidelocks hung with tchotchkes, he's prone to visions and dialogues with the Devil. The community is shrinking; a newly constructed railroad has siphoned off trade, and without its own railway station, the town is marked for oblivion.

Dovid, a young religious scholar (Stuart Townsend), decides to petition the local Squire, a wealthy aesthete (Rutger Hauer, cast against type), to sell him the land to build a station. Dovid hopes, too, that his venture will clinch his marriage to the reluctant widow Leah (Embeth Davidtz, best known as Ralph Fiennes' servant girl in *Schindler's List*.) Meanwhile, Hase, a ruthless merchant and anti-Semite (Sean McGinley), plots to control the town's future by enlisting Simon as a spy on his own people. But crazy-like-a-fox Simon foils expectations with an ingenious scheme of his own. A subplot explores the burgeoning attraction between the Squire and the bookish Sarah.

Clearly, Hopkins was hoping to capture a demi-fantastic, Chagall-like world, all angles and

apparitions, seen, in part, through Simon's interior mayhem. But maybe, sadly, that's hard to pull off on a slim budget. Some scenes are murky and incoherent; others--as when Dovid pays court to the widow Leah (Davidtz, lovely even in a babushka)--are woodenly played. And the film could win a gross-out award. Okay, so Hopkins was shying away from Hollywood pearlies--but do we really need lingering views of Simon's rotten teeth painted on with brown enamel? Or the badly misused Ian Holm as a Devil caked in schmutz? The soundtrack is more shtetl Muzak than music, complete with plaintive violins and, unbelievably, a hint of zither straight out of Ed Wood.

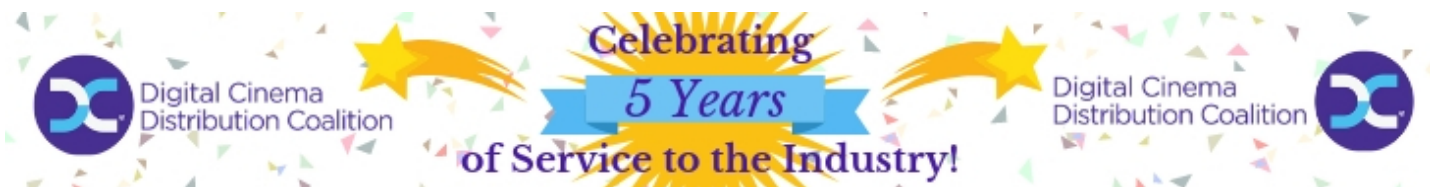
Still, *Simon Magus*, which was shot in Wales, has winning moments. A horseman emerges eerily from a staked field through swirling mist (an image that reprises Tim Burton's *Sleepy Hollow*). Taylor, though a bit too puckish for payiss, manages to convey a touching vulnerability. A delicious note is struck when Sarah and the Squire trade quotes from Shakespeare and Schiller--in fact, the most humorously nuanced performance is Rutger Hauer's Squire, a frustrated writer less interested in selling land than finding readers for his poetry. And, of course, there's the dreadful irony that the railroad the Jews are championing will eventually transport them to the Nazi camps.

The movie finally finds the tone it's been searching for in the sweet closing sequence: a night of wind and gleams of light and tossing trees; Sarah reading aloud a sonnet the Squire has composed for her; Dovid and Leah moving toward each other through the shadows... Kindred souls come together and for a moment the planets are aligned. But it's too little, too late.

--Erica Abeel

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