

The Illusionist

I saw *The Illusionist* at the 2006 Seattle International Film Festival, where it was the premiere feature kicking off the festival. In keeping with SIFF's tradition of choosing terribly tepid films to inaugurate its festival (think *The Notebook*), this movie fits right in. There's little redemption to be found here, and that's sad because there was a lot of talent involved in this project. From Pulitzer Prize winning author Steven Milhauser's short story, *Eisenheim the Illusionist*, to director Neil Burger, whose *Interview with the Assassin* showed good promise, and the strong cast of Edward Norton, Paul Giamatti and Jessica Biel, the amount of creativity squandered on this project is astounding.

The story follows the stoic magician Eisenheim (Norton) as he takes early 20th Century Vienna by storm with his feats of legerdemain. Keeping tabs on Eisenheim's popularity is the somber, grunting chief of police Inspector Uhl, the horribly miscast Giamatti. Eisenheim's popularity grows so large that it attracts the attention of Prince Leopold (Rufus Sewell), who brings along his bride-to-be Princess Sophie (Biel). We learn, through sepia-toned flashbacks, that Eisenheim and Sophie were childhood companions, whose love was never consummated due to class differences. This is but one of the film's many half-hearted attempts at seriousness; it not only fails to convince, but in its failure further emphasizes the movie's shortcomings.

The plot weaves as we see Eisenheim flirt both with Sophie and disaster, the latter in the form of the volatile Leopold and his enforcer Uhl. The film speeds up and attempts to convince us it's getting intricate, when in fact all it's doing is stumbling towards an enigmatic, bet-you-didn't-see-that-one-coming ending reminiscent of *The Sixth Sense*. But like that other thriller, once things are explained you get the feeling that there was a lot of effort put into being tricky, and little consideration given to minor details like plot and character.

I suppose this film will be classified as a romantic drama, two adjectives which are both sadly lacking. Like the above-referenced debacle *The Notebook*, individuals who spend the entirety of their lives pining after unrequited love are not tragically romantic. They're pathetic and more than a little disturbing (imagine if your grade-school love found you now, 20-40 years after the fact, and confessed to having spent the entirety of their lives patiently waiting to be reconnected with you). Unfortunately, the same could be said of this film.