



FILM REVIEW: Film Paints a Picture of the Draw of the Sea for J.M.W. Turner

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by James Croak

In dire weather an old man is lashed to the mast of an 1800s square rigger. Underway the ship heels port and starboard in the fierce snow storm but the aged soul at the bow clings to the upright and scans for a unique light he has not seen before.

Such is a pivotal and riveting scene from “Mr. Turner,” a film biography of the English marine landscape painter Joseph Mallord William Turner, 1775- 1851, known colloquially as J.M.W. Turner. Taken together, his many paintings and atmospheric watercolors provide a revolutionary gateway between the major movements of Romanticism and Impressionism. His body of work is mandatory study for any student of art history but, oddly, until now there has not been a bio epic of this singular painter.



Timothy Spall as Turner.

This year, the Hamptons International Film Festival included one. Like other aspects of the East End arts scene, the festival, founded in the early 1990s, continues to grow each year in size and importance, as evidenced by its inclusion this year of this major film 15 years in the making. The 2014 festival showcased about a hundred films across several venues on the South Fork, with attendance estimated at about 20,000 people overall. One of the better selections this year was “Mr. Turner,” which had its American debut at the Sag Harbor Cinema last week.

The film was written and directed by British writer and director Mike Leigh, known for his film “[Naked](#)” (1993) that received [Best Director Award](#) at [Cannes](#) Film Festival, and his “[Secrets & Lies](#)” (1996) that was Oscar-nominated and won the [Palme d’Or](#) at Cannes. Having the same writer and director means one hand is on the tiller, as many films seem to be a battle of cudgels between the writer and director, with the film’s editor often forced into the role of referee.



Mike Leigh, writer and director

of Mr. Turner.

Irritatingly, films tend to be known by the director and not the writer, an open sore among screenwriters as only one person sat and stared at the “white bull,” as Ernest Hemingway called the blank page. Confusing the director and writer is to confuse the conductor and composer: George Szell conducting Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony is a magnificent experience, but Szell is not, well, Beethoven writing the Fifth.

With Mike Leigh’s film, he is essentially conducting his own score, one auteur vision by an experienced filmmaker, a steady and amusing quietude as [J.M.W. Turner](#) paints his way from one setting to another in this two-and-a-half-hour art form filmed in the tradition of the French New Wave of the 1950s and ’60s. And as such Mike Leigh did a fine job.

I suspect he already knows that, considering that “Mr. Turner” competed for the [Palme d’Or](#) at the 2014 Cannes Film Festival and garnered the [Best Actor award](#) for the lead role of [J.M.W. Turner](#) played delightfully by British actor Timothy Spall.



Lead actor Timothy Spall.

Additionally, Mr. Turner’s cinematographer Dick Pope won the Vulcan Award, aka Prix Vulcain de l’Artiste Technicien, at the Cannes festival for his dark and brooding candle-lit interiors inviting one into the mood of the early 1800s.

Spall’s cartoonish mug is incontrovertibly stamped with his continuing Harry Potter role of the wizard Peter Pettigrew, aka Wormtail. But in “Mr. Turner” he plays such a singular and subdued character his other endeavors are soon forgotten and he wins the audience quickly.

Spall’s singular repartee for all “Mr. Turner” action is a throaty grunt that kept the large Sag Harbor audience in stitches: e.g. “Your painting looks lovely.” Grunt. “Your daughter passed on.” Grunt. And so on. Whether [J.M.W. Turner](#) actually served up this mannerism is not known but it is an effective device to show an artist in love with his craft at the expense of social engagement.

Much of the film shows a tender relationship between Turner and his Chelsea landlord Sophia Booth, played involingly by the actress Marion Bailey. Turner starts out using only his partial name Mallord with her in order to remain incognito. This works for a bit, but then Turner is recognized by a local doctor and the cat is out of the bag. He remained with her until the end of his life.



Still from Mr. Turner.

Turner was popular at the time and many scenes show the gentry of the day paying homage to him, but later in the play, sadly, his work and his methods are ridiculed in a stage play in which the actors toss jellied bakery goods at a canvas.

Near the end of this long film Turner makes his way into a storefront photography portrait studio and in a spunky scene examines this new invention called a camera. The young staff knows nothing of his old man's reputation and hurries him through the session with their massive technical camera aimed at a seat with a brass head-clasp to keep the subject still.

The photographer opens the shutter, belts a 10-second bar of some aria, and then closes the aperture with a perky "I am finished." A stunned Turner stares at this painter's-craft replacement and says, "And so am I."

BASIC FACTS: "Mr. Turner" (2014), written and directed by Mike Leigh; featuring Timothy Spall, Paul Jesson and Dorothy Atkinson, 150 min.