I'd saw off a finger for a night with Scarlett Johannson, who co-stars with Hugh Jackman in the new film "The Prestige". Figuring The Scarlett Factor would make this film worth seeing, we dispatched the talented Mitch Cyrus to the theater to review it. Was it any good? Mitch provides the 411.

LeBron James has been known to miss a shot every now and then. Despite Tiger Woods' recent stretch of victories, golf's greatest player doesn't always win. On occasion, Peyton Manning throws an interception. So in that context, British director extraordinaire Christopher Nolan should not be lambasted too badly if he were to have a let down in quality following such superb movies as "Momento", "Insomnia", and "Batman Begins".

In other words, I won't be skewering him as mercilessly as I did M. Night Shyamalan after "Lady in the Water", even though Nolan has created one of the worst movies I've seen this year in the predictable yawn-fest "The Prestige", a film about magic that has zero cinematic magic of its own, only some old tricks and stale treats. When the inclusion of Scarlett Johansson can't even generate sizzle, you know you're in trouble.

Christian Bale and Hugh Jackman portray rival magicians in turn of the century Victorian London, with Michael Caine serving as their mentor while they first toil away as assistants to a well known (but over-the-hill) illusionist (real life magician/actor Ricky Jay, in an inspired bit of cameo casting). There is little respect, and certainly no friendship between the British Borden (Bale) and the American Angier (Jackman), but the hatred really kicks in after Bale causes and accident involving Jay's assistant Julia, who happens to be Angier's wife.

From that point forward, there is two hours of “can you top this?” revenge between the two men. Borden gets married and starts putting on his own stage show when Angier shows up in disguise as the proverbial “member of the audience brought forward to assist” and manages to maim Borden, who later shows up onstage to return the favor to Angier, not harming him, but causing a trick to fail and an innocent bystander to be hurt in front of hundreds.

Despite these failures, idiotic promoters in London still seem to be OK with hiring them again. Consequently Borden comes up with an amazing new stunt, “The Teleported Man”, in which he steps into one door, and almost immediately steps out of another twenty feet away. Angier is obsessed with the trick, and with the help of Caine, comes up with a version of his own involving a double. While Borden is said to be the superior magician, Angier is a superior showman, and consequently his “New Teleported Man” becomes the hit of London. That is, until Borden screws it up for him once again, causing Angier to head to Colorado Springs to seek out a mad scientist who may be able to reveal Borden’s secrets to him.

The casting of the mad scientist and his assistant is the best thing this entire movie has going for it, as David Bowie shines as the Hungarian genius Tesla, with Andy Serkis not once slipping in a “Gollum!” as his hard drinking helper.

Alas, the rest of the cast are unable to break through the stilted script to show their true abilities. Johansson is completely wasted as the magician groupie who ends up bedding both of the protagonists. Her character is given no opportunity to show why she is attracted to them and we learn nothing about her past or her personality, other than her desire to have sex with performers. Worse yet is that there is zero chemistry between her and either Bale or Jackman. Nolan has these two men shown as so obsessed with their illusions and their hatred of one another that nothing else is allowed to come through. In fact, had either of these magicians spent half the energy towards their craft as they did towards finding ways to thwart the other, they would have far exceeded anything ever done by Houdini.

Having one Captain Ahab careening downward due to his lust for revenge can be an

interesting exercise in character study; having two of them do it becomes tedious to watch, as you really can't find anything worth rooting for in either of them. Sure, Angier is sympathetic for awhile as he mourns his wife, but given how quickly he falls in the bed of Olivia (Johansson) and how callously he discards her; you question how much capacity for emotion the man really has. Borden, on the other hand, is openly cold most of the time towards his wife and seemingly uncaring about her depression concerning his affair. When there is no real insight into the psyche of an obsessed man, there is no way to truly understand and identify with him.

In a movie such as this, the keys are in maintaining a good mystery, believable characters, and an ending that will make you go "Whoa!", while you start going back in your mind as to the plausibility of it all. Nolan has failed on all three. It was obvious five minutes into the movie what the conclusion would be, and the continued flashbacks did nothing but affirm those first impressions. As already discussed, the characters were one-dimensional and unsympathetic. And then to top it off, the big "gotcha" at the end was lazy, completely illogical, and a total cop-out; a last second effort for Nolan to change genres from a Victorian murder mystery to something more in the realm of science fiction that did nothing but muddle the entire film.

I am a big fan of Christopher Nolan's previous work, and I still have high hopes that "The Dark Knight", the 2008 follow up to "Batman Begins", will be just as dark, edgy, and excellent as the first. He gets a mulligan from me. "Hook" was not enough of an abomination to damage the reputation of Steven Spielberg, so I doubt this debacle will do irreparable harm to Nolan.

My Rating: Jeff Garcia (1 football)

Review Key:

Otto Graham: Over 4 Footballs. HOF quality movie

Bernie Kosar: 4 Footballs. Excellent

Brian Sipe: 3 ½ Footballs. Very Good

Frank Ryan: 3 Footballs. Good, solid film.

Bill Nelsen: 2 ½ Footballs. OK. Worth seeing at the theater.

Kelly Holcomb: 2 Footballs. Disappointingly inconsistent but some bright spots. Rent it on DVD.

Tim Couch: 1 ½ Footballs. Poor. Had potential, but lack of support led to an overall stinker.

Jeff Garcia: 1 Football. Horrible. All hype; no performance.

Mike Phipps: ½ Football. “We gave away Paul Warfield for THIS?” level of suck

Spergon Wynn: No Footballs. UberSuckitude personified.