

The Prestige

USA/UK 2006

130 mins

Crew and Cast

Director	Christopher Nolan
Screenplay	Jonathan Nolan Christopher Nolan
Cinematography	Wally Pfister
Robert Angier	Hugh Jackman
Alfred Borden	Christian Bale
Cutter	Michael Caine
Olivia Wenscombe	Scarlett Johansson
Tesla	David Bowie

Synopsis

London, the 1890s. Alfred Borden and Robert Angier are apprentice and audience plants working for a magician whose illusions are designed by the *ingenieur* Cutter. When Angier's wife drowns on stage during a stunt, he blames Borden and resolves to avenge her death. Some years later, Borden and Angier are arch rivals on the magic circuit. Angier, aided by Cutter, is a flashy showman playing big halls. Borden is the better magician, but has little stage presence and performs at less glamorous venues. Borden marries Sarah, and has a daughter. Adopting disguises, the two men disrupt each other's shows and their respective acts of sabotage become ever more deadly....

Extract from Sight & Sound, Dec'06



Nolan directs the film exactly like a great trick, so you want to see it again the second it's over. I'd call that wicked clever

PETER TRAVERS
Rolling Stone.com



Reviews

There are few more enjoyable experiences in the cinema than seeing a director make a highly promising first feature and rapidly follow it up with something truly accomplished - Martin Scorsese's *Mean Streets* coming a mere few months after *Boxcar Bertha*, for example, Neil Jordan going straight on from *Angel* to the extraordinary *The Company of Wolves* and, at the cusp of the century, Christopher Nolan proceeding directly from the shoestring *Following* to the mesmeric *Memento*.

Nolan kept up the momentum with *Insomnia* and *Batman Begins*, the one a Hollywood remake of a Norwegian film, the other a revival of a franchise. In both, he pursues themes from the earlier movies that continue to preoccupy him in his outstanding new picture, *The Prestige*, among them the nature of time and perception, dangerous rivalries and serious game-playing between men and the changing, doubling and questioning of identities.

In *The Prestige*, which is co-scripted by Nolan and his brother Jonathan from a novel by Christopher Priest, the rivals are stage magicians in late Victorian London, Robert Angier (Hugh Jackman), a smooth American, and Alfred Borden (Christian Bale), a rough-hewn cockney. We first see them together dressed as working men planted in the audience to be brought on stage to assist a magician performing a trick that involves a woman being bound with ropes and locked in a glass box filled with water.

Their employer is, in fact, the celebrated real-life illusionist Ricky Jay, a regular collaborator of David Mamet, a writer fascinated by confidence trickery. The woman in the act is Angier's wife. In a voice-over commentary, Cutter (Michael Caine), an elderly deviser of magic equipment and a respectful, very knowing artisan among artists, explains that a magic performance unfolds in three stages. The first is 'the Pledge', wherein we're shown something; the second, 'the Turn', centres on a disappearance; in the climactic third part, 'the Prestige' (a term deriving from prestidigitation, but also implying respect and admiration), a person or object is miraculously brought back, leaving the audience stunned and delighted.

This sequence of events informs the structure of the film as well as the tricks, the most significant of which is known as 'the Transported Man'. Angier and Borden come to have different, competing versions of this legendary trick. The two men begin as friends, then, when an act goes lethally wrong, they become rivals and increasingly deadly enemies. The movie beautifully creates the world of stage illusion and the workshops in which the tricks are created, as well as looking at the ethos, the ethics and the ambitions of the performers.

Angier is a second-rate magician, but a brilliant showman; Borden is a magician of genius, but poor at presenting himself. Their relationship in some ways resembles that between Salieri and Mozart in *Amadeus*. The rivalry drives both men towards acts of madness and the film asks what it is that produces this urge to deceive and to puzzle, and why the public delights in being manipulated, fooled and astonished.

The film is immaculately assembled with magnificently stylised sets by production designer Nathan Crowley, acute editing by Lee Smith and wonderfully atmospheric but wholly unaffected photography by Wally Pfister. They've all previously collaborated with Nolan, in Pfister's case on all his pictures since *Following*, which Nolan himself photographed.

Philip French, The Observer, Nov'06