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THE OUTSIDERS

"Wild" and "Mr. Turner."



By David Denby

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Reese Witherspoon stars in "Wild," adapted from the book by Cheryl Strayed. Illustration by Chang Park

“Wild” opens with a shot of majestic forested mountains and the sound of a woman breathing harder and harder, as if in sexual excitement. The woman, however, turns out to be a hiker, Cheryl Strayed (Reese Witherspoon), with a huge pack on her back, laboring to reach an exposed high place. When she gets there, she takes off her too-small boots, to reveal blackened toenails that are painfully loose. One of the boots falls into a canyon, and, with a curse, she throws the other after it. “Wild” is based on Strayed’s autobiographical best-seller, published in 2012, seventeen years after her arduous trek, which she reconstructed in punishing and exhilarating detail. Her mother died in 1991, and Strayed, grief-stricken and lost, cheated on her devoted husband (played by Thomas Sadoski in the film), and, with one lover, fell into a heroin haze. In 1995, she walked eleven hundred miles, through desert, bush, and snowy mountains, from Mojave, California, to the Oregon-Washington border. Each stopping place in the wilderness is a kind of marker along the road to redemption. Sweating and freezing, Cheryl wants to expunge loss and self-disgust from her soul. The suggestion of sex at the start is part of the movie’s candid tone. One of the things that make Cheryl more complicated and compelling than the heroine of “Tracks” (this year’s earlier woman-schlepping-across-the-desert movie) is that, along the trail, she experiences every encounter with men as fraught with erotic possibility—or trepidation. (She has one happy meeting with a sinewy young man played by the Dutch actor Michiel Huisman.) “Wild” is about the renewal of self, but it’s a film made without sanctimony or piety.

The English screenwriter and novelist Nick Hornby (“About a Boy”) adapted the book for the movie, which was directed by the French-Canadian Jean-Marc Vallée (“Dallas Buyers Club”). Both men know that narrative art lives in small details woven through large emotions. Cheryl’s throwing the second shoe over the side suggests defiance and a willingness to endure pain and humiliation. (She makes shoes out of sandals and duct tape, which produce blister upon blister.) Vallée focusses on the hiker’s obsession with the profound materiality of her

existence—not just heat, rain, cold, snakes, and tiny crawling creatures but the complicated paraphernalia of food, water, stove, tent, animal-scaring whistle, and whatnot, all of which has to be packed and unpacked daily. Inexperienced Cheryl is as overloaded as a nineteenth-century American grand tourist embarking for Europe with too many steamer trunks.

In photographs, Cheryl Strayed looks like a big-bodied woman, but Reese Witherspoon stands barely more than five feet, and when she first tries to pull on her monster pack it forces her to the ground. (The pack becomes something like a malevolent object in a Chaplin comedy.) Witherspoon doesn't have the muscular legs of a hiker, but she has a determined set to her jaw. From the beginning, with her startling performance as a ruthless high-school girl in "Election" (1999), she has played unstoppable young women. Her pink-candy-box period—the two "Legally Blonde" movies—turned her all-conquering will into a profitable joke. But she has dropped that sort of calculation and, in addition to acting, become a formidable producer (she's part of the team that made "Gone Girl"). Here she's a good actress playing an intelligent, well-read, ambitious, but screwed-up woman.

Strayed is enmeshed in literature, and her skillfully structured adventure tale is more expressive than the film. She keeps a journal, and the entries, as well as chance encounters, set off memories in the movie of her extraordinary mother (Laura Dern), her husband, and various other men. The memories flash by in mostly short scenes—sometimes a montage of single shots—and the device, which tries to keep us inside Cheryl's head, becomes tiresome and far less satisfying than Strayed's more sustained written recollections. The scenery, of course, could stop the heart of a mountain goat, and "Wild" has an admirable heroine, but the movie itself often feels literal-minded rather than poetic, busy rather than sublime, eager to communicate rather than easily splendid.

Watching Timothy Spall's performance as the finest of British painters, in Mike Leigh's "Mr. Turner" (opening December 19th), you can't help but think that Dickens is his most accurate portrait of ambivalent Englishness, even if

think that Dickens, in his many portraits of exuberant Englishmen, wasn't exaggerating. All the men in "Mr. Turner" bluster at one another, as if they were playing themselves onstage, but Spall outdoes everyone in heroic oddity and temper. The movie begins in 1826, when J. M. W. Turner, then fifty-one, is a famous man living a largely anonymous life. Sketchbook in hand, he walks alone and undisturbed along cliffs facing the sea, or in the Kentish port town of Margate, or in Holland, on a bluff, staring at the sun on the horizon. Spall has a small mouth that pulls up toward a shapeless nose, and eyes that are set close together, like those of a furtive animal. It's a face that repels examination; his Turner wants to see, not be seen—or heard. When he speaks, indistinct syllables emerge from his throat—a half-dozen varieties of grunt, snarl, and roar. Spall has played angry men before, but, except for a brief appearance as Churchill, in "The King's Speech," he hasn't played angry great men. Beneath the snarling, hooded temperament, intellectual curiosity and a wide range of sympathies seethe and, occasionally, breach the surface. "Mr. Turner" is a harsh, strange, but stirring movie, no more a conventional artist's bio-pic than Robert Altman's wonderful, little-seen film about van Gogh and his brother, "Vincent and Theo."

Like many such persons, Turner has an overwhelming desire to do exactly as he pleases. In his handsome but underdressed London house, he lives with his loving father and an adoring servant, whom he uses sexually, giving her not so much as a glance. Returning from a journey, he rushes to his studio in a back room and immediately sets to work. He sleeps in his clothes, makes art all day, wherever he is, and enjoys few pleasures. The bohemian scene doesn't exist for him. He has no special milieu except for a few aristocratic country houses, where he's an honored guest, and the Royal Academy, in London. He strides through its marble halls in a top hat, frock coat, and cravat, and challenges the other artists, including John Constable, with muttered remarks and such astonishing acts as disfiguring one of his own maritime paintings with a smudge of crimson. After disappearing for a while, he returns and wipes away half the wet paint, leaving a bobbing buoy. He later attacks a canvas like a proto Action painter. He stabs it with a brush, spits on

it, and speckles it with handfuls of powdery substances. His top hat affords him the reputation of a gentleman, disguising sheer aggression with respectability. But Mr. Turner is no gentleman.

Mike Leigh, whose "Topsy-Turvy" (1999) was an acridly entertaining portrait of Arthur Sullivan and W. S. Gilbert, never softens or explains. His people brush rudely past one another. The movie details, for instance, Turner's encounters with the impecunious painter Benjamin Haydon, whose large historical canvases were no longer in fashion (or very good, according to Dickens). Haydon comes off as a self-dramatizing hothead—no gentleman, either, and, worse, unlike Turner, he can't fake composure when necessary. Leigh features him, I think, in order to remind us that not all possessed artists possess genius. A resilient but tough-minded attitude toward life and art rules the movie. Many of the people we see seem to be ill, and the death of children is a constant. Against this early-Victorian gloom, Turner, a modern sun god, floods his canvases with light. Obsessed with the meeting of land and sea, he suffuses everything with an effulgence of white, yellow, and ochre, and blurs the outlines of solid objects with a squiggly brush and a rag, anticipating the work of the Impressionists. Leigh and the cinematographer, Dick Pope, show people looking at the paintings more than they show the paintings themselves, which was wise—the work doesn't reproduce well onscreen. What the filmmakers can do, however, is re-create, with hard clarity, what it was that Turner saw. They appear to be saying, "This is our way of looking. Photography is an art, too."

There's one sour note—the treatment of the critic John Ruskin, an early supporter of Turner's and a great man in his own right, who comes off as a petted, fatuous, self-important young exquisite. Turner humors him (Ruskin and his parents were buyers), says teasing things to his notoriously neglected wife at a dinner party, and snorts when he sees some delicate pre-Raphaelite pictures (influenced by Ruskin's writings) at the Royal Academy. The Ruskin portrayal is Leigh's way of putting down critics who reduce an artist's work to banal words. Yet Leigh, too, has had his share of appreciation by non-geniuses. I think I'll live. ♦

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