



Martha Marcy May Marlene

Sean Durkin

USA, 2010
English

103 minutes ■ Colour/35mm
Production Company: Borderline Films
Executive Producer: Ted Hope,
Matt Palmieri, Saerom Kim, Saemi Kim,
Alexander Schepsman
Producer: Josh Mond, Antonio Campos,
Chris Maybach, Patrick Cunningham
Screenplay: Sean Durkin
Cinematographer: Jody Lee Lipps
Editor: Zac Stuart-Pontier
Production Designer: Chad Keith
Sound: Coll Anderson
Music: Saunder Jurriaans, Danny Bens
Principal Cast: Elizabeth Olsen,
Christopher Abbott, Brady Corbet,
Hugh Dancy, Maria Dizzia, Julia Garner,
John Hawkes, Louisa Krause,
Sarah Paulson

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US Distributor: Fox Searchlight Pictures
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Rarely do American independent films carry themselves with as much grace as *Martha Marcy May Marlene*. Writer/director Sean Durkin's film, about a young woman's recovery from time spent in a sexual-religious cult (the subject of many an exploitation flick), is all the more special for resisting the demands of convention and genre. Durkin isn't especially interested in the lurid details, but rather the psychological motivations for her involvement with this substitute family. His attention to specific gestures and instances of vulnerability are impressive; even the inevitable moments of horror are handled with subtlety. Given Durkin's complex psychological relationship with his characters, as well as the film's focus on landscape as metaphor, one can't help but be reminded of early Terrence Malick.

Martha Marcy May Marlene begins with a young woman (Elizabeth Olsen), known by all four of these names at different stages of the film, struggling to escape from cult life and readjust to normality in the lakeside cottage of her self-involved sister (Sarah Paulson). Vaguely chronological flashbacks to her time in the cult punctuate her incomplete and disturbed recovery. Scenes from Martha's recent past have a luminous quality that suggests happy memories, but life in the cult is anything but easy: hard labour in the fields, forced sex with the cult leader and a gnawing need to belong compound her confusion. When her surrogate family is forced to engage in criminal activity, she begins to prepare herself for a break, but the cult just won't vanish from her life.

A special actress is needed to reflect Martha's tides of conflicting emotion. Olsen, in her auspicious debut, is all that and more, while John Hawkes gives an award-calibre turn as Patrick, the charismatic cult leader. Another notable performance comes from Brady Corbet as Watts, the young man who recruits Martha and becomes her erstwhile companion. Corbet was one of the exceptional young actors in Gregg Araki's *Mysterious Skin*, and his evocation of lost innocence in *Martha Marcy May Marlene* seems to build upon that prescient film.

■ Noah Cowan



Sean Durkin attended the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University. He has directed the short films *Doris* (06) and *Mary Last Seen* (10). *Martha Marcy May Marlene* (11) is his first feature.

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