

Review: Tar is a Caricature of a Woman with Power



by Phyllis Chesler

Warning: this movie review contains spoilers.

At first, *Tar* demands too much of the viewer. It opens with a black screen on which barely visible screen credits go on and on accompanied by a painfully high and tuneless (perhaps Asian or atonal) song as sung by a female voice. The film is also purposely dark, hard to view, ultimately without any bright colors—and then suddenly, we see the fiercely brilliant, famous, and multi-talented conductor, Lydia Tar, played by Cate Blanchett, being interviewed by the *New Yorker*. They are talking insider talk; if the viewer is not a classical music aficionado, even an expert, the scores, performances, histories, pieces referred to may be completely unknown. The viewer is made to feel like a complete outsider. The viewer is bored silly and/or made to feel like an idiot. Or, is supposed to feel reverence for

all that which she cannot understand. Chalk one up for postmodernist Mandarins.

I was watching this at home with a friend, a film buff, who looked very unhappy and who left after eighty minutes.

But, the moment it became clear to me that Tár was an out lesbian, I vowed to stay with the film until I learned how they bring her down. The plot is no different than Radcliffe Hall's novel, "The Well of Loneliness," Lillian Hellman's play "The Children's Hour," or the film, "The Killing of Sister George." One wonders why the director, Todd Field, with so many Academy Award nominations, and who also penned the screenplay, felt compelled to tell this story and why the film has already received so many accolades. True, Blanchett is a wonderful actress and her performance here is stellar.

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Is it still true that no mere woman can be forgiven...her arrogance? Is being born female, even if you are a genius, especially if you are recognized as such, by definition, a punishable offense?

It is not clear if Tár used her position to demand sexual favors from her subordinates just as her male colleagues routinely do. She may have done so. For example, she follows a young, new Russian cellist, Olga, in an inappropriate and dangerous way—Olga has left a small teddy bear behind in Tár's car and she is most improbably trying to return it in a very dangerous neighborhood—but even here, as she pursues her fancy, the great conductor literally falls flat on her face, bloodying herself. She is immediately punished. However, satisfying her lust is not what leads to her downfall.

Rather, it is her coldness, and the fact that she wields her

power with cruelty. (“Unsex me here” as Lady Macbeth once said) defines Tár’s character. This is what does her in. She is not “feminine,” or maternal to anyone other than to her wife, Sharon, and their young daughter.

In an early scene Tár shames a conducting student for his “woke” views—he identifies as a BIPOC and rejects Bach as a white misogynist. He is ridiculous—and Tár’s long, drawn-out mockery drives him out of her Master class. Later on, she demotes or dismisses a long time orchestra member, Sebastian, because he is no longer as good as she needs him to be. Tár upholds very high standards which is her absolute right and yet, her exercise of power is not forgivable.

Here’s what really gets her into trouble. She has written letters to every possible orchestra about one of her former female conducting students which, in effect, destroy that student’s career. Tár refuses to take the desperate student’s calls, refuses to see her, or to respond to her emails. That student kills herself. Lydia Tár deletes her former student’s every email together with all the emails that she wrote which doomed her career. Tár asks her assistant, Francesca, to do likewise. But she does not make sure that she’s done so.

Thus, when the Genius Conductor also refuses to promote Francesca (who has neither deleted the desperate student’s emails nor Tár’s own damning emails), Francesca suddenly resigns and disappears. Shortly thereafter, the lawyers come to call. The girl who killed herself has parents and they are suing Tár and creating a scandal.

Unbelievably, Tár loses her position as the principal conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic. In response, she wildly appears, mid-performance, or mid-rehearsal and starts beating the more inferior male conductor Eliot, in full view of the orchestra.

Soon enough, her marriage is over, she cannot see her young daughter, and she is reduced to conducting in some backwater at the ends of the earth.

None of this is realistic. Tár herself is not realistic. And, we do not “like” her. We barely know her. She is a caricature of a woman with power. Well, I did enjoy the merciful bars of soaring music contained in this film. More Mahler, say I.

One wonders what is the director’s point? That being monstrously cold while female or exercising one’s artistic standards while lesbian is a crime? Is this meant to be seen as a politically correct defense of lesbianism? If so, Field has certainly taken the long road home in this edgy, disquieting, “artistic” film.

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