

Power of the Dog [12A]

2021, UK/Canada, 126 mins

UK release date **19 November 2021**

Director **Jane Campion**

Screenplay **Jane Campion, based on the novel by Thomas Savage**

Cinematography **Ari Wegner**

Cast **Benedict Cumberbatch (Phil); Kirsten Dunst (Rose); Jesse Plemons (George); Kodi Smit-McPhee (Peter)**

A film as elusive and mysterious as its title*, Jane Campion's *The Power of the Dog* is a beguiling entity. Though its protagonists are men, which is a rare focus for Campion, *The Power of the Dog* contains within it many of the director's usual fascinations.

Repression gives way to risky expression of desire; sublimated truths burble out in seemingly random patterns, causing characters to behave erratically.

The Power of the Dog unfolds in 1920s Montana, mostly on the property managed by the Burbank brothers: gruff Phil (Benedict Cumberbatch) and soft-spoken, gentler George (Jesse Plemons). Phil, who occupies the center of the film, is a cruel man with a hurt in his eyes, the kind of tightly coiled wreck who might break out in sudden violence, or in tears.

Any innate harshness we may see in Cumberbatch the actor is used in service of Phil's anger at the world—made all the more vicious when George takes up with a local restaurant worker, Rose (Kirsten Dunst), and marries her. What is it about Rose, or his brother's happiness, that seems to tear at Phil so?

When Rose's son Peter (Kodi Smit-McPhee) comes to stay on the ranch on his summer break from medical school, Campion's film seems to crouch in anticipation, or to hold its breath as it waits for something to crack or ignite or burst. As she did in *The Piano*, here Campion takes a blunt but holistic approach to the sexuality of older times, assessing its restrictions, allowances, and understandings. The way Peter is treated by the ranch hands, all cowed acolytes of Phil's, is terribly sad—and terrifying, too.

But the film is not pursuing moral lessons, nor is it attempting to assess the past from the more enlightened vantage point of the present. Instead, Campion

remains present in the immediate danger, and in the erotic tension. Smit-McPhee and Cumberbatch have a peculiar rapport, one that Campion gracefully lets develop without any indicating or prodding from behind the camera.

As Peter and Phil do their wary thing, poor Rose unravels, lonely and bored and maybe even a little frightened out there in the middle of nowhere with all these swaggering men. Dunst plays that heartbreak well, never turning Rose into a pathetic sad sack but certainly making plain her desperation.

If *The Power of the Dog* has any one big theme, it might simply be the tragedy, and beauty, of how inner lives wrestle with outward appearances and poses. Compromises are made, needs and desires sublimated, all to get on with the business of living. But Campion doesn't drive any message or meaning home so much as she deftly, unnervingly captures a mood: of a hardscrabble past, of fear and loneliness, and of the invisible churns of lust and shame. While the core narrative is plenty compelling in all its creeping dread and curiosity, *The Power of the Dog* is not too concerned with being about any one thing. The film's secrets are revealed while new ones bloom into being.

*Psalms 22, v. 20: "Deliver my soul from the sword, my darling from the power of the dog".

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