



**BOWIE: STARMAN AND THE SILVER SCREEN**

# The Prestige

Christian Bale and Hugh Jackman play rival master magicians on the late-19th-century stage, each competing to outdo the other both professionally and in their private lives. Director Christopher Nolan petitioned Bowie to play the role of Nikola Tesla as he couldn't imagine anyone else as the physicist, engineer and innovator. An enigma, playing an enigma.

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Every great magic trick consists of three acts, Cutter (Michael Caine), an ingeneur – the technician who designs and manufactures stage illusions – tells us near the start of Christopher Nolan's film of Christopher Priest's novel *The Prestige*. 'The first act is called the Pledge: the magician shows you something ordinary, but of course... it probably isn't. The second act is called the Turn: the magician makes his ordinary something do something extraordinary. Now, if you're looking for the secret... you won't find it. That's why there's a third act called the Prestige. This is the part with the twists and turns, where lives hang in the balance, and you see something shocking you've never seen before.' Film stories, according to the conventional wisdom of scriptwriting guru Robert McKee, also consist of three acts – and Nolan exactly replicates the anatomy of a magic trick in his telling of this tale.

The press materials for the film are prefaced by a 'special note to journalists'. '*The Prestige* is a mystery structured as a cinematic magic trick. In order to allow audiences to fully enjoy the unfolding of the story, the filmmakers respectfully ask that you not reveal too much about the deceptions at the heart of the film.' I rarely think of myself as a journalist, but I do consider that polite 'respectfully' confers on anyone writing before the release an obligation to honour the filmmakers' wishes – even if Priest's book, first published in 1995, is readily available.

'You shouldn't read it before you see the film,' Nolan told *Empire* magazine. 'It spoils everything!' Priest might respond that the same holds true the other way round, though the director wasn't seriously trying to dissuade anyone from reading the novel – this is not a film adaptation that attempts to obliterate or make redundant the original work. Since *The Prestige* is a story that needs to be gone back over, to see if author or director/screenwriter have 'played fair', knowing the story from one medium shouldn't adversely affect your enjoyment of it in another. The experience of seeing the film after reading the book or vice versa is much like returning a second time to identify the moments where sleight-of-hand is most deftly practised. Misdirection, vitally important to stage magic, is not only the subject of *The Prestige*, but an essential ingredient in the way Priest and Nolan tell the story.

Omitting the novel's modern-day frame, Nolan opens his film with an image we might take to be surrealist/symbolic but which later turns out to have a logical (if fantastical) explanation: a mountainside in Colorado strewn with top hats, that most archetypal of magicians' props. The novel consists, in the 19th-century manner of Wilkie Collins or Bram Stoker, of interlocked memoirs and diary extracts – and one of its most cunning elements is the occasional inconsistency in the characters' voices, which calls the attributed authorship

of some chapters into question (though, it should be noted, nobody actually lies). The film simplifies this to a set of mirrored circumstances whereby lifelong rival magicians Robert (formerly Rupert) Angier aka The Great Danton (Hugh Jackman) and Alfred 'Freddy' Borden aka The Professor (Christian Bale) come into possession of each other's private diaries and pore over them in the hope of learning the secrets of the one great illusion on which their careers (and lives) have been founded.

Much of the story unfolds in a set of bracketed flashbacks that make Nolan's *Memento* (2000) seem straightforward, yet in fact are seldom confusing. Borden is in jail, condemned to hang for Angier's murder – though it seems his attempt to discern his rival's secret merely led him to be present at Angier's accidental drowning in a Houdini-style water-filled cabinet – when he reads Angier's journal. Earlier, Angier is given Borden's diary by Olivia (Scarlett Johansson), the assistant/lover he has sent to spy on his rival. At crucial moments, both readers are surprised by journal entries addressed directly to them when they believe the writer couldn't know the diaries would fall into their hands.

To delve further into the story would be to risk violating the 'special note', so the rest of this summary is necessarily coy. Suffice to say, the doppelgangers Angier and Borden commit parallel crimes and suffer parallel losses throughout, each paying an appalling price to maintain their secrets.

Christian Bale is well cast as the serious, ingenious Borden, while the breezy but inwardly boiling Angier is cannily tailored to Hugh Jackman's slightly too-slick charm. A conventional Hollywood development exec might object that there's no one to root for: though Bale and Jackman never entirely lose our sympathy, their characters are monsters whose sole redemption comes in the revelation that each is willing to inflict grievous harm upon himself to achieve the illusion he needs for his act. Angier and Borden double each other, and are surrounded by doubles (two ingeneurs, two suspended wives, two onstage shadows); when, as in the assistant Olivia or Borden's angelic daughter Jess (Samantha Mahurin), no actual double is available, they share – at the expense of tearing the third party in two (sawing a woman in half may not be part of their stage acts, but they habitually practise the stunt in private). The sole unique individual is the real-life inventor Nikola Tesla (a brilliantly cast, near-unrecognisable David Bowie). As the ingeneur, Caine even doppelgangs his *Batman Begins* role as Bruce Wayne's butler Alfred, stalwartly supportive of his master Angier but trying in vain to keep him grounded in sanity.

The central irony of *The Prestige* is that it is a story about a man spurred to break the laws of physics because he can't see how a rival is uniquely equipped to pull off an illusion that turns out to be almost insultingly simple. Christopher Priest is best known as a science-fiction writer, and elements of this plot evoke H.G. Wells' scientific romances (among Priest's novels is *The Space Machine*, a spirited pastiche of *The Time Machine* and *War of the Worlds*), specifically those dealing with impossible, transformative inventions. Borden's much envied 'Transported Man' effect – in which he steps into a cabinet on one side of the stage and seems to emerge from a similar cabinet on the other – could be achieved by using the teleportation device which has unfortunate side-effects in both Kurt Neumann and David Cronenberg's versions of *The Fly*. Certainly the huge, crackling device Tesla creates for Angier in his attempt to outdo his rival seems designed as a steampunk take on Cronenberg's telepod.

Canny audiences will probably tumble to the film's tricks and secrets a reel or so before confirmation comes along, but this is part of the strategy. We should be able to guess the answer to the puzzle, but not be confident of our solution until we see the what-really-happened montage that recaps the clues as the penny finally drops.

**Kim Newman, *Sight & Sound*, December 2006**

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#### **THE PRESTIGE**

*Directed by:* Christopher Nolan  
*©/Author/Presented by:* Touchstone Pictures, Warner Bros. Entertainment Corp.  
*Production Companies:* Newmarket Films, Syncopy  
*Executive Producers:* Charles J.D. Schlissel, Chris J. Ball, William Tyrer, Valerie Dean  
*Produced by:* Emma Thomas, Aaron Ryder, Christopher Nolan  
*Associate Producer:* Jordan Goldberg  
*Unit Production Manager:* Cristen Carr Strubbe  
*Production Supervisor:* Gregg Edler  
*Location Manager:* Russ Fega  
*Post-production Supervisor:* Nancy Kirhoffer, Teresa Kelly  
*1st Assistant Director:* Alan B. Curtiss  
*Script Supervisor:* Steven R. Gehrke  
*Casting:* John Papsidera  
*Screenplay:* Jonathan Nolan, Christopher Nolan  
*Based on the novel by:* Christopher Priest  
*Director of Photography:* Wally Pfister  
*Camera Operator (Additional):* Tony Gaudioz  
*Steadicam Operator:* Craig Fikse  
*Visual Effects:* Buf Compagnie  
*Special Effects Co-ordinator:* David Blitstein  
*Edited by:* Lee Smith  
*Production Designer:* Nathan Crowley  
*Art Director:* Kevin Kavanaugh  
*Set Designers:* Scott Zuber, Sally Thornton, Mark Lucero  
*Costume Designer:* Joan Bergin  
*Department Head Make-up:* Peter Robb-King  
*Department Head Hair:* Janice Alexander  
*Titles/Opticals:* Pacific Title  
*Music:* David Julyan  
*Orchestra Conducted by:* Blake Neely  
*Sound Designer:* Richard King  
*Sound Mixer:* Ed Novick  
*Re-recording Mixers:* Lora Hirschberg, Gary A. Rizzo  
*Supervising Sound Editor:* Richard King  
*Stunt Co-ordinator:* Rick Avery

#### **Cast**

Hugh Jackman (*Robert Angier*)  
Christian Bale (*Alfred Borden*)  
Michael Caine (*Cutter*)  
Scarlett Johansson (*Olivia Wenscombe*)  
Rebecca Hall (*Sarah*)  
Andy Serkis (*Alley*)  
Piper Perabo (*Julia McCullough*)  
David Bowie (*Nikola Tesla*)  
Roger Rees (*Owens*)  
Edward Hibbert (*Ackerman*)  
Ricky Jay (*Milton*)  
Samantha Mahurin (*Jess*)  
Daniel Davis (*judge*)  
Jim Piddock (*prosecutor*)  
Christopher Neame (*defender*)  
Mark Ryan (*captain*)  
Jamie Harris (*sullen warder*)  
Monty Stuart (*stagecoach driver*)  
Ron Perkins (*hotel manager*)  
J. Paul Moore (*Virgil*)  
Anthony Demarco (*boy*)  
Chao-Li Chi (*Chung Ling Soo*)  
Gregory Humphreys (*policeman*)  
John B. Crye (*voice*)  
W. Morgan Sheppard (*Merritt*)  
Sean Howse (*man*)  
Julie Sanford (*elegant lady*)  
Ezra Buzzington (*ticket hawker*)  
James Lancaster (*moderator*)  
Olivia Merg, Zoe Merg (*Jess as a toddler*)  
Johnny Liska (*scalper*)  
Russ Fega, Kevin Will (*men in hotel*)  
Christopher Judges (*burly stagehand*)  
James Otis (*blind stagehand 1*)  
Sam Menning (*blind stagehand 2*)  
Brian Tahash (*blind stagehand 3*)  
Scott Davis (*carriage driver*)  
Jodi Bianca Wise (*glamorous assistant*)  
Nikki Glick (*housekeeper*)  
Enn Reitel (*workman 1*)  
Clive Kennedy (*warder*)  
Robert Arbogast (*Leonard*)  
Chris Cleveland (*Will*)

USA/UK 2006©  
130 mins

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