The first thing that should be said here about SHUTTER ISLAND is that it’s not the consistently scarifying horror film that some of the ads are making it out as—and nor is it trying to be one. While there are plenty of creepy events and imagery scattered throughout its running time, here’s a movie that truly warrants description as a “psychological thriller”—no surprise coming from Martin Scorsese, a director who has always been just as interested, if not moreso, in tortured souls as in tortured bodies.

When he last visited genre territory with 1991’s CAPE FEAR remake, Scorsese changed the targets of Max Cady’s revenge from a squeaky-clean, all-American brood to the ultimate dysfunctional family, to the point where it eventually became difficult to feel for them. A more consistently sympathetic protagonist is SHUTTER ISLAND’s Teddy Daniels (Leonardo DiCaprio), a member of the U.S. Marshals who is first seen heaving into a toilet on a boat en route to the titular locale, located in the waters off Boston, in 1954, where he and new partner Chuck Aule (Mark Ruffalo) have been assigned to investigate the disappearance of an inmate at the Ashecliffe Hospital for the Criminally Insane.

Teddy regains his physical bearing when he reaches the island, but his psyche isn’t as stable. He’s tormented by visions of his dead wife Dolores (Michelle Williams) and the victims he encountered when, as an Army soldier, he helped liberate the Nazi death camp in Dachau. The latter experience means that it’s dislike at first sight when Teddy meets the German Dr. Naehring (Max von Sydow), one of the key staff under Dr. Cawley (Ben Kingsley), who gives Teddy and Chuck a tour of Ashecliffe and explains the situation. The vanished prisoner—er, patient was a mother who murdered her three children and appears to have vanished without a trace from her locked room within the highest-security of the facility’s three wards. The attempt to track her down will lead Teddy into a mystery that comes to encompass more ghosts from his past, plus the possibility of bizarre medical experiments, secret conspiracies, Cold War paranoia and visits to dark, dripping passageways, the local cemetery and its mausoleum, the imposing

cliffs at the edge of Shutter Island and the lighthouse beyond them—and oh yes, a good deal of the action takes place during a cataclysmic hurricane.

All the ingredients, in other words, are here for a wild, lurid Gothic ride, and Scorsese certainly doesn’t hold back. He unleashes the full bag of filmmaker’s tricks to create a modern, full-color (complete with brighter-than-natural blood), widescreen version of a vintage picture by admitted influence Val Lewton, with sudden, sharp camera moves and small, apparently intentional jump cuts to keep the audience on edge. As usual, Scorsese has marshaled sterling production values from his regular team of craftspeople, with impeccable cinematography by Robert Richardson, production design by Dante Ferretti and costumes by Sandy Powell, plus an eclectic and spooky assembly of music from the divergent likes of Gustav Mahler, György Ligeti, Krzysztof Penderecki, John Cage and Brian Eno. Thelma Schoonmaker’s editing is, for the most part, razor-sharp from scene to scene—though the movie as a whole could stand to be tightened up somewhat.

That’s because the longer the story (scripted by Laeta Kalogridis, adapting Dennis Lehane’s dense and twisty puzzle of a novel) goes on, the more it becomes clear where things are ultimately headed. As he plunges into the third act, Scorsese seems determined to plumb every nook and cranny of Teddy’s psyche at the expense of narrative economy, and at least one major revelation is both explained in dialogue and dramatized in flashback when either one or the other (probably the latter) would have sufficed. Nonetheless, DiCaprio holds the center throughout, his still-boyish looks adding to the vulnerability of a man struggling to submerge his insecurities beneath an authority-figure exterior. Ruffalo, as the one guy he can trust on this assignment, offers a fine sounding board and welcome levity, Kingsley and von Sydow evoke just the right amounts of empowerment and suspicion and Williams allows Teddy’s deceased beloved to become fully alive in his eyes. Making strong impressions in smaller roles are the impeccably cast likes of Emily Mortimer, Patricia Clarkson, John Carroll Lynch, Ted Levine, Elias Koteas, actor/HOME MOVIE director Christopher Denham and Jackie Earle Haley, whose sole but lengthy pivotal scene opposite DiCaprio promises great things from his Freddy Krueger.

SHUTTER ISLAND effectively raises the hackles at moments like this, but Scorsese’s endgame isn’t to send the audience reeling from the theater in terror, but to leave them shaken from the personal tragedy at the story’s core. As such, Saturday-night thrillseekers may be a bit disappointed or nonplussed, while those who can get on the director’s wavelength will appreciate how he harks back to the virtues of a classic style of thriller-making. One thing’s for sure: His craft is so aggressive and unrelenting that nobody who sees SHUTTER ISLAND is likely to be bored.

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