

film review

[home](#) » [arts & entertainment](#) » [film review](#)

Sleight of Heart

By [Josef Woodard](#), August 23, 2006

***The Illusionist*. Edward Norton, Paul Giamatti, and Jessica Biel star in a film written by Neil Burger, based on the short story "Eisenheim the Illusionist" by Steven Millhauser, and directed by Burger.**

Reviewed by Josef Woodard

In his most famous performances, including *Primal Fear*, *American History X*, and *Fight Club*, Edward Norton has shown acting chops involving chilling layers of meaning, where edginess mixes with icy control. In *The Illusionist*, an enjoyable enough and nicely atmospheric diversion from the usual August movie slump, Norton is more of a cool character throughout, relying on subtle facial expressions to get the job done. We keep expecting some of the impressive Norton-esque qualities to emerge.

But control is the essence of Norton's role here as a late 19th-century magician who seduces theaters full of people into suspending disbelief. Control is also embedded in the making of this film, a moody fairytale about deception, mind games, and the lengths one goes for love. On another interesting level, the film deals with the historical and cultural transition zone of fin de siècle Vienna, the time of Freud, Mahler, Klimt, and collisions of reason and new mysticism.

This doesn't mean, however, that the film extends much energy in the way of historical accuracy or assiduous attention to accents, which waver between assorted modes of generic Euro speak. Director Neil Burger, who also adapted Steven Millhauser's original short story for the screen, is mostly after capturing a mood, setting up a twister ending, and wallowing in a filmic trick or two.

Playing an investigator with allegiance to the crown prince as well as to justice, Paul Giamatti is the rational anchor in a story swirling with elusive, shady, and sometimes seemingly metaphysical characters. Norton's elusive illusionist is, at root, driven by a longstanding love for a woman above his station (Jessica Biel), whose romantic link to Vienna's crown prince is an obstacle to overcome, by whatever quasi-mystical means necessary.

Elements of dramatic energy and empathy seem lacking, yet the film's strongest suit may be sensory: between Dick Pope's elegant and evocative cinematography that is matched to Philip Glass's effectively rippling, textural score (Glass's true calling, in the end, may be in film music), it's clearly a period piece thing. The film gives its actors a beautiful stage on which to operate, if coolly — as if recognizing that, in magic, the setup is as important as the punch line.