

Acropolis Cinema
presents:



October 16-22, 2020 - Acropolis Virtual Cinema

ABOUT THE FILM

Adapted from a 1909 novel by Jack London yet set in a provocatively unspecified moment in Italy's history, *Martin Eden* is a passionate and enthralling narrative fresco in the tradition of the great Italian classics. Martin (played by the marvelously committed Luca Marinelli) is a self-taught proletarian with artistic aspirations who hopes that his dreams of becoming a writer will help him rise above his station and marry a wealthy young university student (Jessica Cressy). The dissatisfactions of working-class toil and bourgeois success lead to political awakening and destructive anxiety in this enveloping, superbly mounted *bildungsroman*.

129 min. | Italy/France/Germany | 2019

Martin Eden by Manohla Dargis

The following article was originally published by the New York Times, October 15, 2020

The entirety of the 20th century — its promises, illusions and traumas — sweeps through the audacious and thrilling “Martin Eden.” An ingenious adaptation of the Jack London novel, the film follows its title character, a humble young man as he embarks on a program of self-improvement. Like a hero out of Horatio Alger, Martin strives to change and to advance. A voracious autodidact, he succeeds. But his rags-to-rich path with its hard work, perseverance and bourgeois education, proves far more complicated and finally more shattering than most upward-mobility fairy tales.

The story proper opens when Martin (a revelatory Luca Marinelli), a sailor, is still rough clay. He's a beautiful and raw masculine specimen, with a loose gait, an ominous scar under one eye and a nose that sits on his sculptured face like the prow of a ship. When he's not at sea, he lives with his sister and her family in a cheerless, suffocating house. On land, Martin seems penned in, but everything about him — his restless body, jutting chin, quick fists — suggests he's eager to break free. His opportunity comes when he rescues the son of a wealthy family from a thug.

Invited to the family's mansion, Martin is at once awed and seduced by its opulence; he hungrily studies an oil painting and leafs through a volume of Baudelaire. He also falls under the spell of the daughter, Elena (Jessica Cressy), who becomes interchangeable with her world. A wan, pretty avatar of the upper classes, Elena is physically droopy and given to dull pronouncements; she's educated just enough to think she knows better. She's been groomed for acquiescence, which makes Martin's wildness intriguing to her. More important, Elena ignites something in Martin — call it desire — that spurs him to transform into a man he thinks will be worthy of her.

The Italian director Pietro Marcello takes an inventive, excitingly irreverent approach to London's novel, which was published in 1909 to great critical censure. The book is a stunning heartbreaker, and Marcello — who transports this very American story to Italy — follows its sweep as he lingers on some of the milestones in Martin's transformational journey, his new friends and philosophies. The true miracle of this film is how Marcello translates both London's scabrous tone and his lush, character-revealing prose into pure cinema. Lines have been plucked from the novel, yet even at its wordiest, the film is never weighed down by the burden of faithfulness.

Marcello's boldest conceptual move is to blur the story's historical timeline, which he does through brilliant editing, a strategic use of archival footage and playing with the usual period cues. Cars change and the lengths of women's skirts shift, unsettling your sense of time. Soon after the film opens but before the young Martin is introduced, Marcello folds in silent-era newsreel images from 1920 of the anarchist and revolutionary Errico Malatesta amid an eager throng. The archival imagery suggests the story's time frame and nods at the larger historical forces at work as Martin rejects socialism to embrace an annihilating individualism.

These forces swirl and churn, ebbing and flowing as Martin continues on his quest for self-improvement. He studies and he learns, insatiably reading everything. Each exotic word and ravished book serves to close the gap between him and Elena, or so he believes. What he doesn't grasp is that all his knowledge — with its dizzying new words and implanted thoughts — only increases the distance between them. That's particularly true when Martin turns to writing. He buys a typewriter and pounds out stories that he fails to sell until he does, thereby rewriting his fate.

Touching and vaguely menacing, Martin looms like a colossus. He's such an overwhelming presence that it's a shock whenever he and Elena stand face to face and you remember he isn't a giant. Marcello lightly accentuates Martin's size using camera angles and other strategies: Martin is hovering over Elena when he announces he's going to write. For the most part, though, his bigger-than-lifeness comes from his feverish words ("I felt a creative spirit burning inside") and from a performance that can make it seem as if Martin were straining at the seams of his very being. His eyes bulge, his shoulders brace. He grows, he transforms, and then he invokes Nietzsche.

"Martin Eden" is an autobiographical artist's novel — "I was Martin Eden," London later wrote — and a didactic one. London was disappointed that critics didn't understand the indictment of individualism he advanced through Martin, whose existential condition incorporates philosophical arguments of the day. By transferring the story to the period between the two World Wars, however hazily, Marcello extends those arguments deeper into the century, sometimes to unnerving effect. Late in the story, after Martin's great and terrible success, he is toasted by a man whose bald head and loving talk of war suggest Mussolini in a scene that could have taken place yesterday.

By connecting the triumph of one man's individual will to fascism, Marcello turns Martin

into a time traveler. This Martin is an emissary from the past and a warning for the present. For a time, he is also a hugely attractive, magnetic figure whose power Marcello builds only to coolly dismantle. (Few filmmakers do as much with jump cuts as he does here.) It's easy to fall under Martin's spell, to gaze at him like Elena finally does. The genius of "Martin Eden" is that Marcello makes you fall in love with Martin only to reveal — as the hero's journey devolves into a devastating tragedy — how easily we are charmed by the charismatic man who has absolutely nothing to offer. ♦



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