

CLOSER (PUBLISHED IN RAVE MAGAZINE, BRISBANE)

Natalie Portman beat the favourite, Cate Blanchett, for the Best Supporting Actress Golden Globe, which is a strange irony considering Blanchett withdrew from Closer because of her pregnancy. She was to have played the part taken by Julia Roberts, who although good in the meaty role, is the weakest link.

Director Mike Nichols has specialised in films where savage relationships figure - Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf, The Graduate, Carnal Knowledge. In Closer, there are two central relationships which become entwined as partners stray and return with humorous and ultimately pathetic regularity.

Adapted by Patrick Marber's play, the film mixes gritty kitchen sink drama, confrontingly honest sexual politics and Hollywood glamour.

The first character we meet is Jude Law's - an obituary writer and aspiring novelist named Dan. While walking along a London street he encounters Alice (Portman). Next thing you know they're cohabiting.

There's a jump in time - a common device in the film - and Dan then meets Anna (Roberts) while having his photo taken for his now published book. The two are attracted to each other.

Lastly there's dermatologist Larry (Golden Globe winner Clive Owen), who ends up marrying Anna. But there's obviously something pulling Anna and Dan together.

Closer's stage roots are obvious, with not much effort made to make it particularly cinematic, but that won't bother those who relish an emotionally complex story that sizzles with brilliant and sometimes confronting dialogue.

While Clive Owen is stunning as the bitter Larry, it's the breakthrough adult performance of Natalie Portman that really impresses. She's quite a revelation as Alice and a scene between her and Owen in a strip club is gritty and powerful.

There's a melancholy angst in Closer that's quite claustrophobic, and towards the end you might feel thoroughly fed up with these self-indulgent, self-pitying characters.

The script however resists making moral judgements. People in relationships behave in ways that make them scratch their heads years later wondering how they could have been so stupid. In that sense, Closer is one of the most realistic films to be made in a long time.

Vicki Englund