

Chicago Daily Law Bulletin®

Volume 162, No. 241

Serving Chicago's legal community for 161 years

'Nocturnal Animals' effectively a movie within a movie

Tom Ford's film a visual stunner, but the intertwining plots don't always fit together

"Nocturnal Animals," the second feature film directed by Texas-born fashion designer Tom Ford and adopted by Ford from an Austin Wright novel, is a Russian nesting doll of cinematic ideas: Southern gothic terror embedded in noir romance, encrusted with lavish imagery.

Jake Gyllenhaal is Edward, a brooding, insecure writer who grew up in Texas with aspiring artist Susan (Amy Adams). The two reconnect in New York as graduate students and marry, notwithstanding Susan's mother (the marvelous Laura Linney) warning her that Edward is weak and she will grow to resent him.

Mother was right, and Susan ditches Edward to marry a handsome rich guy, Hutton (Armie Hammer), with predictable results.

Years later, Susan is a Los Angeles art dealer living in a futuristic concrete-and-glass

fortress. It is a splendid setting with a Jeff Koons Balloon Dog sculpture by the pool. But Susan is alone at night while her husband cavorts, unable to sleep as she ruminates her regrets. Lonely, lacking in confidence and racked with debt, one day out of the blue she receives a package from her ex, Edward. He has sent her the proofs of his new novel entitled "Nocturnal Animals." It is dedicated to her.

As Susan reads, the movie skips, cuts, and flashes back between Susan's past with Edward, her present with Hutton, and the "Deliverance"-style crime story of Edward's composition. Suddenly,



**REBECCA
L. FORD**

Rebecca L. Ford is counsel at Scharf Banks Marmor LLC, and concentrates her practice on complex litigation, compliance, board governance and specialized employment issues. She is the former executive vice president for litigation and intellectual property at MGM. She can be reached at rford@scharfbanks.com.

there are two films in one.

In the movie-within-a-movie, a man named Tony (also played by Gyllenhaal) drives through the night with his wife and daughter on an interminable west Texas road. They are on their way to visit Marfa, Texas, the desert art colony. The family is forced off the desolate road, then kidnapped and tormented by backcountry brutes.

Michael Shannon ("Boardwalk

Except for Shannon's performance, the action on the screen doesn't rise to match the movie's visual level.

Empire") delivers a stellar performance as the rogue sheriff, Bobby Andes, who eggs on Tony to seek revenge. Andes, both shaman and trickster, is menacing and off-kilter. He doesn't hesitate

to push Tony further into danger and we are never sure whether he will suddenly turn into the family's worst terrorist.

The power of this stylish, visually beautiful film (Seamus McGarvey is director of photography) is not the storytelling but the many artistic, literary and cinematic ideas it presents, sending one's mind off in directions that may or may not relate to the narrative.

Rather than an integrated body of work, the visuals, the love story and the crime story can almost be experienced separately. Except for Shannon's performance, the action on the screen doesn't rise to match the movie's visual level.

The optic feast stands apart as an extraordinary succession of images — like slides in an art lecture. The scenes of night terror are velvety in their darkness, characters abandoned in the desert are silhouetted by painterly skies, and powdery pink corpses are posed as reclining odalisques.

Director Ford said in an interview with The New York Times that by sending Susan the nightmarish manuscript, Edward is saying, "This is what you did to me. This is how it felt when you left me."

Perhaps. But the crime thriller is solid in a way that Susan's plotline can't equal. The two stories are essentially non sequiturs, like timber and gauze. Intertwining them, then lathering on luscious cinematography, doesn't resolve a fundamental lack of integration — it just gives one's mind a place to wander.