

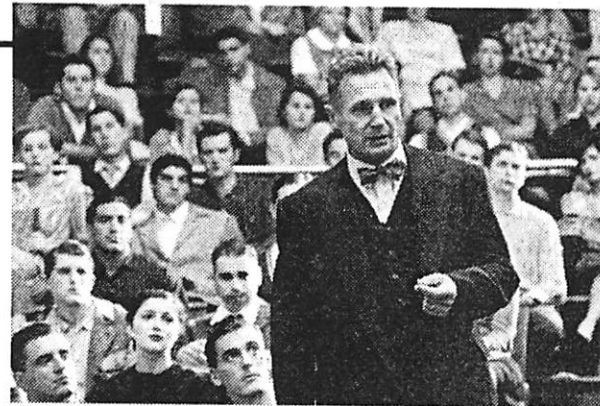
A. O. SCOTT

Studying Dr. Kinsey's Sex Life

NOT quite a movie star but too helplessly charismatic to be considered a character actor, Liam Neeson has proved unusually adept at playing half-forgotten figures, of various nationalities, from 20th-century history. His finest work to date has come in the roles of Oskar Schindler, the conscience-stricken Nazi in Steven Spielberg's "Schindler's List," and Michael Collins, the conflicted Irish freedom fighter in Neil Jordan's underrated revisionist epic of the same name. Now, in Bill Condon's "Kinsey" (Nov. 12), he will play a revolutionary of a decidedly different sort: Alfred C. Kinsey, the midcentury American sex researcher whose findings, first published in the best seller "Sexual Behavior in

the Human Male" in 1948, helped to bring sex out of the Victorian shadows and into the glare of the modern media.

Though Kinsey is no longer the household name he once was, his work — and his own rather adventurous sexual behavior — continue to exert a certain fascination. This fall, his life is the subject of a new novel by T. C. Boyle as well as Mr. Condon's film, and while the timing is no doubt coincidental, it is not hard to make a case for Kinsey's relevance at a time when the culture — or perhaps the whole species — seems more obsessed with, and more ambivalent about, human sexuality than ever. It's a bit of an overstatement to say that our world, where gay marriage is a topic of serious debate and



Liam Neeson as the sex researcher Alfred C. Kinsey.

pornography has become mainstream entertainment, is one that Kinsey made, but it is nonetheless tempting to wonder what he would make of it.

Kinsey's approach to sexuality was candid without being sensationalistic, a description that also fits "Gods and Monsters," Mr. Condon's earlier foray into screen biography. That film, for which he won a screenwriting Oscar in 1998, dealt with James Whale, the expatriate English filmmaker who brought Frankenstein to Hollywood. "Gods and Mon-

sters" is memorable for its performances — Ian McKellen at his witty, elegiac best as Whale, Brendan Fraser actually bothering to act as the young gardener who catches the old man's eye — and for its wry, acute insights into the complexities of erotic desire and creative ambition. If Mr. Condon can bring these qualities to the life of a man whose name was at once the punch line to 100 dirty jokes and a rallying cry in the culture wars, "Kinsey" should be a pleasure. □