

DVD Select: Ben Affleck's arrived with 'Gone Baby Gone'

by *Robert_J_Hawkins*

If movies best serve when they raise difficult questions and bring discomfort to the complacent, then "Gone Baby Gone" (Walt Disney, 4 stars) was one of the best serving movies of 2007.

'GONE BABY GONE' - John Ashton, Amy Ryan and Ed Harris star in the gritty thriller from Ben Affleck, 'Gone Baby Gone.' CNS Photo courtesy of Claire Folger. DVD RATINGS

4 stars: Don't miss: rent it/buy it

3 stars: Worth the risk: rent it

2 stars: On the tipping point: if nothing else is available

1 star: Don't bother: wait until it's in the \$1 bin Fans of Clint Eastwood's "Mystic River" will embrace "Gone Baby Gone." It revisits the same Boston blue-collar neighborhood and it is pulled from a novel by the same author, Dennis Lehane. And personally, as a one-time mill worker from the Boston area, I got chills encountering characters from my long-distant past. This film drips with authenticity.

A lot of that has to be attributed to actor and Boston native Ben Affleck, who makes a stunning debut as director.

As the movie begins, a child is missing in Dorchester and the whole neighborhood is in an uproar. The child's

mother, Helene McCready (Amy Ryan in a deservedly Oscar-nominated role), and her aunt, Bea McCready (Amy Madigan), have turned to the media, which is spinning the standard pitiful story of missing child, distraught relatives, determined cops and ratings-busting, beat-the-clock drama.

The relatives turn to a pair of private detectives to bolster the search by the cops. Patrick Kenzie (Casey Affleck) and Angie Gennaro (Michelle Monaghan) hardly look like private eyes. They are young, attractive and seemingly as green as the weeds popping up in the sidewalk cracks.

Looks are deceiving. (In this movie, everything is deceiving.) Patrick in particular, despite his baby face and sweet demeanor, is a product of this very neighborhood. In a flash, all the street anger and barbarity rushes to the surface and he's suddenly as capable of killing a man as the next Southie sod.

Casey Affleck, Ben's younger brother, is up for a supporting actor Oscar for his role as Robert Ford in "The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford," but if the year's body of work is considered by voters, "Gone Baby Gone" ought to make him a shoo-in.

Patrick and Angie are paired up with a couple of hardened veteran Boston detectives Remy Bressant (Ed Harris) and Nick Poole (John Ashton) by the crusading head of the missing children division, Capt. Jack Doyle (Morgan Freeman). The cops, needless to say, are none too happy at first.

Patrick's neighborhood ties soon establish that the mother Helene is hardly of mother-of-the-year caliber. Her true story leads the cops and private eyes on a sordid trail of busted drug deals, stolen money, gang lords, barflies, perverts and coke-heads.

Every revelation takes the four of them down another twisted and deception-filled trail until your own moral compass is useless. Not every good guy is all good, not every right decision is a good one, bad guys can do good deeds and every victim has a complicated back story.

The two detectives, Doyle and Bressant, are hard-bitten and cynical. They are beyond passing judgment and accept the worst in everyone they encounter as commonplace. Angie Gennaro is tough but not so tough that she can suppress the revulsion she feels for the "dregs" of society - including the mother, Helene. Only Patrick passes through without passing judgment. He has an almost preternatural and serene ability to accept people for who they are. By not passing judgment he is able to move in circles even the cops can't access.

Or so it seems.

When it is all done, you have the sense that you have just witnessed some profound truths about human nature - none of which will apply the next time around. And that might be the most profound truth of all.

The "Gone Baby Gone" DVD offers two features - one a look at the relationship between the Affleck brothers and the neighborhood in which the movie is shot and a second on the casting for the movie, which you'll agree was brilliant. There are a few deleted scenes that serve to reassure us of the sound judgment of Affleck as a director and a commentary track by Affleck and writer Aaron Stockard.

ALSO THIS WEEK

"No Reservations" (Warner, 2 stars) A sincere and utterly predictable romantic comedy about a tightly wound New York chef (Catherine Zeta-Jones) and the two people who intrude upon and disrupt her painstakingly ordered life: her orphaned niece (Abigail Breslin) and an upstart sous chef who adores her (Aaron Eckhart). They are all charming and even the underutilized talents of Patricia Clarkson as the thankless owner of the restaurant in which the two chefs flout their egos and ids is somewhat forgivable. It's just that if this story were an entree it would be lovely to look at but constructed from all-too-familiar ingredients. A safe meal for the unadventurous.

"Becoming Jane" (Walt Disney, 2 1/2 stars) Suddenly, Jane Austen is hot. Everywhere you look on DVD and TV, you'll find an Austen-related film. Last week, it was a clutch of women in various stages of broken hearts turning to her novels in "The Jane Austen Book Club." This week, the au current actress Anne Hathaway exchanges her Prada outfits for period dress and tackles the emerging author's own romantic tale. Her co-stars include James McAvoy, Julie Walters, James Cromwell, Maggie Smith and Joe Anderson (Max in "Across the Universe").

Worth checking out:

"Martian Child" (New Line) John Cusack is a recently widowed sci-fi writer who considers adopting a peculiar young boy (Bobby Coleman) who insists he's from Mars in this touching little dramatic comedy.

"Blue State" (MGM) A political activist decides to make good on his vow to migrate to Canada if George W. Bush is elected president in 2004. Well he was. John (Breckin Meyer) heads for the border with a fellow traveler Chloe (Anna Paquin). Not so much Bush-bashing as two quirky characters on the road to discovery.

"We Own the Night" (Sony) Joaquin Phoenix manages a Russian-owned nightclub in Brooklyn and soon finds himself in the drug-war crossfire between cops and Russian mobsters - and must choose sides. Both his brother (Mark Wahlberg) and father (Robert Duvall) are cops. Also co-stars Eva Mendes as Phoenix's girlfriend and a strong supporting cast.

"Why Did I Get Married?" (Lionsgate) Adapted from Tyler Perry's stage play of the same name. Another exploration of love and relationships - through four married couples on vacation.

"The Amateurs" (First Look Studios) Satire previously known as "The Moguls" about a lovable band of losers in a small town who decide to make an adult film. For an unknown film, the cast is extraordinary - Jeff Bridges, Tim Blake Nelson, Joe Pantoliano, Ted Danson, Patrick Fugit, Glenna Headly, Lauren Graham and Jeanne Tripplehorn among them.

IT CAME FROM TV

Season three of "Family Ties" and "Girlfriends"; season one of the BBC drama "Hotel Babylon"; the eighth season of "Dallas"; seasons one and two of "Perfect Strangers"; the first season of "General Hospital: Night Shift"; and season one of "The Equalizer."

FROM THE VAULTS

"The Stanley Kramer Film Collection" (Sony) Five films from the acclaimed director/producer that account for a total of 20 Oscar nominations: "The 5,000 Fingers of Dr. T," "The Member of the Wedding," "Ship of Fools," "The Wild One" and "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner." In all, Kramer's 35 films received a total of 80 nominations

"The Charlie Chan Collection - Volume Four" (Fox) Sidney Toler's first four films as the venerable detective make their video debut: Charlie Chan in "Honolulu," "Reno," "Treasure Island" and "The City of Darkness."

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