Movie Review: 'Snow Angels'

by David L. Coddon

It's probably too early in the year to brand a film the most anything of 2008.

But "Snow Angels," based on the book by Stewart O'Nan and written and directed by David Gordon Green, gets a head start in the race for most depressing movie of the year. This, or any year.

'SNOW ANGELS' - Sam Rockwell and Kate Beckinsale star in the drama 'Snow Angels.' CNS Photo courtesy of Chris Reardon. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) Unrelenting in its bleakness - this has to be the unhappiest snow movie since 1997's

"Affliction" - and relentless in the emotional pain its doings inflict upon its characters, "Snow Angels" starts violently (unseen gunshots distract a performance by the high school marching band) and proceeds, funereally, toward an even darker denouement. (The ending, actually, is the seeing of what we only hear at the outset.)

Annie (Kate Beckinsale) and Glenn (Sam Rockwell), parents of a 3-year-old little girl, have split - and you can't blame Annie for trying to keep her distance since. Glenn, who tried to kill himself after their parting, has become a booze-guzzling, born-again-religious, self-mutilating mess; and unfortunately for Annie, he claims to want her - and their little family - back.

As much as for escape as to pay the bills, Annie waits tables at the local China Town restaurant, where she finds wisecracking kinship from fellow waitress Barb (Amy Sedaris, solid as you'd expect) and flattering, artless flirtation from young Arthur (Michael Angarano), the mop-haired trombone player in the high school band for whom she once baby-sat.

On her work breaks, Annie finds kinship of another kind at a faceless motel with Barb's tattooed husband, Nate (Nicky Katt). That makes two men who aren't good enough for Annie, who, while self-involved and a bit scarred by adult life, soldiers on with good intentions, directed mostly at her child and at confused teen Arthur.

Arthur, by the way, has every reason to be confused. His folks (Jeannetta Arnette and Griffin Dunne) are ending their dysfunctional marriage, his best friend (Connor Paulo) considers the opposite sex pieces of meat to be sampled, and a sweet geek of a girl named Lila at school (Olivia Thirlby, charming) regards him with puppy love (and something more) from behind her thick glasses.

For an hour that unfolds like a month in the dead of winter, director Green interweaves these small-town characters' miseries and insecurities, with very few flash points (Barb's discovering the affair between her husband and Annie being an exception). But the disintegration of Glenn physically and emotionally is slowly foreshadowed, as are Annie's lapses in maternal decorum. Little Tara is acting up and pouting and breaking things, as little ones are apt to do, and distracted single-mom Annie is erupting (albeit nonviolently), especially when Glenn is around.

We know something even worse is coming - and it does. Tara goes missing. The entire town rallies in search of her. Poor Arthur, already fraught with adolescent frights and anxieties, is naturally the one to find her body.

From this point on, "Snow Angels" turns more harrowing, and ultimately horrifying. Though Arthur is the one wholly sympathetic person on screen, not even he is incorruptible. (He's smoking pot with his buddy when he discovers Tara's body.) And the focus is undeniably on Annie and Glenn, the latter losing himself (and losing his mind) in religious mania, cheap alcohol and grief.

Annie, devastated by the still-unsolved death of her child (an accident? a murder, perhaps by nutso Glenn?), should have seen what was coming. Either she does, and her submission is an act of martyrdom or self-punishment; or she's not as smart as we thought she was - though she was foolish enough to have married hangdog Glenn in the first place.

Beckinsale rises above these holes in the script. A versatile actress who deserves A-list status (and more A-list roles), she makes us see, and feel, her heartbreak. With a part less showy than Rockwell's, she outdoes him scene-by-scene in conveying frailty and despair and anger. Not enough, however, to counter the weighty hopelessness of the film itself.

There are no snow angels, and little tenderness, in "Snow Angels." Just an unrelieved, numbing cold.

"Snow Angels." Running time: 1 hour, 45 minutes. Rated: R. 2 stars

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