Movie Review: 'Sunshine Cleaning' finds the light in the darkness

by David Coddon

A quick tip for "Sunshine Cleaning"-goers: Skip the snack bar.

This quirky dramedy, seemingly inspired by "Six Feet Under," "CSI" and some scrapped "SNL" Halloween skit, spares us the sight of dead bodies or outright gore. Instead, its ... , shall we say, uneasiness, ... looms in the aftermath of violent or squalid death. Not just blood on tiled walls or "fluids" puddled on floors, but odors that buckle the knees of the whimsically named Sunshine Cleaning crew.

RATINGS GUIDE:

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) That crew is a sister act with, at the outset, zero experience at biohazard removal. Rose and Norah Lorkowski are so down on their luck that even cleaning crime scenes looks like up to them. Rose (recent Oscar nominee Amy Adams) is a single mom with an ADD kid, a married cop boyfriend (Steve Zahn) and a "career" working for a maid service. She recites self-empowering affirmations when things go bad and dreams of trading her carpet sweeper for a real estate license. Sister Norah (Emily Blunt) is irresponsible, codependent (she lives with the girls' get-rich-quick dad, played broadly but affably by Alan Arkin) and gets her kicks smoking pot and climbing train trestles.

It's the married cop boyfriend who steers Rose into the crime-scene-cleanup biz, and after a few false (and sight-gag-rich) starts, the Lorkowski sisters get pretty good at it. It's paying the bills, for starters. But before long, their gruesome gig also impresses upon both Rose and Norah the profundities of death and the basic rewards of survival.

What began as a stumblebum operation becomes a well-oiled machine: The Lorkowskis sport business cards, a van with a shiny logo on the side and biohazard suits just like the pros wear. Oh, right. They are pros, thanks to tips and training manuals supplied by a sympathetic (and one-armed!) cleaning-supply salesman (Clifton Collins Jr.).

The inevitable complications ensue, and it all (spoiler alert) goes up in smoke before the Sunshine Cleaning service ever gets rolling too smoothly.

But "Sunshine Cleaning" the movie fares better, thanks to a game cast led by Adams, who keeps getting better and better. Her Oscar nomination for "Doubt" (as a different kind of sister) was well-deserved, and she'll win one someday. Adams' wide, questioning eyes, so evocative in the role of a young, disbelieving nun, serve her equally well in the far-different shoes of cursed but courageous Rose Lorkowski. Though saddled with weighty emotional baggage (her mother killed herself, her son's causing problems at school, her boyfriend's a louse, etc., etc.), Rose forges on. You like her, and you root for her. That's Adams' doing.

Blunt is a gifted comedian, and her character, like Adams', has heart.

"Sunshine Cleaning" has heart, possibly to excess. We could have done without the CB radio in the van used for talking with God or with the sisters' dead mother. And director Christine Jeffs never clearly establishes whether she's delivering a black comedy or a family drama â€” the movie never commits one way or the other.

But as a curiosity arriving in between the Academy Awards and the summer movie season, "Sunshine Cleaning" may find its audience: Those with a strong stomach and a weakness for Amy Adams, who shines even in this film's darkest moments.

"Sunshine Cleaning." Rated: R. Running time: 1 hour, 42 minutes. 3 stars.

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