The Screen Savor: 'The Night Listener' - HUH?

by Kimberly_Gadette

Movie Review of "The Night Listener"

"The Night Listener" is advertised as a psychological thriller. Psychological, yes. Thriller, no. After the first two-thirds of the movie, after a constant barrage of such time-honored devices as creaking stairs, spooky cellars, and furtive expressions on bit players, I finally surrendered the edge of my seat for the much cushier center. Question: Is it still considered foreboding, if there's ultimately no boding?

Robin Williams stars in 'The Night Listener'. Photo by Miramax Inspired by a true story, Robin Williams portrays late-night radio show personality Gabriel Noone, whose lover of eight years has just walked out on him. Reeling from the break-up, Gabriel is struggling with severe writer's block. In an attempt to get Gabriel's mind off his professional and personal problems, his publisher gives him a manuscript written by a terminally ill, 14-year-old boy. A phone relationship develops between Gabriel, the boy (Rory Culkin) and his adoptive mother Donna (Toni Collette). When Gabriel's ex-lover Jess hears the voices of Donna and the boy over the phone, he believes that the two voices belong to the same person. Gabriel travels to Wisconsin to meet the boy and his mother himself, determined to discover what is fact and what is fiction.

All too often, it seems that it's a tricky venture for a novelist to attempt to write the screenplay based on his own property. Perhaps the writer has such a strong attachment to his book that it's almost impossible for him to "reinvent the spiel." (It took John Irving thirteen years to write the screenplay for his own Cider House Rules.) In revisiting reviews of the original book of The Night Listener by Armistead Maupin, critics praised the depth of character, the unfolding relationship not just between Gabriel and the boy, but also the problematic issue of sick lovers suddenly turning well, and relationships between fathers and sons. If Maupin's screenplay had focused on these issues, instead of trying to drum up faux-suspense, it might have made a far better film.

It's as if Robin Williams has one foot in Maupin's original book, doing his best to portray Gabriel as a man making one wrong choice after another due to his unsettled state of unreality. But the film doesn't support the character's back story; instead, it makes the audience want to yell at the screen, "What, are you stupid?" However, his Gabriel is a long way from earlier dramatic attempts, when it seemed that Mr. Williams thought that lowering his voice and looking wistful meant serious acting. With his later films such as "One Hour Photo," "Insomnia," and now "The Night Listener," he's grown into a fine dramatic actor.

As for the extraordinarily talented Ms. Collette, though she can't sound a wrong note, the film's a laborious cacophony around her. The creators show only one mini-crumb of a scene between Gabriel and his cranky father from Raleigh (John Cullum). But faring the worst, Sandra Oh is wasted as a three-dimensional conduit for vital information. What fate must she face next? A starring role in "Yellow Pages â€¦ The Myth! The Movie!"?

Book, movie or children's theater, good stories donâ€™t contradict themselves. They adhere to the truth of their own particular universe, whether limited to the world of one apartment building or expanded to encompass an entire galaxy. The story doesn't have to be factual, but it does have to be consistent and authentic. Given that the particular world of "maybe" is highly fragile, it needs an expert director to guide the visual innuendo by choosing what to reveal and just as importantly, what not to reveal. Unfortunately, director Patrick Stettner was not up to the task.

The only mystery still unrevealed in "The Night Listener" â€¢ why Robin Williams and Toni Collette signed on in the first place.

Grading this movie on the curve of the Deschutes River: C-plus

PRODUCTION CREDITS: "The Night Listener" Directed by Patrick Stettner Written by Armistead Maupin, Terry Anderson, & Patrick Stettner Based on a novel by Armistead Maupin Cast: Robin Williams, Toni Collette, Bobby Cannavale, Rory Culkin, Sandra Oh Rated: R Running Time: 82 minutes Grade: C-plus

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