

Movie Review: 'December Boys'

by David_Elliott

"December Boys" manages oddly to be Catholic but sexually charged, and both rather childishly. It also enshrines family values with sincere, shallow obviousness.

'DECEMBER BOYS' - Daniel Radcliffe, Teresa Palmer, James Fraser, Lee Cormie and Christian Byers star in 'December Boys,' the story of a memorable summer. CNS Photo courtesy of Lisa Tomasetti.
RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) Daniel Radcliffe, famous (and now rich) as Harry Potter, is fairly bland as Maps, a moody teen. He's the oldest of four pals; the smaller kids are nicknamed Spark, Misty and Spit. They are sent from their Australian orphanage on a first vacation, leaving the desolate Outback for what you might call Laidback.

That's Ladystar Cove on the coast, with gorgeous surf and wind-carved, almost unearthly boulders. The

bonded pals are taken in by an old Catholic couple, including very fine but skimpily used Jack Thompson. And there's a younger couple, including French and saucy Terese (Victoria Hill), childless and perhaps in the adoption market.

Much of the story centers not on movie star Radcliffe but Lee Cormie as Misty, who's cute, needy and very Catholic. He sees the trip as his special "mission" from the Virgin Mary. He is like a mascot from "The Bells of St. Mary's."

Darn if there is not a blessed vision of the Virgin underwater, though this is beaten as candy corn by Misty's misty visions of nuns from the orphanage. There are no singing nuns, but quaint, acrobatic ones. Meanwhile, sunny fleshpot Lucy (Teresa Palmer) comes on hotly to Radcliffe, just after admitting that she hopes to become a nun.

Along with nips of nun comedy in a sort of Aussie "Boys Town," there is a big, wild horse straight out of "The Black Stallion." A daredevil cyclist almost invokes Evel Knievel. The 1970 John Fogerty tune "Who'll Stop the Rain," so piously saluted, seems off-sync with the story's time frame.

Lucy and Teresa add a "Summer of '42" flavor. The boys often ogle bra ads in dated magazines, or peep gamely through windows. One shocking glimpse is quite a rebuke to voyeurism.

Daniel Radcliffe may become quite a handsome man, but here he seems recessive and uneasy, a sort of senior-junior. When he bolts through a carnival at night, he poses no rivalry to James Dean in "East of Eden." He often looks ready for a passing wizard or muggle to spiff up his interest.

Rod Hardy, directing this version of Michael Noonan's novel, is also fairly generic. He revels well in wonderful scenery. The young boys have fresh charm, while Radcliffe hits his marks (which he evidently went well beyond, in his praised London performance last spring as the tormented boy in "Equus").

As for Catholicism, please ask: Does this very old and large religion need to become fantasy pudding with Cirque de Vatican nuns? As the boys dream of family life, ponder faith and feel the first sparks of sex on holiday, their ups and downs are leveled by a tone of trite, beachy escapism.

An IFC Films release. Director: Rod Hardy. Writer: Marc Rosenberg. Cast: Daniel Radcliffe, Christian Byers, Lee Cormie, James Fraser, Jack Thompson, Teresa Palmer. Running time: 1 hour, 45 minutes. Rated PG-13. 2 stars.

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