

Movie Review: 'Reservation Road'

by David_Elliott

"Reservation Road" hits its marks, but regrettably the marks are made of sponge. There is the squishy tension of a problem drama gone soft.

'RESERVATION ROAD' - Jennifer Connelly and Joaquin Phoenix are a family torn apart by an accident in the drama 'Reservation Road.' CNS Photo courtesy of Macall Polay. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) Mark Ruffalo plays Dwight, a lawyer. Returning home with his son from a game of their beloved Boston Red Sox, he veers away from a coming vehicle and fatally sideswipes a boy near the road. This is Josh Learner, son of Ethan (Joaquin Phoenix) and Grace (Jennifer Connelly), instantly plunged into grief along with their younger daughter (Elle Fanning).

Terry George's film is about how Dwight, who drove away in panic, feebly tries to duck (but doesn't get rid of his damaged SUV), while feeling damnably guilty. Feeding his misery, he observes Josh's funeral,

frantically bonds with his teen son, and picks the scabs of his failure with ex-wife Ruth (Mira Sorvino).

Ethan, feeling impotent because he didn't protect his son and can't much help the police, retreats into glum rage and vigilante thoughts. The family doesn't go for counseling, but there is time for Ethan to stoke his fury by getting Web advice from grieving parents like: "There is no justice in the court system, there is only the law."

To tighten the plot net, the Learner daughter takes piano lessons from Dwight's ex-wife. And (what a small town) Ethan even turns to Dwight as his lawyer, to pressure the cops into action.

Inevitably, Dwight proves stunningly ineffectual. All turns on a gratuitous episode of an overheard name. And then, necessary confrontation.

"Road" holds earnest interest because the cast is strong; the best work may be Antoni Corone as the weary, wary cop on the job. But the talent churns a bowl of pathos poured over us like glum gravy, and though the death of a child is certainly a living hell, there is extra movie hell when adorable Fanning is made to look wide-eyed at mommy and say, "Can you hear music if you're in heaven?"

If this were not about well-heeled, suburban, educated people, we might at least have the pulp satisfaction of a revenge killing. But "Road" is bound to its plaintive sense of taste.

A Focus Features release. Director: Terry George. Writers: John Burnham Schwartz, Terry George. Cast: Joaquin Phoenix, Mark Ruffalo, Mira Sorvino, Jennifer Connelly, Elle Fanning, Antoni Corone. Running time: 1 hour, 42 minutes. Rated R. 2 stars.

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