

Movie Review: 'Things We Lost in the Fire'

by *David_Elliott*

Benicio del Toro is aging into one of the major, used movie faces, up there near Bogart, Gabin, Von Sydow, Mitchum, O'Toole, Nolte and Tommy Lee Jones. A few times in "Things We Lost in the Fire," he could be James Dean at 40.

'THINGS WE LOST IN THE FIRE' - David Duchovny comes to the aid of friend Benicio Del Toro in the drama 'Things We Lost in the Fire.' CNS Photo courtesy of Doane Gregory. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.)

As an actor, del Toro is imposing but limited. His spaniel eyes and Beat Latin smolder fit Jerry Sunborne, who seems born more for the dark side of the moon. Jerry is a heroin addict in a flophouse, trying to recover with group support, and oddly his best chance comes when his favorite pal, successful Seattle developer Brian (David Duchovny), is killed.

The widow, Audrey (Halle Berry), invites Jerry to live and work in the house, partly in guilty charity to a bond she had resented, partly to balm her grief. Allan Loeb's script doesn't go for the most obvious climax, but at the cost of other, obvious payoffs.

Danish director Susanne Bier's film, produced by Sam Mendes, is a soaper about a dooper, yet Berry gets a lot of time. There are many shots of her wispily lovely and in pain, often gazing at her fabulous kids. Jerry even tells her, "You're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen," but Berry, though credible, is up against del Toro's haggard, sleepy charisma and even his detox fevers.

The story is built to contour and warmly neuter the growing rapport of Audrey and Jerry. The home is a cherished sanctum of family. The kids (Micah Berry and Alexis Llewellyn) are perfectly pert packages. Flashbacks keep reminding us how superb a spouse and dad Brian was, even dying like a saint.

And Jerry is always a bit too grubby for sex. Even after showering, he isn't a stud fireball like Nick Nolte's cleaned-up bum Jerry in "Down and Out in Beverly Hills." So the bond of man and woman remains consoling, therapeutic, almost a memorial to the noble Brian.

"I hated you so many years, Jerry," says Audrey. And he replies with wistful wisdom, "It's all right." Everything is a little too all right in the movie, too lushly maintained to keep us feeling good about the people. Heroin addiction even brings Jerry a second female angel, Kelly (Alison Lohman).

Add twinkly nods to Steven Spielberg's work, and music on Jerry's headset to express feelings he can't verbalize, and the darling daughter looking up and cooing, "Am I fluorescent?" She darn near is, and so are others (exception: funny John Carroll Lynch as Audrey's badly married neighbor).

The actors groove into often adroit lines and textured sensitivities. The movie could score with adults hungry for comfy, nuanced pain. Del Toro is a stubbled slab of magnetism, Berry a slim vision of sexy motherhood, Duchovny a very nice cup of Seattle coffee.

Still, it's a soaper about a dooper and a classy widow. Keep that in mind, even if you give way to seduction.

A Paramount Picture release. Director: Susanne Bier. Writer: Allan Loeb. Cast: Halle Berry, Benicio del Toro, David Duchovny, Alison Lohman. Running time: 1 hour, 50 minutes. Rated R. 2 1/2 stars.

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