

Movie Review: Manchester By The Sea

Reviewed by Chris Lewis

Once in a while a movie comes along that so profoundly illustrates a certain theme, its title becomes a short-hand metaphor for that theme. *Sophie's Choice*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, *Saving Private Ryan*, *Shawshank Redemption*, *All the President's Men*, and the TV movie *Roots* come to mind as examples. It is possible that this film's title could become a well-recognized metaphor for indescribable traumatic loss.

How indescribable is it? The movie trailer or "preview" offers no real hints about what viewers will eventually learn. Critical reviews in several well-known publications (one being *The New York Times*) are careful to not overtly reveal to readers the core trauma event. We are told early on that the characters find themselves trying to deal with the sudden death of a young boy's Dad, and who should take over as his guardian, but viewers aren't yet aware that "the other shoe" dropped in horrible fashion a long time

ago. One wonders if there has been a kind of global unspoken pact to avoid scaring potential viewers away from such an artistically excellent film.

This writer struggled in deciding whether to tell the whole story here in this review. Finally it seemed wiser to hold back, certainly not out of coyness, but rather due to being at a loss for words. How does one adequately discuss, in a short space, the worst possible loss? Kenneth Lonergan, its director and the writer of the original screenplay, says "The character doesn't learn to live with and move on from what happened. It's part of him for the rest of his life."

Rebecca Mead writes in a November 7, 2016 *New Yorker* article about this film, that the main character, Lee Chandler, is "a man who experiences a trauma that neither kills him nor makes him stronger. Rather, it leaves him maimed." Remember Ms. Mead's sentences the next time you hear the trite phrase "Whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger." Her use of the startling word "maimed" was insightful.

It is not unusual for movies to tell their stories in a non-linear way, by shifting back and forth between past and present. Viewers need to be alert to these time shifts, and in this story, one sees dramatic changes of mood and energy in the main character. Differences between "before" and "after" are striking, but viewers don't know "before what?" and close attention must be paid. Lee's heartbreaking story is fed to us slowly, through subtle clues and flashbacks, culminating in a shocking memory that causes audible gasps in the theater. Suddenly it all makes sense: Lee's deadly-flat affect, his seeming disconnection from others as well as himself, his need to

throw punches, his refusal to accept his trusted brother's dying wish, the judgmental whispers of others. It's easy to miss the significance of Lee's overreaction to his nephew's careless car exit, and his quiet line "I just get scared." The flashback that finally makes it all piercingly clear is so stunning and so difficult to process that it is hard to remain attentive as the movie continues to roll.

Nevertheless, viewers are urged to keep focusing on the difficult dance in which Uncle Lee and his nephew Patrick find themselves: two generations, two people with vastly different needs that get in the way of empathy, though each is motivated to keep trying by their longstanding love for each other and for the man they both grieve. Until the movie's end, one wonders how they can possibly make this work.

In two separate scenes late in the film, one between Lee and his nephew Patrick, and the other between Lee and his former wife Randi, crucial words of desperately needed self-revelation finally break the tension but replace it with an aching sadness. This dialogue is so genuine, so validating of the truth that for certain losses, there is no such thing as "closure."

Manchester by the Sea has already won numerous awards for acting and direction, including a Golden Globe for Casey Affleck's performance as Lee. If you are reading this review after Oscar Night on February 26th, you will know whether *Manchester by the Sea* won any of the six Academy Awards for which it was nominated, including Best Picture. Kenneth Lonergan is nominated for both Best Original Screenplay and Best Director for this third film he has directed, all three



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films exploring how people try to keep living their lives under the weight of past tragedy.

For this film, the three main actors, including Casey Affleck, Michelle Williams, and Lucas Hedges, all earned well-deserved Oscar nominations. Their portrayals are painful to watch but the excellence of their effort is the viewer's reward. Actually there is a fourth "main character," a boat that provides crucial stability and healing, an "even keel." How deeply ironic that, according to *New England Cable News*, the boat, the "Claudia Marie," was rented by the movie crew from a local couple whose occupation is fishing and who had named their boat after their infant daughter who had passed away

For those of us in MCDES who spend time in the world of loss, this unforgettable movie surely affirms what you know: yes, this is how shattering, and lingering, and so much like a rudderless boat, grief can be.