

American Pastoral

Sometimes creative acts come in twos. Just last July, your friendly reviewer discussed in the *Hill Rag* the film “Indignation,” based on a Philip Roth novel, while noting attempts by Hollywood over the years to adapt other Roth works. Voila! Mere months later and another Roth adaptation appears, “American Pastoral,” based on the writer’s critically acclaimed and Pulitzer-Prize-winning 1997 novel. The movie, directed and starring Ewan McGregor, is an ambitious effort that inevitably falls short of attaining the historicism and symbolism of the original novel.

In this version, scripted by John Romano, the core story is told in flashback during a 1990’s Newark, N.J. high school reunion where Jerry Levov (Rupert Evans) informs narrator Nathan Zuckerman (David Strathairn) about Levov’s just-deceased brother, Seymour (nicknamed “Swede” for his blond locks). Swede was a Jewish golden boy, a star athlete and Marine who married the town beauty Dawn (Jennifer Connelly), had a sweet daughter Meredith (Dakota Fanning), smoothly took over his father Lev’s (Peter Riegert) thriving glove business in Newark, and settled comfortably into the upscale suburb of Old Rimrock.

The film’s basic narrative picks up in early 1968 with the Vietnam War heating up. Though Swede’s life seems serenely unaffected by it, his 16-year-old daughter, nicknamed Merry, is so embittered by America’s actions that she acts out by setting a bomb in the local post office, killing its one inhabitant, then swiftly goes underground. Dawn is crushed by her daughter’s act but slowly accedes to it, while the distraught Levov begins a dogged pursuit to both find his daughter and to learn the reasons for her actions. The rest of the film is defined by that pursuit, while his life and his marriage spiral ever downward.

The telling of this fable of the 60’s has its poignancy; Merry is eventually found, and her revelations and the world to which she has succumbed are worse than Swede could have imagined. Yet much of this narrative of his tenacious search for his daughter is less than compelling.

Swede, in McGregor’s impersonation, is earnest but repetitive, simply ringing standard changes on the stricken father trying to fathom his daughter and who—in the end—cannot. He is left hanging because the act of Merry is basically inexplicable, and the film can offer no insights into her conversion. Connelly certainly scores high on the beauty queen scale, but her character is underwritten, and a later hospital-bed confession of the emptiness of her marriage comes out of nowhere. Poor Fanning lacks the screen time to show the development of her radicalism, so her bitter denunciation of her father seems just willful and utterly unearned. Worse of all is activist Rita Cohen (Valorie Curry) a stereotypical radical and underground colleague of Merry’s who offers a disquieting and prurient come on to Swede. Perhaps best of all, however, is the appearance of veteran Riegert as the sardonic Lev, the lone source of humor in a film almost wholly devoid of it.

With “American Pastoral” we may be witnessing again the perpetual dilemma of adapting a complex and high-minded novel into convincing cinematic terms. The story itself may have much to chew on, but that doesn’t mean that it has much taste.

(The film is rated "R" for mature themes and runs 126 mins.).

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