

Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri

Go to this film with the expectation of seeing a new Coen Brothers film, most particularly “*Fargo*.” It has the small-town Midwest vibe, a consistent “hick” tone, the same sudden shifts from goofy to ghastly in a nanosecond, a favorite Coen actress in a formidable performance-- even the same sound track composer, Carter Burwell.

Mildred Hayes (Francis McDormand) lost her daughter months ago in a horrendous rape-murder, and she decides to pressure the local police to find the murderer by commissioning three chiding billboards on an abandoned road near her home. The pressure is on Chief William Willoughby (Woody Harrelson) to solve the crime, but he—a decent family man—has his own problems with a terminal cancer diagnosis. His staff seems mainly inept, especially deputy Dixon (Sam Rockwell) a casual racist and lay about, and the community finds Mildred’s obsession unseemly. Nevertheless, she persists.

A shocking death changes the dynamics of Mildred’s cause, and events begin to escalate, with retaliations by Dixon on the advertising company that mounted the billboards (he defenestrates the office manager) and Mildred firebombing the police station (in this lackadaisical town, both escape without consequence, and the two injured parties end up sharing a hospital room!). An overheard remark by Dixon promises a solution to the murder, and antagonists Mildred and Dixon join forces. The ending is not neat, not even necessarily promising, but is consistent with this cunning, switchback story.

I referenced McDormand as one link to “*Fargo*,” but her performance—the main reason to see the picture—is extremely different. Hardly the sweet but dogged policewoman Marge Gunderson, McDormand here is a tight-lipped yet profane vengeance seeker, ready to put down anyone (including an officious local minister) who questions her motives. Her search for answers is obsessive, clouding out everything else and making her double down on naysayers. Her stance is adamant, and puzzling, too, since the film only offers one brief scene (the movie’s lone flashback) with her and her daughter, and it is a very sour one, ending on a “rape” line. Still, she is riveting.

Rockwell, as the maladroit Dixon, appears as a crass stereotype whose character, in fits and starts, begins to gain dimension and sympathy (he also may have the worst mom in recent movies, played by Sandy Martin). Harrelson, normally coarse and wooden, is a decent sort who reveals a richer nature as the film proceeds. There are other featured players who add welcome elements of calm and reason (Mildred’s son played by Lucas Hedges), goofball romanticism (Peter Dinklage), reassuring competence (Clarke Peters), and charming ditz (Malaya Rivera Drew), among others. Whatever weirdness of plot, these players ground the film.

Martin McDonagh became a world-famous playwright in his 20’s, with provocative Irish dramas packaged as the *Leenane* and *Aran Island* trilogies. He later gravitated to film, and “*Ebbing*” is his third feature. From the offhand humor of “*In Bruges*,” he moved to darker territory in “*Seven Psychopaths*” and exhibits an even more complicated palette in his latest film. What he excels in is keeping up the

momentum of the story, keeping it finely balanced between silly and shocking, and keeping you guessing as to what's next. It may turn you off occasionally, but "Ebbing" remains decidedly watchable.

(Rated a fairly hard "R," this film runs 115 mins.)

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