

House of Sand and Fog

This gripping new film, which distills taut drama from material as pedestrian as real estate, offers as rich a dose of fine acting and impeccable cinematography as any film this year. It is the maiden directorial effort of Vadim Perelman, a Ukranian-Canadian-American (previously a director of commercials) and is heartily recommended.

House of Sand and Fog, based on the eponymous novel by Andre Dubus III, turns on a real estate dispute triggered when Kathy Lazaro (Jennifer Connelly) is evicted (wrongfully, it turns out) from her family home by the authorities of Pacifica west of San Francisco. Kathy is at wit's end, her husband having left her months before, her days reduced to working as a cleaning woman, and her mother--who knows nothing of her plight--coming to town. Colonel Massoud Behrani (Sir Ben Kingsley), an Iranian emigré (from the Shah's air force) who himself has been reduced to construction jobs, sees the house for auction and is able to snap it up with the hope of a quick resale to cash a bundle. Kathy aims to gain back the home that her father left her, enlisting the aid of a lawyer (Frances Fisher) and the support of a local sheriff's deputy Lester Burdon (Ron Eldard), but she runs up against the strong-willed colonel, who quickly turns the modest bungalow into a home for his wife Nadi (Shohreh Aghdashloo) and teenaged son Esamail (Jonathan Ahdout).

The struggle begins slowly, but builds steadily as Kathy both confronts the steely Behrani on the property and cajoles his wife in her old--now transformed--living room. Lester, who is falling for Kathy, gets into the act by threatening the Behrani family, but the colonel, now a citizen and fully aware of his rights, challenges right back. You sense as a viewer that this is going down a grim path, but you don't know how or when you are going to arrive. Someone, maybe more than one, is going to get hurt. The final moments of the film--not revealed here--are heart-crushing.

It is that *inexorable* sense of tumbling down to a predetermined end that makes *House of Sand and Fog* tragic in its telling. It is made the more affecting because the protagonists don't bristle good and evil. Nobody does; they are all people trying to do their best for themselves but whose desires have come into irrevocable conflict. The tragedy is made the more poignant because the conflict is cross cultural, with a dispossessed American woman and a striving Persian man staring across a gap in their lives and experiences which simply cannot be bridged.

Jennifer Connelly and Ben Kingsley are exquisite in portraying the ying and yang of this melancholy story. Connelly may be disconcertingly ravishing, but she still personifies heartache and heartbreak as a woman at wit's end who can't see past her own sense of loss. Kingsley assays a more complex role as the stalwart soldier from a paternalistic world who must adapt to a confusing, wide-open Californian society without compromising his values. He shows that he can, with tremendous effort, remake himself, yet--in a hushed bedtime conversation with his beloved son--he also shows that he remains implacably of his own culture. All the subsidiary roles are uniformly excellent, with Aghdashloo as Nadi an especial revelation. A promising Iranian actress who left Iran herself in 1978 to eventually settle in Los Angeles, she shows a woman torn about her husband's actions yet struggling to empathize with others.

And did I mention the cinematography? The great Roger Deakins (*Shawshank Redemption*, *Fargo*, *A Beautiful Mind*) transforms the simple offices, cheap motels, and modest bungalows of *House of Sand and Fog* into ravishing imagery that lends seriousness and intensity to this potent, captivating drama. (*The film is rated "R" for some violence, disturbing images, and language.*)

(January 2004)