

## In the Bedroom

Christmas time often offers a cinematic explosion, an outpouring of flicks made both to lure vacationing kids and their families to the mall and aimed at movie industry folk who vote for the Oscars. Each studio's hope is for the big film--either commercially or critically. Among the fanfare and the fuss made over these and other movies a very special film is likely to be overlooked. This column hopes to give that film, *In the Bedroom*, some modest attention it might not otherwise garner. This movie combines superb cinematography, a humane and truthful script, and superlative acting that make it, in sum, as fine as any motion picture I've seen this year.

*In the Bedroom* is the stunning directorial debut of Todd Field, a competent character actor (*Ruby in Paradise*, *Eyes Wide Shut*) who co-wrote the screenplay (with Rob Festinger) based on a story by André Dubus III. It takes us into the town of Camden, Maine, where reside Dr. Matt Fowler (Tom Wilkinson), town physician, and his wife Ruth (Sissy Spacek), choral director of the local school. Their very measured, equable life is being mildly unbalanced by their only child, son Frank (Nick Stahl) and his affair with an older woman, Natalie (Marisa Tomei), who is estranged from her abusive husband Richard Strout (William Mapother). Though the youth's romance seems idyllic, the disaffected Richard stalks the couple and, in the heat of a fight, shoots and kills Nick. This crucial incident happens messily, not melodramatically, in the spirit of this film's thoroughgoing naturalism.

The aftermath is, of course, devastating to Matt and Ruth. The loss of a child--an only child, the greatest loss a couple can suffer--is monumental enough. It's made the worse when the prosecutor cannot assure that the erratic Richard will be held for the crime because there is no eyewitness to the deed. The case looks weak. The Fowlers' suffering becomes mired in both a need for vengeance and spasms of guilt. They cannot just leave; their whole life has been made in Camden. The wife sinks into stone-like grieving; the husband begins, through his friend Willis (William Wise), to quietly contemplate private retribution against Richard. How he works it out, bucking a sluggish legal system, brings some closure to the permanent ache of loss.

This sounds like awfully grim stuff for a holiday movie, but consider it instead another kind of Christmas present, gift-wrapped for those who long for a true, honest, and handsome adult film among the sparkling tinsel of the season.

For a rookie director, Todd Field shows both class and command of his craft his first time out. He got to know the work and person of author Dubus (who died in 1999) and his tales of New England families and their domestic trials, and that inspired his first feature. As a Mainer, Field has the writer's regional sensibility in his own bones. As a photographer, he knows how to evoke the scenes and seasons of his home state. And as an actor himself, he is able to bring out stellar work from his fine cast.

That cast is solid in all its parts, with Marisa Tomei, for example, veering from her usual semi-comic persona to take on convincingly the part of a sweet, yet troubled mother. But the film is truly dominated by the towering performances of Sissy Spacek and Tom Wilkinson as the Fowlers, who must pass from settled domesticity through devastating sorrow to a mix of resignation and resolve. Both actors offer sublimely calibrated work, never overwrought, always in tune with reality.

Spacek, a splendid actress for three decades, has probably her best part in 15

years and does her very best with it. Having won one Oscar and been nominated four other times, I would hope *In the Bedroom* gives her another chance for a statuette. Her Ruth has a certain serenity that is shattered by the loss of her son, followed by a gradual estrangement from Matt because he cannot, in her mind, cling to the memory of their son as willfully as she. Spacek handles these changes with great sensitivity and nuance, punctuated by some dramatic fireworks.

Tom Wilkinson is just as effective. He plays off Spacek beautifully, as the earnest, stolid husband who internalizes things and tries to look for some logic and purpose in the unmentionable. Wilkinson, an English actor (known here for such roles as Lord Cornwallis in *The Patriot* and the oldest stripper in *The Full Monty*), absorbs the Maine persona like he was born in Bangor. In the less showy role, he must reveal more through cast of eye or turn of shoulder, and he does it unerringly.

The one slightly false note in this wonderfully modulated film is a major moment mid-way through, when the couple's long suppressed emotions about Frank's death flare out into a shouting match of mutual blame. It is, in itself, a powerful moment, but a predictable and conventional one in a film strikingly free of the obvious. Having gotten to know these two characters so well, one wonders whether they could ever attack each other so rawly.

There is much to praise in *In the Bedroom*, but I would single out one part. Right after the death of the son, we return to the once warm and lively home of the Fowlers, but we do it in the realm of grief. We see a series of wordless, music-less sequences when one, only one of the parents does a routine action or settles into a room... There is silence, resignation, a crushing sense of despair, a snapshot of a family torn asunder, made palpable on the screen as each sequence dissolves to white...

These are scenes that rip the heart, seismic in their emotional impact--and yet are so *beautiful*. Field proves his worth as a film director with these episodes alone. (*The film is rated "R" for violence and mature themes.*)

(December 2001)