Is Anybody There?

Old people, much less old people's homes, rarely figure in commercial cinema. When they do, the treatment is usually farcical (aren't they silly!) or saccharine (aren't they cute!). A film mixing both offbeat comedy and offhand drama in showing the lives of seniors is singular, but that describes the new British film *Is Anybody There*?

This unpretentious but affecting movie, directed by John Crowley, is set in 1987 at an isolated old folks home in southeast England run by Dad and Mum (David Morrissey and Anne-Marie Duff) whose only child is ten-year-old Edward (Bill Milner). The boy, grave and reticent, is surrounded by the aged and their ever impending demise. It doesn't make him inured to death, rather he becomes curious about the afterlife, taking to taping the dying to learn if they will speak of the hereafter. In his earnest way, Edward is trying to find out if, indeed: is anybody there?

Into the home comes Clarence (Michael Caine), a retired magician of modest gifts who resents his new environs and the doddering types there. He says of his sour life: "You accumulate regrets—like old bruises." He is also a scalawag and a curmudgeon, telling poor Edward to "bugger off" when he first meets him.

The film traces the journey of Clarence and Edward through tolerance to acceptance then on to understanding, with Edward learning magic tricks and life lessons along the way. As Clarence warms to the boy, he proves a fruitful mentor in getting Edward to finally think about life—and his own future—even as the old man's future fades.

This kind of simple story could tend to the syrupy, but this film exudes genuine sentiment without being sentimental. I think that a good deal of this spirit comes from its scriptwriter, Paul Harness, who is writing about his own upbringing; he spent his 1980's childhood living in the old people's home that his parents ran. He knows this boy and his environment of cloistered old people. To note: the codgers of the home are deftly and truthfully portrayed in a convincing set of cameos by venerable British character actors.

John Crowley, known as a stage director, found the right Edward in young Bill Milner, in only his second movie. He begins as the unsmiling kid who spends his days coolly examining oldsters (and his parents' semi-shaky marriage) but who, through Clarence, develops into the boy who discovers a wider world and his own latent talents, like the decent palming of a playing card. His performance is both touching and mature; he avoids the cute for the authentic.

Michael Caine, meanwhile, was born to play Clarence. In fact, the filmmakers wrote *Is Anybody There?* for him. Here, Caine seems to attain what he has often aimed at: acting that doesn't look like acting at all. His scruffy beard, baleful eyes, and tousled white hair are the perfect accompaniment to his lingering swagger and his deep sense of loss (his beloved partner Annie). The actor has said that, with this film, he has produced what may be the performance of his life.
(*The film is rated "PG-13;" running time 95 mins.*)

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