

The Woodsman

Kevin Bacon has displayed an amazing versatility in more than 25 years on screen, but he has probably never had as hard an acting task as he has taken on in the new film *The Woodsman*. On screen almost the entire time, Bacon must depict a man in turmoil, a turmoil that is all internal--and wrenching. *The Woodsman* is--if this is not a contradiction in terms--an honest, sympathetic portrayal of a child molester, directed and co-written by young Nicole Kassell (a most auspicious debut, by the way).

I hope that description doesn't turn off every potential moviegoer, because they would be missing one of the very best acting turns by one of our best film actors (it is this year's—2005--equivalent of seeing Charlize Theron in *Monster*). Bacon has played every kind of role, from fraternity kid (*Animal House*), through young buck (*Footloose*) and villain (*JFK*) to forsaken loner (*Murder in the First*).

Here he is Walter, just out of the slammer after a twelve-year tour for child molestation, under "supervised parole" in Philadelphia, and trying to find a life. None too articulate, but good with his hands, Walter gets a job at a lumber shop through the kind graces of the owner (David Alan Grier), and even finds a girl from work, Vickie (Kyra Sedgewick), willing to look beneath his sullen surface. Walter lives in a spartan apartment near--though just distant enough--from a grade school. He watches the kids occasionally--with an uncertain, troubled air--and even notices what he thinks is a predator like he used to be.

Both Vickie (who suffered childhood abuse) and Walter are damaged goods who come together because she's willing to take a chance on a guy who backs off rather than comes on too strong. Just to keep his possible recovery in perspective, Walter has to undergo periodic harangues about his urges from a sarcastic police sergeant (Mos Def) sent to check up on him. The policeman emphasizes what we have, by now, come to accept--from myriad TV cop shows and magazine articles--that child abusers are completely unredeemable, ever and always recidivists who must always seek their forbidden fruit.

Walter must struggle with that collective knowledge, trying to break out of his past to find a "normal" world. When he calmly starts following a young girl, Robin (Hannah Pilkes), into a park, we suspect the worst. When he purposely seeks her out and engages her--Robin's a sweet, solitary child who loves birds--we are agonized, horrified at the thought of his succumbing to his appetites. When he struggles with that appetite, then gets past it, when the child--suspecting a true friend rather than a fiend--hugs him upon leaving, it is a catharsis rarely seen in American movies. Kevin Bacon brings this off exquisitely; a flawed man who can, by mighty will and heart, exorcise his demons. Redeemable.

(*"The Woodsman" is rated "R" for language, troubling themes, and some serious intensity.*)

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