

All Is Lost

Robert Redford is now a ripe 77 years old. He had his first lead movie role over 50 years ago. He has appeared in dozens of films since and directed 10. In his new film, "All Is Lost," he may have worked as hard as he ever has in this riveting tale of a man adrift.

Redford plays "Our Man" (as the role is credited) and is—with the single exception of an outstretched hand--the only human presence in the picture. The credit sequence introduces the only sustained output from Redford's mouth, an over voice intoning a last letter he writes at what will be the end of this tether, the first words of which are "All Is Lost..." In essence, though, this is a dialogue-less motion picture.

The setting is a yacht in the middle of the Indian Ocean 1,700 miles from the Sumatra Straits. Trouble comes immediately: the sleeping skipper is awakened by water splashing around him from a gash in the boat's hull. He climbs to the deck to learn that an abandoned container has rammed into his vessel, creating the opening. He cleverly disconnects the fateful container, finds a way to patch the gash, and hand pumps out seawater from his boat.

The incoming water, however, has ruined his navigation gear and radio (one attempt to communicate through it poignantly fails) and some of his food. Patched up, but afloat, the boat then encounters a vicious storm that damages it beyond salvaging. The man must save himself in its accompanying lifeboat. Through all this travail, he finds ways to adapt to his ever straitened circumstances, showing conspicuous adaptability and sea-smarts.

Still able to use a compass and charts, he finds he is drifting into the shipping lane of the ocean. Once there, he even encounters a ship which, however, ignores him, a speck on the sea. The sun burns down, his food supply wanes, sharks began to circle, even his water can is compromised with sea water. All is lost...

What makes the film so effective as a suspense yarn, though, is that the Man here, this wizened but stalwart Redford, is no stud or superman: he's just an old guy struggling to do his best against a watery world seemingly bent on obliterating him. Redford certainly had stunt doubles for some of the film, but time and again we see him demonstrate real physical effort, e.g., climbing the boat's mast, flipping completely over on a life raft, working in waist-high water, swimming for (what looks like) his life.

The viewer keeps rooting for this Everyman of a Certain Age, hoping against hope that he makes it. Little moments offer that hope, as when the man finds time during his salvage operation to shave, perhaps for the last time. But the film, diabolically well-directed by J. C. Chandor, keeps slipping in moments of dread: the distant storm, the dead radio, the lost food, that tainted water. The latter realization—that his water jug is full of sea water—creates the only vocal outburst from Redford in the whole movie: an agonized F-bomb signifying all may really be lost.

In an interview while musing on the film, Redford said it recalled an earlier picture in which he played a solitary man who could have given up but didn't. "I thought about 'Jeremiah Johnson,' said Redford of the 1972 film. "He had a choice to give up or continue but he continues, because that's all there is. And this film...suggests the same

thing. He just goes on because that's all he can do. Some people wouldn't, but he does."

Shot variably off the coasts of California, Mexico, and the Bahamas, "All Is Lost" combines all these locations (along with a gigantic filming tank in Baja California and some background effects) into an unnerving, vast simulacrum of the Indian Ocean, an immensity that dwarfs the Man and his dogged efforts to survive. Effective, too, is the film's sound design, with a track of wind currents and varied water slaps and burbles, the latter of which keep you literally *in* that boat with the man.

American filmmaker J. C. Chandor debuted spectacularly in features with "Margin Call" (2011), a gripping tale of high finance which he wrote and directed with a glossy New York setting and a large cast. His "All Is Lost" could hardly be more different, but in one significant way, the two efforts parallel each other. Man stands dumbfounded before two implacable and threatening environments: Wall Street and the open ocean. I can't wait to see what this guy will make next.

(Running 107 min., the film is rated PG-13).

(October 2013)