

## Mass

A small movie in scope but large in heart is “Mass,” a four-hander wherein two grieving couples come together to try to cope with unimaginable loss. One pair, Jay and Gail (Jason Isaacs and Martha Plimpton) had, six years earlier, lost their teen-aged son in a school shooting, while the other, older couple, Richard and Linda (Reed Birney and Ann Dowd) are the parents of the teen-aged shooter, who committed suicide after the act. Though they all have had testy legal encounters in the aftermath of the shooting, Gail has, through a mediator, suggested that the other couple meet with them one more time for some kind of final reconciliation.

Their meeting, in an all-purpose room in an isolated Episcopal church (the film was shot in northern Idaho) begins tentatively, with church staff trying to make the guests comfortable. All arrive and agree to sit at a plain round table. Some guarded small talk ensues—there is a fussy exchange about a bouquet Linda has brought—before Jay opens up the meeting, still trying to comprehend what happened. An early flare-up occurs when Richard hints at political issues being implicated in their case, when Jay cuts him off, saying they should exclude politics from their conversation.

From there, each parent, more or less in turn, agonizes about how the shooting has left them. Gail still wants to know “why,” while the shooting has triggered her husband towards a new activism. Richard, though grudgingly regretful, is the one most ready to move on, while his wife struggles with her own inchoate guilt. All four actors express themselves within a delicate balance, with each given a chance at a modest monologue to express their own version of grief. The four pinwheel through personal attacks, poignant remembrances of their sons, speculations on their own guilt—not exactly reconciling what has happened but aiming for some kind of surcease.

All four actors are splendid, utterly natural and believable in delivering the incisive script. Plimpton stands out as a woman struggling to express herself, while her inner turmoil is agonizingly revealed in her eyes and expressions. Ann Dowd, the most emotional of the quartet, delivers an urgent late soliloquy describing her last evening with her son, a soul-destroying encounter.

Fran Kranz makes his directorial and screenwriting debut with “Mass,” and it is a stunning one for this LA-based actor. His work is the more remarkable for directing a fine quartet of older actors when he was but 39. His achievement reminds me of other young directors who have created serious dramas with mature actors such as the 27-year-old Sarah Polley with the touching “Away from Her” (2006) “ and 33-year-old German Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck with the magnificent “The Lives of Others” (2006). May Mr. Kranz have many more chances to prove himself over the years.

*(The film is rated "PG-13" and runs 111 minutes.)*  
(November 2021)