

Reservation Road

Just as tough and tense is “Reservation Road,” though its scope is very different: intimate and local rather than sweeping and international. It turns on a fatal hit-and-run accident, where the runner Dwight (Mark Ruffalo) is a lawyer in a small Connecticut town whose victim—a small boy—has a professor father Ethan (Joaquin Phoenix) in the same hamlet who obsesses over finding the killer of his son. It will be all too easy for filmgoers to fully identify with one—or both—of the antagonists.

Here the anguish seems, in a way, even more potent than in “Rendition,” because the setting is so commonplace, even pedestrian, and the torment of the two men—one from all-consuming guilt and the other from all-consuming vengeance—is so palpable. The weight of each of those factors accumulates for each character to where it becomes almost unbearable.

Both Mr. Ruffalo’s and Mr. Phoenix’s on-screen personae—both performers who naturally give off vibes of anxious, troubled souls—contribute to the film’s very effective, if daunting, sense of doom. And--bless the filmmakers--for once an American movie built on a revenge theme backs away from the obvious, violent climax and sticks to a much more believable, open-ended finale. This is serious, earnest work from writer/director Terry George (“Hotel Rwanda”) and his co-writer John Burnham Schwartz (upon whose novel the movie is based). Still, go in knowing that your emotions will be given the once-over. (rated “R,” 102 mins.)