

The Substance of Fire

The Substance of Fire, based a recent play by Jon Robin Baitz, traces the generational breakdown of a publishing family, matching its literary theme with a most literate script--and some fine acting.

The film revolves around veteran publisher, Isaac Geldhart (Ron Rifkin) a distinctive Manhattan intellectual of smug mien and demanding taste. He is also a Holocaust survivor with a (hidden) need to atone. The family publishing house has long combined a strong literary tradition together with a propensity to take on--as a kind of holy duty--obscure and wrenching works about the Final Solution. It is his dogged insistence on publishing just such a work (on Dr. Mengele's camp experiments) by an old colleague that alienates him from his children: Aaron (Tony Goldwyn), his assistant in the firm who longs to take on more current, viable works, Martin (Timothy Hutton), a sensitive landscape architect who teaches upstate, and Sarah (Sarah Jessica Parker), a flaky actress on a kiddie TV show.

Isaac's determination to publish the book leads to a confrontation with his children, who have inherited one-half the firm from their mother. His obsessions and breakdowns lead to legal warfare and ultimately the sacrifice of his youngest son leads to his redemption.

Mr. Baitz's play is decently translated to the screen by first-time film director Daniel Sullivan, who directed "The Substance of Fire" on stage in New York and Los Angeles. The booky feel of dark hardwood rooms and rich leather bindings is nicely evoked, and the language is about as literate as movies get these days. Most of the performances are excellent (though Ms. Parker seems to have wandered in from some other movie), but the overriding reason to see *Substance* is to see Ron Rifkin.

You may recognize Rifkin if not immediately identify him--he's done recurring roles on television's "ER" and "Law and Order." However, the stage is his natural habitat, and he created the role of Isaac Geldhart for Jon Robin Baitz. This film preserves that performance for us. Rifkin fully incarnates a bristly, haughty member of the New York literati who feels it is all right "to insult somebody, as long as it's done elegantly." Here is a once hyper-confident *mensch* who, though losing his grip on reality, cannot admit of his own demise: he covers the cracks in his soul with an armor of offended arrogance. As done by Ron Rifkin, it, is one infuriatingly proficient display.

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