

Win Win

Tom McCarthy makes his living as a busy, journeyman actor (recent roles include “Fair Game,” “2012,” and the last season of HBO’s “The Wire”), but he earns accolades as a proven writer/director of intelligent, well-crafted, droll movies about contemporary life. He debuted, splendidly, with “The Station Agent” (2003) and followed it up with the much-admired (including by this reviewer) “The Visitor” (2007). Well, he has hit the director’s trifecta with his latest effort “Win Win,” a film both full of feeling and humor.

“Win Win” introduces us to attorney Mike Flaherty (Paul Giamatti), his wife Jackie (Amy Ryan), and their two young daughters living in New Providence, New Jersey (where McCarthy himself went to high school and wrestled). Mike’s practice is struggling, the office furnace may blow any time, and his real passion, volunteering as the high school wrestling coach, is souring as his team loses every match. He then secretly takes on the personal guardianship of an incapacitated elderly client, Leo Poplar (Burt Young), which comes with a monthly stipend from the court which he quietly uses to help keep his practice and his family afloat. Then the client’s 16-year old grandson, Karl Timmons (Alex Shaffer) shows up on his grandfather’s doorstep, having run away from home and a drug-addicted mother in Ohio. Mike grudgingly takes him in then discovers the kid is a top-notch wrestler, one that can inspire his team and transform his luck, and he signs him up to attend the school. It’s a nice win-win arrangement.

Things come apart, however, when Karl’s mom, Cindy (Melanie Lynskey) shows up after a rehab stint, looking to gain access both to Leo (and his money) and to her estranged son. She gets a lawyer Eleanor (Margo Martindale) who presses Mike, finding key court documents that prove he used Leo’s status for his own remuneration. Karl’s learning of this drives him to a crucial match meltdown that wrecks Mike’s best-laid schemes and exposes him to the opprobrium of family and friends.

While the story so outlined sounds dour, it is anything but. What with Giamatti’s likeable schlubness, Bobby Cannavale playing his best friend and hedge fund manager Terry, and veteran Jeffrey Tambor, as Stephen “Vig” Vigman, CPA and Mike’s assistant coach, there is much to guffaw about. Add to the mix a quirky nerd and would-be wrestler Stemler (David Thompson) who befriends the competent Karl, and you have a quartet of considerable comic potential. Tambor—known best from TV’s “Arrested Development”—behaves and looks like a clueless sea lion. Cannavale, comic relief in McCarthy’s “The Station Agent,” provides that role again here, cracking wise to the stolid Giamatti. And the latter actor, unsurpassed in playing conflicted, mildly desperate figures (see the recent “Barney’s Version”), fits in this role of a decent man going off the rails like an old suit.

To leaven, but not weigh down, the ensemble is the estimable Amy Ryan (“The Office”) as Jackie Flaherty. She plays a mother leagues away from her standout role as a crass lowlife in “Gone Baby Gone.” Here she is a no-nonsense yet nurturing mom with a veneer of Jersey toughness. Excellent, too, in his film debut, is young Alex Shaffer, who plays Karl just right: as a platinum-haired, blank-faced, taciturn teen whose mind suggests a vacuum, but who, you eventually learn, has both common sense and a

sense of responsibility. The kid brings real wrestling credentials to the role, too, being a New Jersey champion.

It is McCarthy, though, who brings all these pieces together is what is probably a labor of love, depicting a world he knows by heart and offering it to us as a gift.
(The film is rated "R" and runs 106 mins.)

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