

# Stillwater

“Stillwater” is the latest feature by the multi-talented American writer-director, Tom McCarthy. McCarthy is the kind of esteemed filmmaker who may not be especially prolific, but when he sits in the director’s chair, he offers quality. McCarthy has, since his debut with the fine “The Station Agent” (2003) made only eight films, but they have included consistently intriguing and lauded work such as “The Visitor” (2007) “Win Win” (2011) and the outstanding “Spotlight” (2015), which won him an Oscar for his script.



Matt Damon stars as "Bill" in director Tom McCarthy's STILLWATER, a Focus Features release. Photo Credit: Jessica Forde / Focus Features

Also known for his steady acting presence, McCarthy is perhaps best known for his memorable role as a Baltimore journalist in the last season of HBO’s “The Wire” (2008). With “Stillwater,” he proves himself again unpredictable, laying out an investigative crime story which morphs into a cross-cultural domestic drama—which takes place mostly in, of all places, Marseille. Bill Baker (Matt Damon), a laid off oil worker in Stillwater, Oklahoma, has been seeking for years the release of his somewhat estranged daughter Allison (Abigail Breslin), an exchange student in Marseille, who has been charged with murdering her friend and partner Lina, though Alison insists she is innocent.

Baker travels regularly to visit her in prison and learns that she has all but exhausted her legal options with her French defense team. Frustrated with them and with authority generally, he then tries private eyes without success. He eventually befriends a French actress, Virginie (Camille Cottin), and her eight-year-old daughter Maya (the charming Lilou Siauvaud). Camille helps him with French to advance his case. Sleuthing on his own, he also becomes convinced that a man named Akim, whom his daughter met at a party, is responsible for Lina’s murder. This is where the film’s plot seriously swerves.. To help with the case, he decides to reside in France permanently, settling in to live with Virginie and Maya and getting a job in demolition work. The three settle into a sweet domestic unit, best illustrated in the film by a lovely threesome performing a slow dance to Bill’s country music. To help clear his daughter’s name, he must continue to contend with the language barrier, tenacious cultural differences, an arcane legal system, local delinquents, and a strange, chaotic city.

Damon often plays an American everyman, but here he is cast differently, as a fully working class guy, as well as an ex-felon and alcoholic. His character might also be compared to Jason Bourne, also taciturn and not given to small talk, but he lacks the latter's intellect. This is Damon moving down in class, yet believable as a good Christian guy struggling for what he hopes is justice for his kid.

Camille Cottin is an attractive, supportive co-star, leagues away politically from Bill but sympathetic to his fate. Their platonic friendship is handled with care, rare in American movies. Young Maya is, throughout, a delight, eager to attach herself to this rugged American and even willing to give him impromptu French lessons when he labors on workshop projects..

"Stillwater" may not be up to the best of his McCarthy's creations, but it still merits attention and offers an intriguing role for its lead, Damon.

(The film opened in cinemas on July 30, is rated "R," and runs 140 mins.)

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