

Worth (DC in the Movies)

“Worth” follows the aftermath of the horrific 9/11 attacks, after Congress has appointed renowned DC mediator Kenneth Feinberg (Michael Keaton) to lead the September 11th Victim Compensation Fund, which aimed to quickly allocate financial resources to the families of the victims (more than 7,000) of the attacks.

Feinberg, under the title of Special Master, and his firm's head of operations, Camille Biros (Amy Ryan), face the impossible task of determining the “worth” of a life to compensate families who had undergone unfathomable losses. A non-negotiable element of the settlements required that families could never file suit against the airlines for any lack of security or unsafe procedures. The special master was given two years to come up with a valid compensation plan.

At first, Feinberg and company use a basic formula based on each victim's salary, but, when presenting this to an audience of the edgy families, the latter erupt in protest. One of those attending, Charles Wolf (Stanley Tucci), a community organizer mourning the death of his wife in the tragedy, calms the crowd down but later informs Feinberg that he totally disagrees with the formula and begins lobbying to “Fix the Fund,” arguing for close listening to the family members instead of treating the victims as part of a cold numbers game.

As applications for the Fund lag behind a hoped-for 80 percent acceptance, Feinberg changes the focus of his team, as we see Biros, a new Asian-American recruit, Priya Khundi (Sunavi Ramanathan), and a black attorney Darryl Barnes ((Ato Blanken-Wood), as well as Feinberg himself, having in-depth interviews with families, gauging what they want on a human and personal level.

Individual cases are highlighted, especial Feinberg's involvement with the Donato family, one of whom— a firefighter—has left a bereft wife Karen (Laura Benanti) and three young boys, with the added complexity of a cynical Frank Donato, brother of the departed and a firefighter survivor.

Also featured is Biros's ongoing involvement with the Schultz family, whose dead son's gayness has been denied by his parents and whose partner, Oliver (Clifton Samuels), seeks compensation that cannot be granted by his home state. Each case is resolved in dramatic ways, as the Donatos come to learn of additional children left behind from an affair by Frank's brother, and as Biros (a shattered Amy Ryan) must make a heart-wrenching phone call to Oliver to tell him he cannot be the beneficiary of his lover's portion.

To make the process the more problematic, another team of lawyers, headed by corporate advocate Lee Quinn (Tate Donovan), insists that major businesses housed in the twin towers, as greater earners, deserve a significantly larger portion of the Fund. As the deadline of December 2003 looms, the collective efforts of the Feinberg team, as well as a more sympathetic Wolf, gather steam towards a possible solution.

The film, directed by Sara Coangelo and written by Max Bernstein, plays out this scenario in a straightforward, no-nonsense manner, though the background of 9/11 and its victims creates enough built-in tension to keep the drama compelling. The story has its own kind of mournful momentum.

Keaton and Ryan are under-toned and earnest, as befits the grinding work they are doing, and Keaton as Feinberg has a little more to do, since he has to show a gradual transformation from a “just-the-facts” decider to a more passionate advocate for his clients. The film also shows a different side of the lawyer, a known opera buff, as he privately listens to arias in his den, softening somewhat his stringent side..

Tucci, though an activist and a thorn in the side of the process, acts as the civil figure of reason (he and Feinberg eventually bond over opera). There are a passel of fine featured performances, none better than Benanti’s Karen, the working-class housewife who tearfully acknowledges the impossible task Feinberg and Company had taken on.

(The film could be considered a DC movie since Feinberg’s firm is based here, and he did most of his work on the case in the city. Still, except for a few fleeting special effects shots of DC, the movie (mostly made up of office interviews and other interiors, was filmed in Astoria, Oregon.)

(The film, running 118 minutes and rated “PG-13,” opened in early September and is now streaming on Netflix.)

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