

'Three Billboards' is a thoughtful, gripping character study

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
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Rating: «««« out of «««««

Running Time: 115 min.

Martin McDonagh sure has a way with words. In fact, his previous features *In Bruges* and *Seven Psychopaths*

are well known for their sharp and incisive dialogue and deeply flawed characters.

Three Billboards outside Ebbing, Missouri

is no exception, boasting an incredible cast at the top of their game and a mean but thoughtful script dealing with grief and anger.

Mildred (Frances McDormand) is a grieving mother whose child was raped and murdered by an unknown assailant. Frustrated at the lack of progress in the case by law enforcement, she buys a trio of billboards and posts a pointed question on each of them in large lettering to Chief Willoughby (Woody Harrelson). His staff, including a violent and racist cop named Dixon (Sam Rockwell), are none too pleased about the message. This leads to increasing tension and conflict between the woman and authorities.

The performances are uniformly excellent here, with each character distinctive and memorable. McDormand is certainly worthy of accolades as the frustrated and angry mother. Her blunt and direct comments cut through the hypocrisy present in the town and allow the film to deal with some of the small town's backwards ways. Harrelson is also excellent as the grouchy chief who ultimately isn't quite as mean as he initially appears. And Rockwell stands out as a despicable deputy forced to come to hard realizations about his own flawed character. Portraying a person with horrid traits that viewers are supposed to eventually feel sympathy for is a remarkably difficult task, but the actor pulls it off.

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The cast is rounded out by stellar supporting turns from familiar faces like Peter Dinklage and John Hawkes (among many others). Thankfully, there’s a dark sense of humor running through the piece, which helps to add a bit of levity to the extremely grim material. There are plenty of great interactions between the baffled cops and other citizens as they attempt to get to the bottom of the billboard issue and catch up with what is going on. It is incredibly harsh and foul at times, but the unique phrasing and delivery is part of what makes the material so compelling.

Viewers should be warned that this isn’t a murder-mystery and the ultimate outcome of events related to the crime aren’t as essential as the personal development and growth of the characters. The movie doesn’t give any easy answers to the questions raised and ultimately appears to promote the importance of forgiveness, understanding and positive change (that is, in between the questionable behavior and actions of its leads).

While it certainly won’t be for everyone, this reviewer was very impressed with the biting script and incredible performances in *Three Billboards outside Ebbing, Missouri*. This backwoods town certainly doesn’t seem like a place anyone would want to visit, but watching a film about the residents is undeniably gripping from start to finish.

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For the Sun***