

‘Motherless Brooklyn’ going for Oscar glory

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
Friday, 08 November 2019 09:29



Rating: «« out of «««««

Running Time: 144 minutes

In case you haven't already noticed, we're beginning to venture into awards season. This part of the year is always filled with ambitious pictures featuring high drama that seem earmarked for Oscar glory...as well as some that aspire for the honors, but don't quite make as strong an impression (at least for this writer). *Motherless Brooklyn* is one such example.

Everyone involved seems to be giving it their all with big performances filled with grand speeches and bold dramatic gestures. Yet while it's watchable in the moment, the end result feels manufactured and one that never matches the films that inspired it.

Set in New York during the 1950s, this tale follows Lionel Essrog (Edward Norton) aka "Brooklyn," a sharp-witted adult battling Tourette's Syndrome, which causes uncontrollable spells that involve shouting as well as repetitive gestures. Lionel refers to it as having, "...threads in his head," that he can't stop, as a description of the sudden and sometimes unnerving behavior. Despite his troubles, his ability to remember details has gained him favor at a private investigation firm run by Frank Minna (Bruce Willis). When a case goes wrong and Minna is taken out of the proceedings, the protagonist feels obligated to find out what really happened to his friend.

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The trail uncovers a possible conspiracy involving Brooklyn Bridge Authority official Moses Randolph (Alec Baldwin), as well as his estranged brother Paul (Willem Dafoe) and lawyer Laura (Gugu Mbatha-Raw), who has an unknown connection to the case.

Much of the film details the struggles Lionel faces in taking on the lead in an investigation. While his memory is impeccable, he can't interview strangers without twitches and blurting out unexpected curses and naughty words. And when I write that this is a big focus, it truly is. Not one scene goes by without a shriek or inappropriate term uttered.

It is certainly a bold performance by Norton to play a social outcast with no friends and a facial tic, but the circumstances the character is put in ultimately make it difficult to completely buy into the concept. Suspension of disbelief gets even harder to salvage after the arrival of Laura, a lawyer who immediately finds Lionel sweet and charming despite the outbursts, which up until this point had left him on the social fringes.

It also doesn't help that the central investigation involving a government cover-up proceeds so slowly. It's clear from the outset that Moses is involved in some nefarious activities. While Baldwin is a very capable actor, he's forced into scowling and threatening those around him for most of the proceedings. Things do liven up with the arrival of brother Paul, an eccentric who may or may not be in league with his sibling.

As the details are finally revealed and the seedy underbelly of the Brooklyn Bridge Authority is revealed, things do perk up a bit. There's even an exciting confrontation between the lead and an oversized pursuer on a fire escape.

While it's watchable overall, things never quite heat up to a boil dramatically and ultimately it never generates much excitement. Part of the problem is that it feels like a group of characters are really working hard to chew scenery with all their exaggerated and eccentric behaviors, ultimately taking this viewer out of the proceedings. Those with a film history knowledge will also very quickly realize that the picture and/or its source material, intentionally or not, owes a big debt to the 1974 neo-noir classic, *Chinatown*. And this flick just isn't in the same league.

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Motherless Brooklyn tries too hard for awards glory, and while it may make for a reasonable night's entertainment at home, it isn't worth the time and investment of pounding the pavement and discovering in the cinema.

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