

'Stillwater' makes a lasting impression

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

out of «««««

Running Time: 140 minutes

This film from Focus Features opens in cinemas on July 30.

Over the years, there have been plenty of movies about family members giving their all to try to prove a loved one innocent of a crime. In many of these stories, the leads take extreme measures to uncover the truth. By definition, "Stillwater" is one these films, but this tale is handled differently from others of its ilk. This character-based drama focuses on the characters and takes many unique turns along the way, asking questions of its protagonist and addressing bigger themes in the process.

Bill Baker (Matt Damon) is an Oklahoma oil-rig roughneck with a sketchy history. However, his focus has turned to helping his estranged daughter, Allison (Abigail Breslin). After traveling to France, it is revealed that she has been arrested and sentenced to prison in Marseille for murdering her partner. Allison insists that the responsible party must have been a figure whom she and her girlfriend met at a party.

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When all legal avenues fail, Bill decides to hunt down the mysterious figure himself. He doesn't speak the language, but is taken in by a kind local named Virginie (Camille Cottin) and her young daughter, Maya (Lilou Sauvaud). As his search begins to stall, the protagonist finds himself making a new start with his hosts. However, when a lead develops, Bill is faced with the dilemma of whether to continue in his pursuit or leave the job to authorities.

While the story isn't unusual, writer/director Tom McCarthy ("Spotlight," "Win Win") handles the material with far more complexity than most Hollywood dramas. Initially, the film addresses the lead's difficulty communicating with residents, as well as with his own daughter. Bill's determination and impulsive mindset is in some respects relatable. There are also some interesting exchanges between the protagonist and Allison, who becomes infuriated by her dad's independent efforts to find the responsible party.

His actions also lead to an intriguing conversation about the flaws in the family character and how the best of intentions can sometimes lead one down a dark path. But as he spends more time with Virginie and Maya, we begin to see a more thoughtful and considerate figure emerge.

Obviously, this narrative makes sure not to make a mockery of legal processes in other countries or show the protagonist getting the job done easily. Instead, the methods he employs are frequently blunt and ineffective. The lead finds himself in grave danger because of some lunkheaded actions. As he ultimately gets closer to the person he is targeting, his acts threaten not only his daughter's potential case, but put his new life in jeopardy. As things take an even more extreme turn in the latter third, the movie builds on these ideas and maintains a great deal of tension.

The climax and resolution don't disappoint either. While it may not shock all viewers, there are some interesting twists as some of the primary relationships are forever changed. It seems that there is always a personal cost to the decisions made and this drama isn't afraid to examine them in detail. Naturally, as one might have guessed by now, a bigger metaphorical message eventually looms over the film about the detrimental and destructive effects of an American entering a foreign nation and aggressively intervening in their legal system and regulations.

The somber approach, serious tone, and final message may not please all viewers, but it drew this viewer in. Additionally, the performances and relationships on display have a believable and

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authentic feel. And this is also a story that, by the close, delivers plenty of food for thought. “Stillwater” ultimately stands as a unique and enlightening drama and will make a lasting impression on those looking for a little more meat in their crime pictures.

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