

‘Armageddon Time’ won’t win any awards, but it’s still effective

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

out of «««««

Running Time: 115 minutes

This film from Focus Features was released on Nov. 4.

Around this time of year, many studios begin releasing movies they believe may have the potential to be nominated for some end-of-year awards. One of those titles is the drama “Armageddon Time,” which is being released this week.

Despite the title, this film is not a disaster flick involving the end of the world – the moniker is actually a play on a piece of music used in the feature. Instead, the movie is a low-key, well-acted and effective coming-of-age drama. This is a solid production, but one that also doesn’t feel like a frontrunner to take home any big awards.

Based on the real experiences of writer/director James Gray and set in New York in 1980, this tale follows young Paul Graff (Banks Repeta). He’s a youngster who dreams of being an artist, displeasing many in his Jewish-American family. His father Irving (Jeremy Strong) wants him to take life seriously and mother Esther (Anne Hathaway) appears to merely tolerate his interests. However, Paul does receive support and encouragement from his favorite relative, grandfather Aaron Rabinowitz (Anthony Hopkins).

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Unfortunately, problems arise after he begins acting out in class. Paul also notices and befriends a black student in his class named Johnny Davis (Jaylin Webb), who receives far worse punishment for the very same infractions. As the school year passes, Paul gets a lucky break and is admitted into a private school, but embarks on a plan to run away with Johnny to Florida.

This film certainly appears to be based on real experiences. In fact, it looks like a perfect recreation of the era.

As someone who remembers this time period well, the production design is top notch. All of the household items, toys, records and even the wood paneling that covers much of the inside of the Graff’s modest home is expertly recreated. These little elements certainly struck a chord with this reviewer, who felt like he was transported back to his own childhood.

Additionally, the cast are all very strong. Young leads Repeta and Webb have difficult and complex emotions to convey as they deal with some terrible situations and a few ugly truths. They are both extremely likable, despite the fact that their plans aren’t particularly well thought-out and lead them at times into a downward spiral.

Of course, it was also a different time and the movie deserves some credit for being frank about how punishment was meted out by some parents during this period. Irving Graff is at times brutal with his son, but the actor portraying the character manages to add more layers and depth to the role instead of simply being an abusive adult.

But while the period look is captivating, the cast are top notch and the movie does display examples of racism prevalent in many aspects of life, there is something about the restrained and quiet approach that does result in the film coming up short. Certain story aspects are predictable and while the final conversations between Paul and other characters seem authentic, there isn’t much emotional weight to them. And, since the young lead can’t do much to change his situation or make an overt and grandiose personal statement, the close doesn’t overwhelm or make a stirring impression.

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In the end, this is a fine drama that ticks most of the boxes and possesses some elements that feel more authentic than other films of its ilk. It just won’t leave viewers bowled over or moved in the way that one might hope for. The movie does its job efficiently and perhaps it is simply a result of the downcast approach, but “Armageddon Time” doesn’t make the big impact required to leave a lasting impression for end-of-the-year and award accolades.

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