Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
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Rating: «« out of 4 stars

Running Time: 132 min.

Director Derek Cianfrance has become known for his heavy and searing dramas revolving around family, as witnessed in films like *Blue Valentine* and *The Place Beyond the Pines*. His latest is called
The Light Between Oceans
, and it certainly shares similarities with previous films; while there isn’t a big cast, it looks like an epic and features oodles of torment among the inner lives of its characters.

Based on novel by M.L. Stedman, this period piece is set in Australia following the end of the First World War. Veteran Tom Sherbourne (Michael Fassbender) takes on a position as lighthouse keeper on an island. Despite his intentions to maintain a solitary lifestyle, he falls for and marries a local woman named Isabel (Alicia Vikander), who soon joins him at his post. Together, they attempt to start a family, leading to tragedy and marital stress. However, the pair gets an unexpected surprise when a rowboat arrives carrying a baby.

There’s plenty to compliment about the production. As expected, the lead performances are excellent. While the story seems simple enough at the outset, there’s a lot beneath the surface. Isabel becomes increasingly desperate to start a family. Tom knows how difficult their isolated situation is and wants to make his wife happy, acquiescing to her demands.

There’s plenty of distress, and its always clear and visible on the performers’ faces. As events progress and become more complicated, one can see their decisions eating them up from the inside.

The cinematography is also exceptional. As expected, there is a lot of ocean photography with some gorgeous shots of the sea. When the weather turns and storms hit, it’s impressively shot and visually sweeping. Even the tall grass and island itself are beautiful to look at, adding scope and, in some respects, mirroring the emotional states of the characters at particular times in their respective lives.

Despite all the plusses, there’s still something slightly off about the final product. Personally, I think it has more to do with the original material than the actual filmmaking.

After an impressive beginning that sets up the stakes and a revelation that causes great complications and tension between the leads, the tone remains surprisingly muted and the drama doesn’t escalate to the heights it should.

The story puts Tom and Isabel in a difficult position and forces them to make tough calls, but it really pulls its punches when these choices are actually made. Essentially, the child-obsessed Isabel is forced to select between one of two characters. It’s meaty stuff dramatically, but every time the story seems to be getting into interestingly messy (and potentially ugly) territory, it turns away and gets back on the straight and narrow. In the end, this tale ends up feeling a bit traditional, stiff, and by-the-numbers.

Thematically, it all ties together — the importance of understanding forgiveness is frequently reinforced; however, that doesn’t make for intense and tension-filled drama.

The Light Between Oceans is handsomely mounted and impeccably acted, but one wishes that it was willing to delve into choppier waters and deeper moral ambiguity than it ends up exploring.

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