

There's an air of honesty in 'Manchester By the Sea'

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

Running Time: 134 min.

I have a pet peeve about dramas in which a character is attempting to overcome some sort of personal or psychological trauma. In all honesty, I've never been a fan of the way climaxes in these features are dealt with. You've seen them, scenes where a character will get a hug, be told how important they are and suddenly be cured of their ills as if a light switch has just been turned on inside their head. While many are still very enjoyable films, these finales have always played false to me.

Manchester By the Sea completely avoids this pitfall. Unlike other films of its kind, there's an air of honesty and realism to the proceedings. That also means it isn't the feel-good holiday movie of the season. Quite the opposite, in many respects. There is some hope, but this is a generally gray and downcast kind of movie, mirroring the internal states of the characters. It's also an excellent one, bolstered by an excellent lead performance.

The central character is Lee Chandler (Casey Affleck), a Bostonian living a minimalist existence as an apartment handyman. He goes about his workday business in a zombie-like state, avoiding personal relationships. Lee gets dire news from his family when he learns that his brother Joe (Kyle Chandler) has passed away. After heading back to his hometown to make funeral arrangements, he discovers he's been named legal guardian for his teenage nephew Patrick (Lucas Hedges). Equally discomfiting is the fact that Lee is also forced into interacting with people from his troubled past.

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Affleck has to carry the movie on his shoulders and he does so effortlessly. Lee appears focused on details and “logistics” perhaps as a way of not becoming emotional about his history. The performance captures a feeling of emptiness, self-loathing, heartache and frustration expertly. Yet despite some terrible decisions in the past and his less than pleasant nature, he's still a likable protagonist. We're shown a few happy moments and see both the good and bad of the character.

Also helping is the sharp dialogue. It's a grim situation, but the witty back and forth between Lee and his nephew, as well as some offhand comments and complaints delivered in a specific Massachusetts manner stand out and add some brief levity. There's also a good handle on the awkward pauses and tense, long stares between the acquaintances that add to the authenticity. In truth, both Lee and Patrick are dealing with loss in their own, very different ways. And the seaside, small-town photography is also impressive, with the winter backdrop adding some cool and chilling images to match Lee's interior state.

Manchester by the Sea makes no attempts to solve all the troubles facing its protagonist. Much like another recent movie, *Christine*, the filmmakers have a real handle on what it must be like to deal with psychological problems and the story feels all the more believable for it. It certainly isn't a barrel of laughs, but this is an expertly made and performed feature that lingers in the mind long after the credits roll.

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