Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
Friday, 27 January 2023 04:15



Rating: «

out of «««««

Running Time: 123 minutes

This film from Sony Pictures Classics opens at theaters nationwide on January 20.

This season sees a lot of Oscar hopefuls vying to get attention and earn themselves coveted Academy Award nominations. Sometimes, these titles earn praise and go on to be major contenders. Others, well, come across as stilted misfires and quickly disappear from view.

The Son has a wonderful cast and a writer/director coming off a major triumph with his 2020 effort *The Father*, which won Academy Awards for Best Actor and Screenplay. Alas, this effort turns out to be the latter of two scenarios described above. It’s a well-intentioned mess that doesn’t resonate as intended.

After the arrival of a new baby with partner Beth (Vanessa Kirby), divorcee Peter (Hugh Jackman) attempts to juggle his busy career and fatherhood. Things get considerably more complicated with the unexpected arrival of Peter’s ex-wife Kate (Laura Dern), who reports that their teenage son Nicholas (Zen McGrath) is behaving strangely and has not attended school for weeks.

Peter confronts the lad, and the evasive teen asks if he can move in with his dad, Beth and the newborn. The father agrees, hoping to set the boy back on the right path. But as the stay progresses, tension arises between all parties and Nicholas’s condition worsens. These difficulties force Peter to reevaluate his parental methods and confront his own chilly father (Anthony Hopkins).

There is plenty of dramatic material to work with here, including issues like depression and suicide, as well as parental responsibilities and how to handle psychological problems. And there are a few quiet, genuine and moving moments featuring Peter remembering happier times with a younger version of his son.

Unfortunately, there is a lot of artifice to this production and the movie deals with its serious subject in a less-than-subtle manner.

From the outset, Nicholas clearly displays signs of depression. Yes, the youth does inform his dad that he is attending school again and occasionally musters something other than a scowl at his new guardians. And the lead is depicted as a man who might not catch every self-destructive trait in his son’s behavior.

However, Nicholas’s odd, unsettling acts and comments are so prevalent that it becomes difficult to buy into the lead, or any of the other characters involved, as being this clueless.

This falseness isn’t helped by the setting either. Much of the film takes place in the glossy apartment of Peter, Beth and the newborn. The new baby is adorable, but is frequently taken away from the living room via a sliding door to a nearby nursery. That isn’t jarring, yet for a movie detailing the struggles and difficulty involved in being new parents, the infant never causes a single problem and seemingly fades into the background.

The trio of characters converse loudly, argue, and at one point crank up their stereo and dance... with the infant in the next room. Most parents will ask how a napping baby wouldn’t be awakened by such noise (they may also wonder where they can purchase this seemingly magical soundproof door). It certainly doesn’t add authenticity to the proceedings.

And when the drama intensifies, the characters and their conduct become even more unnatural and amplified.

A conversation between Peter and his father dealing with their strained relationship and regrets could have been handled in a thoughtful way, but the pop is never presented as anything but a monster and it quickly devolves into bickering.

Even some of the quarreling between Peter and Beth seems absurd. After Nicholas shows even more erratic behavior, Peter suggests that the couple accept the youth’s offer to babysit their newborn while they attend a party. The debate that follows only earns unintentional chuckles.

Nothing feels genuine here. The film falls flat and the big finale doesn’t make an emotional impact. Everyone involved in *The Son* is certainly talented and they’ll all bounce back from this earnest blunder, but the exaggerated presentation of the important issues contained feel fraudulent and the final product preposterous.

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