Rating: «««

out of ««««

Running Time: 117 minutes

This film from A24 is currently in theaters.

The Whale is a unique drama that poses remarkable risks and challenges for its filmmakers. It is a gloomy tale set entirely within one tiny location featuring a small number of characters with a lead who is an empathetic yet deeply flawed individual.

Honestly, there are so many ways in which this film could have gone wrong. All of the performances have to be perfect and the movie has to remain interesting despite being set in one place over a short period of time. The fact that this film is so compelling speaks wonders for all involved.

Charlie (Brendan Fraser) is an online English teacher suffering from morbid obesity and, as the film opens, life-threatening chest pains. His condition has spiraled so out-of-control that his frustrated friend/nurse Liz (Hong Chau) begs Charlie to seek medical assistance before his heart gives out. Unwilling to do so, he instead focuses on his work, grading essays and rereading a less-than-complimentary opinion written about a classic novel.

Over the course of a few days, the lead is visited by Thomas (Ty Simpkins), a young missionary hoping to convert him to a local religious group. Charlie also reaches out to his estranged and troubled daughter Ellie (Sadie Sink), who deeply resents him for disappearing years earlier. In the process, viewers begin to get a sense of why the man’s life has taken an unfortunate turn.

As mentioned, for a very small film like this to affect viewers, the entire cast must be exceptional. There has been a great deal of awards buzz surrounding Fraser’s performance and the talk is completely warranted. It is a challenge to emote under prosthetics and the make-up effects in the film are extremely convincing, so much so for this reviewer that he soon forgot about them.

This is also because Fraser brilliantly conveys Charlie’s pain and inner turmoil in every scene. There’s a lot going on with this protagonist, who binge-eats in order to deal with a loss in his life, as well as feelings of guilt over not being involved in his youngster’s life. His depressed mindset (and fear of judgment from others) has seemingly led him into a spiral of repetitive behavior that further pushes him towards his end.

Yet, the unusual situation is accessible in that it’s not so far removed from other addictions and issues like alcoholism. As such, his problems and stumbling blocks were relatable, with Fraser adding incredible empathy to the character with a self-deprecating, gentle manner and earnestness. And while some may be confused early on as to the lead’s refusal to get help, Charlie’s understanding of his dire situation and final reasoning eventually becomes understandable.

Another big plus is the stirring work of Chau as the protagonist’s lone helper. She’s Charlie’s sole confidant, constantly juggling her affection for him with irate fury at his continually deteriorating state.

Additionally, Charlie’s meetings with Ellie and ex-wife Mary (Samantha Morton) are tense. Ellie delivers harsh words and insults to her father, making a quick path to reconciliation seemingly impossible and their interactions uncomfortable. But this approach adds an air of authenticity and realism to the proceedings – a lengthy session with the ex is also filled with a seemingly appropriate sense of anger, dismay and sadness between the adults.

This film prides itself on being direct and honest (the subject even comes up in the English course that Charlie teaches) and for the most part the film holds true to this mantra. Thus, the final interactions between Charlie, Ellie and Liz are believable, deeply moving and leave a mark on the viewer.

Director Darren Aronofsky (*Requiem for a Dream, The Wrestler, Black Swan*) is known for making downbeat pictures and taking big gambles in the process. If what you have read above doesn’t sound like your cup of tea, then the movie certainly won’t be the right choice for you. But this reviewer found himself impressed by the work of all involved, engaged in the plight of the lead, and moved by the emotional finale.

In the end, *The Whale* makes a deep imprint and isn’t easily forgotten.

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By Glenn Kay
For the Sun