

‘The Holdovers’ stands as one of the stronger efforts of 2023

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

out of «««««

Running Time: 133 minutes

This film from Focus Features opens in Albuquerque on Friday, Nov. 10

I'll be honest. For most, a film about a curmudgeonly teacher in a prep school filled with privileged students doesn't sound like a particularly relatable or even entertaining cinematic experience. However, *The Holdovers* is quite a remarkable movie. The writing is so strong and the performances so compelling that the story does manage to involve viewers in the characters and their struggles. As a result, this surprising comedy/drama stands as one of the stronger efforts of the year.

The story takes place in 1971 and is set on the campus of Barton Academy, a remote prep school filled with wealthy and arrogant students. Irritable history teacher Paul Hunham (Paul Giamatti) unsurprisingly has no fans in his classroom, but he is also on the outs with employers after failing the son of a prominent figure and donor to the school.

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As punishment, he’s forced to stay on campus with pupils who cannot return home to their families over the Christmas holidays. This includes Angus Tully (Dominic Sessa), a bright but extremely disobedient and difficult student. As the days pass, the film focuses on everyone’s struggle to endure the lengthy break, including sharp-witted cook Mary Lamb (Da’Vine Joy Randolph), who has recently lost her son in the Vietnam War.

It’s very clear from the outset that this picture is inspired by character-driven films of the 1970s. In fact, it goes out of its way to adopt a visual style that makes it look exactly like a picture from the era. The color scheme is slightly muted and even the company logos and opening credits feel like a perfectly crafted recreation of older movies.

For those who appreciate titles from this period, it’s a fun little homage, but by the end of the first act the movie diverges from the obvious visual tributes and focuses on the leads and their personal trials.

As details about them are slowly revealed, the characters feel less like conventional leads and come across as eccentric and troubled, but authentic individuals. Hunham and Tully are both prickly, with more faults than heroic tendencies.

These are uncommon traits in most dramas with similar set-ups. This approach allows for amusing pointed barbs, as well as the occasionally insensitive and hurtful comment.

In a very general sense, the bitter Hunham hates the privileged status of his students and sees every one of them as inferior, while Tully does his best to hide an unfortunate secret. And, while Lamb puts on a brave face, the grief over her lost child slowly begins to bubble its way to the surface.

A great deal of praise should go to director Alexander Payne (*Election Sideways, Nebraska*) and, of course, the cast, who are all phenomenal. Some of the characters aren’t initially likable, but the filmmaker and performers succeed spectacularly in using biting humor to keep viewers intrigued until they are all fully understood. Through their cutting and combative confrontations, their outward behavior is ultimately shown to be a coping mechanism for other problems. And it

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should also be noted that the picture never feels the need to force emotive sentiment during its final act, and yet it still feels moving and poignant.

Admittedly, there aren't any stunning shocks or major twists in the story (although Humham does make a surprising admission about his past late in the film). But while the plot may be familiar, it's rare to see a film handle tone, humor and character arcs this well. It may be a small picture, but *The Holdovers* is a striking and memorable film that deserves plenty of attention from audiences over the holiday season.

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