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film reviews



Conor Donovan, Zoe Weizenbaum and Jesse Camacho in *12 and Holding*

TWEEN TRAGEDIES

12 and Holding

review by George Sax

Several years ago, in his debut movie, *L.I.E.*, Michael Cuesta undertook to portray a pederast—or, at least, a pursuer of adolescent males—with measures of understanding and sympathy. His boy-lover didn't escape a kind of retribution, although the movie hinted it was injustice, but Cuesta's efforts weren't bent to presenting a monster.

In his second film, *12 and Holding*, there are certainly no monsters and sympathy for his characters abounds. There are also reprisals, however, and monstrous consequences.

Cuesta's three central characters are 12-year-olds—two boys and a girl—who are friends and neighbors in what seems to be a small, older suburban, geographically indeterminate town. Initially, there are four, but early on a boy, the twin of one of the other two, dies because of childish bullying and a feud that escalates into terror and tragedy.

Jacob, the surviving twin (Conor Donovan), experiences hatred, guilt and self-recrimination because he hadn't been at the scene of the crime. He was already ill-at-ease with himself and his family because of a large red birthmark on his face, because he lacked his brother's confident competence and brio and because he feels less admired by his now-distraught parents.

Surprisingly enough, Cuesta doesn't concentrate on Jacob's ordeal. He also focuses on Leonard (Jesse Camacho), who is suffering a more-than-usual identity challenge. He was there when Jacob's brother died and was also injured, left with no sense of taste after striking his head on the ground.

This turns out to usher in an epiphanic experience. The overweight Leonard is told by his school's gym coach that he is

the most out-of-shape kid he's ever seen and encouraged to do something about it. Leonard begins a regime of little food—which he can't taste anyway—and exercise. Eventually, Leonard goes to bizarre extremes in this reclamation project, but he is still the most rational and brave of the trio.

Then there is Malee (Zoe Weizenbaum), the half-Asian girl whose father has literally and emotionally abandoned her and her psychotherapist mother (Annabella Sciorra). Unsettlingly advanced for her age, she goes looking for inappropriate love with a spiritually damaged patient of her mother's (Jeremy Renner).

Cuesta's management of these three stories isn't unimpressive, but where he has failed, I think, is in introducing the contrived excesses to which he submits his young protagonists, most particularly Jacob. Each ventures into dangerous territory, figuratively and literally, in the sway of very youthful obsessions. One may grant Cuesta, and his screenwriter Anthony Cipriano, some license to overdraw Leonard and Malee's thoughts and reactions, but they take Jacob's adventure in a direction that is not just startling, but coldblooded and frightening. The resolution of this story becomes the movie's as well, which only aggravates its distasteful quality. The film becomes dramatically and emotionally hypertrophied. The results are even more inordinate since, for much of its length, *12* has basically functioned as a kind of sorrow-infected comedy.

In *L.I.E.*, Cuesta imposed an extreme "solution" to his narrative challenges, but it didn't seem arbitrary. Here he exhibits problems of aesthetic tone and self-control. *12* betrays the sympathy and interest it has encouraged.

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"TWO THUMBS UP!"
EBERT & ROEPER

"★★★★★"
EARL DITTMAN,
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"A RARE AND UNIQUE LOVE STORY. THERE SHOULD BE MORE MOVIES LIKE THIS ONE!"
JIM FERGUSON, ABC-TV



Keanu Reeves
Sandra Bullock



THE LAKE HOUSE

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Sandra Bullock and Keanu Reeves in *The Lake House*

TIMELESS LOVE

The Lake House

review by M. Faust

In cities less blessed than ours with alternatives to Hollywood product, *The Lake House* is the kind of movie that audiences are praying for right about now: a romantic drama with realistically adult characters, featuring an attractive setting and an imaginative premise that is developed without computer graphics or other concessions to young viewers whose tastes have been formed more by video games than by the silver screen.

To put it another way, when I tell you that the romantic centerpiece of the film features a couple slow-dancing to a song by Paul McCartney, you'll understand that this is a movie you can take your mother to without having to worry about being annoyed by loud teens with cell phones and short attention spans. (Any of them that wander into the theater will get bored and leave in about three minutes.)

The Lake House stars Sandra Bullock and Keanu Reeves as the residents of a secluded house on the shore of a lake outside of Chicago. It's a house that will likely provoke in viewers two reactions, in quick succession: one, I'd love to live there; two, but only if someone else cleaned all those windows.

The place is pretty much nothing but windows on a steel frame. Not the kind of thing you could put in the middle of town, but great if you can afford to heat it and enjoy winter as something to be looked at rather than immersed in. (Such an atmosphere is perfectly captured by cinematographer Alar Kivilo, who was probably born to the task: A native of Montreal, his other features include *The Ice Harvest*, Sam Raimi's snow-bound *A Simple Plan* and the horror film *The Glass House*.)

To call our stars the residents of the house is a bit misleading. They don't live in it at the same time. Architect Alex Wyler (Reeves) moves into it after years of disrepair to restore it. It's his way of trying to build a bridge to his father (Christopher Plummer), a famous architect who built it by hand years ago, before his family fell apart.

Kate Forester (Bullock) is a doctor in her first hospital position after finishing her residency. Isolated by her profession and a failed relationship, she leaves the house as the film opens to move into the city and force herself

to be around people. She leaves a note in the house's mailbox asking the next resident to forward her mail.

That note is answered by Alex, and I won't attempt to detail the confusion that ensues before they figure out that theirs is a temporally dislocated correspondence: The mailbox somehow relays his messages from 2004 to her in 2006, and vice-versa.

Some of us might use such a messaging system to, say, relay stock tips from 2006 to 2004, but not our heroes. *The Lake House* belongs to that subgenre of romances in which He and She fall in love through the blessing of being able to communicate only through the written word. Not at all a bad idea—that's when a lot of us are at our best. And it provides an opportunity for the kind of love that movies do best, the dreamy, swooning kind where good-looking movie stars soulfully gaze into the distance while listening to the words of their inamorata on the soundtrack. So much less messy, no?

Because all dramas require a third act, complications ensue, some of them apparently for no better reason than the need to provide an obstacle to Alex and Kate's eventual meeting. It's at this stage of the film that the premise, to which we have until now given the benefit of the doubt, becomes rather threadbare, culminating in a climax that wants to be tense and exciting but which is in fact merely implausible. (By which I mean, implausible by the standards of a film that has already asked us to believe in a magic mailbox.)

Well, you can't have everything. Directed with conviction by veteran Argentine filmmaker Alejandro Agresti (you may have seen his charming autobiographical film *Valentin* at the Amherst a few years back), *The Lake House* has charismatic performances from Bullock and Reeves, a lot of nice songs from the likes of Nick Drake and Rosemary Clooney (if *Billboard* still publishes an "Adult Contemporary" chart, the soundtrack album should go top 10), some low-key comedy and a few misty-eyed moments. You could hardly ask for a better alternative this weekend to Jack Black farting and mooning his way through *Nacho Libre*.

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