

THE SWEET HEREAFTER

[1997]

by

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The Sweet Hereafter. Directed and written by Atom Egoyan. From the novel by Russell Banks. Cinematography by Paul Sarossy. Music by Mychael Danna. Distributed by Fine Line Films 1997.

Ambulance-chasing attorney Mitchel Stephens (Ian Holm) comes to the town of Sam Dent in the frozen wilds of Canada, promising a lawsuit to help heal the pain suffered by many of the citizens after a school bus skidded off the highway into a river and killed fourteen children. Stephens interviews the bus driver and the parents, hoping to place blame somewhere. The citizens are not a very clean lot: an examination of the town reveals adultery, alcoholism, spousal abuse, greed, even incest. While some respond to the impending lawsuit with rapacity and some look for healing, others realize that it will divide the townsfolk still further. One paralyzed survivor, Nicole (Sarah Polley), lies in her deposition to the court so that the driver, Dolores Driscoll (Gabrielle Rose), is blamed for the accident (and thus is covered by the insurance) and Stephens' suit evaporates. All the while, personal problems plague Stephens. His drug-addicted daughter Zoe (Caerthan Banks) constantly scams him for money and claims she is now HIV positive. (Rated R)

Atom Egoyan, one of Canada's premier film makers, has made a great leap with *The Sweet Hereafter*. While his previous films have been elegant to look at and clever to think about, they have been primarily concerned with deconstructing film – little academic postmodern treatises on the cinema. In this film, which won the Grand Jury Prize, the Ecumenical Prize and the Fipresci Critics Prize at Cannes, Egoyan has added storytelling to his repertoire and shows himself an instant master of the art. The result is a stunning, annoying, and thoroughly satisfying film.

In addition to constructing films, Canadian auteur film director Atom Egoyan (*Speaking Parts* [1989], *The Adjuster* [1991], *Calendar* [1993], *Exotica* [1994]) has always been interested in mining the emotional complications of family conflicts. Himself a recent father, Egoyan now seems to have shifted to inspecting familial apocalyptic fears – any father would equate the loss of a child with the end of the world. Here Egoyan investigates the death of fourteen and the resulting aftermath in a small, isolated town. (It seems that Canadian film makers are more concerned with consequences, while Americans are impressed with actions . . . often ignoring the aftereffects.) Egoyan adapts his established techniques of deconstructing film – here deconstruction turns into less of an academic lecture and more of an intriguing jigsaw

puzzle, with four timelines jarringly interwoven. In addition, he often presents multiple layers of information: we hear Stephens speaking to his errant daughter on his cell phone while, a few feet away, a couple rummage through the moral failings of their neighbors. At the same time, their body language and tone reveal the existence of an abusive husband. Since in a film this rich, it is difficult to pick just a few ideas to explore, let's start at the beginning.

The film opens with a long tracking shot from along a piece of wood moving left to right, from darkness to light. In traditional theater, all the positive characters enter from stage-right while the villains enter from stage-left. Thus, left (in the visual world) is associated with evil much as it is in many other cultural manifestations – “right on,” “left out,” “in the right,” “out in left field,” and so on (even in French, the word for “left” is *gouche* – with obvious implications – while the word for “right” is *droit*, which also means “the law” and “straight”). Here, it is clear that the camera is moving from dark to light, from bad to good.

And what is this “good” at the end of this visual journey? A family asleep, naked, with a young child cradled between a loving mother and father. Much later (Egoyan forces us to put the pieces together ourselves), we learn that this is Stephens and his wife (now separated) and his young daughter (now a hopeless addict). Thus the film presents a two dimensional metaphoric spectrum: a physical one – moving from darkness to light, from bad to good – and a temporal one simultaneously moving from good to ill. (Time as a dimension is a rare commodity in our Western, science-influenced world where a scientific experiment done at noon is presumed to reveal the same physical laws as at one o'clock. A pliability of time, parallel to the one we so easily accept in space is more common in Eastern philosophies such as Buddhism. *The Sweet Hereafter* manipulates both.)

In fact, most of *The Sweet Hereafter* is a journey through time – Egoyan weaves together four slices of time: the younger Stephens and his family, the time of the accident in Sam Dent, Stephens' investigation, and Stephens in an airplane on his way to meet his dying daughter. And each reveals a slightly different “truth.” Stephens' journey through time is a downhill one – quite the opposite of the symbolically hopeful opening. His spatial/temporal line intersects with a glimmer of hope during his investigation, but apparently, he rejects it. In contrast, the town is on a very different journey through time; the accident is a plunge into depression and darkness. This downward trajectory is inadvertently deflected by Stephens' investigation. When we leave the town, there seems to be a hope for upward movement. To complicate matters still further, the citizens are on their private journeys through both space and time.

And this is just from the first few seconds of the film. The second image we see is Stephens in his car receiving a call on his cell phone while in a car wash. He then gets stuck in the car wash and has to abandon his car, getting himself drenched in order to escape. The cleansing implications of the car wash are pretty obvious. Some of the “dirt” he tries to cleanse accrues from his guilt about his druggie daughter, now calling and trying to hit him up for money. It is clear that his attempt to cleanse is not successful – his

car becomes stuck in the car wash. He must come in direct contact with the forces of absolution, get out of the protective shell of his car and get personally wet. That greater demands of cleansing are at hand is shown immediately upon Stephens' escape from the car wash, for around the corner is the fateful bus.

A third striking image comes later in the film: a baby-sitter's recitation of the Pied Piper. In most independent films, this would be a dead giveaway that this Grimms' tale is the mythological basis of the film (it seems that most independent film makers make intelligent films for an audience whose intelligence they don't trust – thus the typical “in your face” give aways). Not Egoyan. He takes the myth to its deepest possible level, a place where multiple readings are not only possible, but necessary. In fact, *The Sweet Hereafter* could be a study in the multiple reading of myth. (Indeed, any powerful symbol can be read in many ways; Carl Jung proposed that powerful symbols even contain their own opposite.) And in a really daring move, Egoyan doesn't even tell us the most relevant (to the film) part of the Pied Piper story.

Omitting the center of the Pied Piper story is wise, for it could cast a very ugly pall over the film. The demise of the rats is never mentioned (again more concern with consequences than actions). In the original story, the Piper charms the rats into drowning in the local river – this would make the children the rats and turn bus driver Dolores (a distinctly sympathetic character) into the villainous Piper. Even sans this interpretation, the Pied Piper story generates more questions than answers. Certainly, paralyzed Nicole is the lame child who escapes from the cave and sets the town's people aright. But who is the Piper? Stephens in his demand for money and promise to rid the town of its pain (read rats)? The neighbor who refuses to go along with the lawsuit? Or is it the townsfolk's various moral transgressions that bring down moral retribution?

Laced into this complex web of symbolism and myth is a study of the town of Sam Dent and its citizens. The town is a cesspool of tension, perversion, hate and violence – a Peyton Place of the Great White North. In the hand of a hack, this background would have delivered a made-for-TV soap-opera. Fortunately, however, Egoyan's interests are not in these people's moral faults. It would be far too easy to see their loss as divine retribution; it would be far too easy to point a moral finger; it would be far too easy to say that the corruption of the city has more than been matched by the corruption of the country (which, indeed, it has). Fortunately for us and for Egoyan, the director's interests are elsewhere. He inspects the lives of each of those involved with such respect and sensitivity that we accept them for who they are: imperfect human beings damaged by an unspeakably terrible event, who cannot go on as they had in the past, searching for answers to unanswerable questions.

Egoyan's characters are ambiguous. Lawyer Stephens is a money-hungry worm of an ambulance chaser, all slippery charm, and inflated promises, out for an easy case to slap against a large corporation that will, he hopes, settle out of court. The way he manipulates his potential clients is slimy: a different approach to each, a different promise to each, a different reward to each. Yet Egoyan doesn't stop there. The man is a human being and perhaps honestly believes what he is doing. The film makes it pretty

clear that he is being driven by his inability to admit his own complicity in his daughter Zoe's downfall. (The initial of her name indicates that she is at the end of the line and that the rancidity she has generated in the relationship with her father is also at its terminus.) He is desperately looking for some external entity to blame – classic denial and displacement. While we hope for his healing, we are more conflicted about his means of achieving it – on the psychological backs of his client/victims.

The film builds its case for responsibility, tolerance and humanity from bits and pieces, flashbacks, and flash-forwards, often with so little warning that we must scramble to keep up. Not only is time manipulated (an Egoyan trademark), but so is point of view. Each of Stephens' interviews not only contributes a piece of the story which we are required to assemble like a jigsaw puzzle, each also contributes, Rashomon-like, a slightly conflicting point of view. Rather than achieving a clear picture of what happened, we get a collage of subjective beliefs, memories, and impressions; we get people searching for community and a man searching for salvation.

This film is exquisitely painful without once being maudlin. The film is so cold, that even the interiors, lit and presumably warmed by on-screen fires and heaters, are cold, deathly cold. Against all convention, it is ultimately a lie that heals, the very opposite of the prescribed legal process which deals with truth and promises healing. It is an apt tale to prescribe both individual as well as community responsibility and an antidote to finger-pointing and litigation.

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