

Message Movie ‘Music Within’ Still Within Fledgling Director Steven Sawalich

Submitted by [HollywoodChicago.com](http://www.hollywoodchicago.com) [1] on October 26, 2007 - 8:01pm

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CHICAGO – “Most people go to their graves with their music still inside them,” 19th century poet Oliver Wendell Holmes once said. First-time director Steven Sawalich’s “music” presumably still resides inside him because it doesn’t resound in his “Music Within” message movie.



Ron Livingston in “Music Within”.

Photo courtesy of IMDb

The biopic tells the life and struggles that face Richard Pimental as portrayed by “Band of Brothers” star Ron Livingston. Following a rough childhood from a somewhat estranged and mentally ill mother, Pimental finds a talent in public speaking.

After being shunned by a college speech coach, he enlists in the U.S. Army to gain life experience.

Due to a close-range explosion, he returns to the U.S. almost completely deaf. After personal hardships and seeing the struggle of friends and fellow vets, Pimental becomes a champion of rights for Americans with disabilities.



Melissa George, Michael Sheen (middle) and Ron Livingston in “Music Within”.

Photo courtesy of IMDb

Like most films that are based on a true story and designed to inspire audiences, “Music Within” often feels hyper-saturated emotionally. Up until Pimental goes off to war, the film relies on voice-over as exposition.

Couple this with stories of being orphaned and 1960s classic rock music and it feels like watching an episode of “The Wonder Years” narrated by Charles Dickens. The film relies heavily on the same songs you hear in pictures depicting that time period to fill the void on ascribing emotions to scenes the script can’t deliver.

While all the actors are exceptional in their roles, there never seems to be genuine connection between the characters.



Ron Livingston in “Music Within”.

Photo courtesy of IMDb

Pimental’s relationship between wheelchair-bound Art Honeyman (played beautifully by Michael Sheen) and post-traumatic alcoholic and Vietnam vet Mike Stolz (Yul Vazquez) never really connects. The love story between Pimental and Christine (Melissa George) feels overreached.

Fortunately, the dry humor that made Livingston a fan favorite in “Office Space” helps keep the film moving along. What’s curiously missing from the movie is more work from actors with disabilities.

For a film based on the era leading up to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and a film that hits you so hard over the head with the message that people with disabilities are no different than anyone else, the picture is light on disabled actors.



Ron Livingston in “Music Within”.

Photo courtesy of IMDb

The claim that the disabled should have a stronger presence in film – one that Christopher Reeve championed so heavily in his later years – would work masterfully in this film. Leslie Nielsen, who lives with hearing impairment and serves as president to the Better Hearing Institute (BHI), notably plays a small role as a doctor.

While viewing this movie is a pleasant way to spend a couple hours, you won’t leave feeling inspired or with better insight on the life of a disabled person.

Biographies are created about people who have stories and lives that need to be remembered. Richard Pimental is definitely one of these people. Unfortunately, “Music Within” is a film that inside a year’s time you will likely forget you ever saw.

“Music Within” opened on Oct. 26, 2007.



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Source URL (retrieved on *Mar 29 2024 - 3:34am*): <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/2007/10/message-movie-music-within-still-within.html>

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