

Blu-Ray Review: 'Mother and Child' Offers Riveting Showcase For Actors

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CHICAGO – No director treasures silence more than Rodrigo García. He doesn't want anything to get in the way of the audience's connection with his characters and the extraordinary actors who play them. With the invaluable assistance of cinematographer Xavier Pérez Grobet and composer Ed Shearmur, García has made some of the most brilliant and probing character studies in recent memory.

From the magnificent feature-length collection of vignettes, "Nine Lives," to the addictive therapy sessions of HBO's "In Treatment," García has cemented his reputation as a master of intimate human drama, often involving female characters. As the son of celebrated Colombian writer Gabriel García Márquez, García has succeeded in his efforts to fuse literary sensibilities with visual storytelling. With elegant subtlety, García makes the nuances of his actors cinematically riveting, instead of simply framing a series of talking heads.



Blu-Ray Rating: **3.5/5.0**

His latest film, "Mother and Child" is not quite up to the level of his previous work, but it still provides a worthy showcase for many of the best performers in the business. Unlike "Lives," which told the stories of nine women each followed in one continuous take, "Child" sticks to a more conventional structure, juxtaposing the lives of three women in the same city and time period, but not necessarily the same period of time. García begins the film with a small event that proves to have long-lasting consequences: a fourteen-year-old girl gets pregnant only to give her baby up for adoption. The girl grows up to be Karen (Annette Bening), who's still remained somewhat of a child, crawling into bed with her ailing mother while continuing to be haunted by the daughter she never knew.

Turns out her daughter grew up to become Elizabeth (Naomi Watts), an accomplished lawyer who hops from one firm (and bed) to the next, while struggling with severe abandonment issues. In a seemingly unrelated subplot, sterile aspiring mother Lucy (Kerry Washington) snaps on a desperate smile and chatty demeanor in interviews to become an adoptive parent, before berating her husband for failing to shut her up. Most of the male characters are remarkably patient with these difficult women, none more so than Paco (Jimmy Smits), the physical therapist who attempts to befriend the impossible Karen, who can't resist repelling his advances despite her shared interest.



Mother and Child was released on Blu-Ray and DVD on Dec. 14, 2010.

Photo credit: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment

Like many of García's characters, these women are each perched at the precipice of a pivotal transition point in their lives. While the characters themselves are strong and richly layered, the plot they're confined within is disappointingly contrived, a fact that becomes glaringly apparent in the painfully predictable final act. The story threads are designed to connect far too tidily, yet the performances from Bening, Watts and Washington are guaranteed to resonate with viewers. Though Bening had sported a theatrical broadness in some of her earlier roles, she has become better with each passing year, and is clearly at her peak. In the same year as her soon-to-be Oscar nominated role in "The Kids Are All Right," Bening has created an equally funny and heartbreaking character in "Child," mining the endearing and damaged qualities beneath Karen's prickliness. By allowing her gorgeous face to age naturally, she has become living proof that Botox is indeed an actor's worst enemy. Another major standout of the cast is Shareeka Epps, the marvelous young actress from "Half Nelson," as a pregnant teen who exudes a formidably adult demeanor that only increases Washington's unease. And Samuel L. Jackson delivers his most tender yet complex work in years as the married man who finds himself falling under the spell of the woman he meant to seduce.

"Mother and Child" is presented in crystal-clear 1080p High Definition (with a 2.35:1 aspect ratio), and includes two featurettes where producers Julie Lynn and Lisa Maria Falcone discuss their belief in the project. As a "drama for grown-ups," García says that "Child" is the hardest type of film to get financed these days. He originally planned to have the film follow Karen and Elizabeth before realizing that he needed a third character to achieve the right balance. He also was concerned that Smits was too handsome to play the role of Paco (described in the script as bald and heavyset), and decided to utilize a fat suit and gray highlights. Bening eloquently discusses how cinema "allows us to view ourselves" by revealing moments of recognition to viewers who may have thought they were the only ones who've had such a moment. García says that he learned a great deal about his own characters simply by watching his cast embody them (and with a cast like this, how could you not?).

The disc also includes three minutes of deleted scenes that provide more character texture for David Morse, as Bening's old flame, and Epps. She reveals that her pregnancy (like Bening's) was the result of a one-night stand, thus further emphasizing how women are forced to deal with the consequences of a careless yet consensual act.

'Mother and Child' is released by Sony Pictures Home Entertainment and stars Annette Bening, Naomi Watts, Kerry Washington, Jimmy Smits, Samuel L. Jackson, Cherry Jones, David Ramsey, Elpidia Carrillo, S. Epatha Merkerson and Shareeka Epps. It was written and directed by Rodrigo García. It was released on Dec. 14th, 2010. It is rated R.



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By [MATT FAGERHOLM](#) [14]

Staff Writer

HollywoodChicago.com

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