

Touching ‘The Greatest’ With Carey Mulligan Transcends Melodrama

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on April 9, 2010 - 10:16am

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Rating: **3.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – The surprisingly good “The Greatest” opens and closes with two very different car rides — one silent and mournful and one loud and full of laughter; one on the way from death and one on the way to life. They are bookends for a well-performed tearjerker of the kind that mostly transcends its melodramatic set-up to become something genuinely moving.

I’ll admit to being an easy cry at the movies but I have to say that if you’re not in tears at least once during “The Greatest,” starring Pierce Brosnan, Carey Mulligan, and Susan Sarandon, there might be something wrong with you. It’s a film about being in touch with your grief and viewers should be prepared for an often brutally raw story on an emotional level. It’s not for the melodramatically faint of heart.



The Greatest

Photo credit: Paladin

The aforementioned opening car ride is home from the funeral of a son, brother, lover, and soon-to-be father. Bennett Brewer (Aaron Johnson, soon to be a star in “Kick Ass”) has been killed in a horrible car accident and left a father (Pierce Brosnan), mother (Susan Sarandon), brother (Johnny Simmons), and girlfriend (Carey Mulligan) in various states of shock. The girlfriend, Rose, also happens to be in another state when she arrives on the doorstep of the Brewer family three-months-pregnant with Bennett’s child.

Through sparse use of flashbacks we see that Rose and Bennett had what could be called a brief fling but also an undeniable love. He

admired her from afar for years and finally got up the courage to tell her so just before the most fateful day of his life. Feature debut writer/director Shana Feste wisely doesn’t overplay the doomed romance angle which could have easily turned the film into another Nicholas Sparks wannabe, but we believe that the two young people loved each other.

The bulk of the film consists of dealing with the wave of emotions that come with the death of a loved one. Patriarch Allen retreats into himself, stops sleeping, and mutters “I’m fine” at work. Grace becomes obsessed with the man (Michael Shannon) who hit and killed her son, but not in a vengeful way. She thinks that perhaps this man can shed light on Bennett’s final moments if/when he comes out of his coma. Finally, Johnny’s brother attends grief counseling but doesn’t seem to be in touch with the feelings he had about his brother when he was alive, much less now that he’s dead.

“The Greatest” travels ground that has certainly been trod before in the world of dramatic film, but Feste and her cast find ways to make the cliches effective enough to become emotionally resonant. Her strength seems to be with actors as she draws simply fantastic performances from most of her cast. Much to my surprise, Brosnan actually steals the piece, reminding viewers that he’s a lot more versatile and effective an actor than he’s often given credit for being. He perfectly brings to life a man who wants to express his grief but can’t quite figure out how; largely because his wife isn’t there to support him.



The Greatest

Photo credit: Paladin

Relative new face Simmons is quite good and, of course, Mulligan delivers in her first major role after her work in “An Education”. What’s most rewarding about this turn is how incredibly different it is from Jenny in that film, indicating a range that I think will carry this beautiful star through a long career.

Mulligan is slightly let down by a script that I don’t think ever fully gets under her character’s skin. Rose is not as much of a character as a plot device; the tool to help the other characters manage their grief. Sarandon makes it out the worst, coming to life in the final scenes but feeling a bit false through the majority of the movie, perhaps because we’ve seen this legendary star in this role before. Finally, Shannon proves that he’s best in one-scene performances, completely rocking the one he gets in “The Greatest”.

Naturally, when you open a piece with a devastating death, it’s difficult to maintain that level of tearjerking melodrama for the entire piece and

"The Greatest" does get repetitive and lose some of its initial power in the middle before finding it again for a weeper of an ending. Overall, every time the movie threatened to drift off into soap opera material (usually within Sarandon's overdone subplots) one of its talented stars would do something that felt completely genuine to me. There's a fine line between melodrama and moving; cliché and emotion. "The Greatest" falls on the latter half of those pairs far more often than the former.

'The Greatest' stars Carey Mulligan, Aaron Johnson, Pierce Brosnan, Susan Sarandon, Michael Shannon, and Johnny Simmons. It was written and directed by Shana Feste. It opened in Chicago on April 9th, 2010. It is rated R.



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