

Emotional Journey For Maria Bello, Michael Sheen in 'Beautiful Boy'

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on June 10, 2011 - 5:23am

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Rating: **4.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – The family unit, now in a constant battle with technology, changing morality and a fracturing social structure, comes under psychological siege in the mortally sad but ultimately compelling “Beautiful Boy,” featuring Maria Bello and Michael Sheen.

The film displays an ultimate tragedy. A couple who is in the process of splitting up must now deal with a son who commits a heinous crime and then kills himself. Bello and Sheen scratch and claw each other like feral cats in their post traumatic circumstance, and work towards solving the difficult equation of directing their human spirit as a divining rod for survival.

Kate (Bello) and Bill (Sheen) are in a dissolving relationship situation, made more fractious with their son Sammy (Kyle Gallner) away at college. The strain in their souls are on display when they share a call from Sammy. He is distantly relating his day at school, while his mother is trying to convince her family to take a togetherness vacation. Bill even cuts off the call on his phone extension early.

This splintering relationship awakens to astounding news. The campus where Sammy goes to school has experienced a mass shooting spree, killing over 20 students. While frantically trying to get any news of their son’s whereabouts in the melee, Kate and Bill eventually find out that it was Sammy who was the shooter, ending the attack by killing himself.



Separate Sorrow: Bill (Michael Sheen) and Kate (Maria Bello) in 'Beautiful Boy'
Photo credit: Justine Mintz for Anchor Bay Films

What follows is a blur of devastating reaction and gut wrenching emotions. With the press camped out in their yard, the couple has to escape to the home of Kate's brother, his wife and son. As they work out the situation while under scrutiny from their relations, the last days of their son's life is played over and over again in the distraught couple's minds, and the ways that they react will determine the fate of their commitment to each other.

This is difficult stuff, made more vital by the incredible work of Michael Sheen and Maria Bello. Sheen is best known playing real-life fellow countrymen Tony Blair ("The Queen") and David Frost ("Frost/Nixon"). In this story he is portraying a frayed American father. He reaches into some deep recesses as an actor, and becomes more believable just by precisely syncing with the character's breakdown. Bello, one of our finest film actresses, plays complete truth in nurturing her sorrow, anger and even sensuality within the eye of the storm.

Director Shawn Ku directs his script (written with Michael Armbruster) and it is a stunner of a tragic tale. The delicate nature of imagining the emotional balances and imbalances in such a situation is impressive. There is no wrong decisions in the narrative, just a series of honest choices that coincide with the direction the characters find themselves going. Ku's direction feels like Lars von Trier ("Dancer in the Dark"), with direct, emotional close-ups in almost a documentary style. And like Dancer, the film is shot vérité-style on digital video.

Another interesting element in the film is the reaction from outside the couple, both in individual contact and the world. Kate's brother and sister-in-law walk on eggshells around the couple, but eventually capitulate to their own needs, and there is a palpable relief when Bill and Kate escape on a road trip. The media is depicted as vultures, exposing Sammy so much that the parents cannot escape the news. Friends and work colleagues, though well-meaning, make small mistakes that become amplified through the raw emotional wounds that have been exposed.

The last act becomes a series of confrontations. The two victims, Kate and Bill, fight it out as their whole relationship life becomes fodder for hostilities. Bill faces his work colleagues but withers under their stares. Kate begins the hard climb out by putting the family house for sale. It is Bill that is most paralyzed by his guilt, and he must confront this burden to maintain a reasonable sanity. The troubling reality of all this is essentially aired out in this excellent film.



Soul Surviving: Michael Sheen in 'Beautiful Boy'
Photo credit: Justine Mintz for Anchor Bay Films

One glaring inconsistency, which really becomes inconsequential, is the media coverage of the shooting as it happened. The faked TV news reports are distracting because of the limited resources in creating them. An effort to showcase Fox News style demagoguery is crass, but maybe that's the point. It just emphasizes out how hard it is to recreate the production values of a 24/7 news cycle.

This is obviously not a feel good film, nor is it one of redemption. It is a valiant effort to show the other side of a Columbine or other campus shootings. About the persons left behind, far away from the actual gunfire, victims nonetheless.

"Beautiful Boy" continues a limited release in Chicago on June 10th. See local listings for show times and theaters. Featuring Maria Bello, Michael Sheen, Kyle Galiner, Alan Tudyk and Meat Loaf Aday. Screenplay by Shawn Ku and Michael Armbruster, directed by Shawn Ku. Rated "R"



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