

‘Angels Crest’ Takes Lead-Footed Trip Down Misery Lane

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- [Angels Crest](#) [2]
- [Gaby Dellal](#) [3]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [4]
- [Jeremy Piven](#) [5]
- [Kaboom](#) [6]
- [Magnolia Pictures](#) [7]
- [Matt Fagerholm](#) [8]
- [Mira Sorvino](#) [9]
- [Movie Review](#) [10]
- [Thomas Dekker](#) [11]



Rating: **2.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – Six years after her sentimental debut feature, “On a Clear Day,” filmmaker Gaby Dellal has gotten mired in the wintry sludge of her sophomore effort, “Angels Crest.” This is the sort of film that doesn’t stand a chance of being embraced by many viewers, particularly during an awards season crowded with gems. There’s little to recommend here beyond the icily beautiful cinematography and a few strong performances.

What starts out as an intriguing mystery reminiscent of “Twin Peaks” quickly unravels into a familiar trudge through bleak lives and bad parenting. It’s set in the isolation of a working-class mountain town haunted by drunken souls who mope about while making bone-headed decisions. The ending fails to leave an impact because it’s no less dreary and inevitable than anything that precedes it. This isn’t a story about transformation and discovery, but rather the acceptance of one’s own demise.

One of the few redeeming elements in the picture is the central performance by Thomas Dekker, whose intense characterizations have made an indelible impression in films such as Gregg Araki’s “Kaboom” and Shari Springer Berman and Robert Pulcini’s HBO production, “Cinema Verite.” In “Crest,” Dekker is required to go through the emotional wringer as his guilt-ridden character skirts on the edge of sanity. His work isn’t enough to redeem the picture, but it does further solidify his status as one of the most promising actors of his generation. The film is at its most compelling whenever Dekker is onscreen, but since the script follows in the footsteps of its source material (Leslie Schwartz’s 2004 novel of the same name), “Crest” becomes overstuffed with extraneous subplots. The 93-minute running time reduces several supporting roles to glib caricatures, especially in the case of a prosecutor (Jeremy Piven) whose tragic past is conveyed through artless exposition. This marks the second Magnolia release this year that features Piven in a role that doesn’t utilize an ounce of his potential, while ending on the exact same note of gloomy pointlessness. Yet for all of its faults, “Crest” is nowhere near as maddeningly abysmal as “I Melt With You.”



Thomas Dekker stars in Gaby Dellal's *Angels Crest*.

Photo credit: Magnolia Pictures

The film is most gripping in its opening act, as Dellal skillfully captures the bleary first moments of the day when one's mind is prone to wander. Single father Ethan (Dekker) awakens to find his three-year-old son Nate dazzled by the freshly fallen snow outside his window. The striking Rocky Mountain landscape makes it easy for a lone observer to become lost in the surrounding gorgeousness. That's precisely what happens to Ethan after he takes his kid on a scenic car ride where cinematographer David Johnson gets to show off his painterly eye.

Countless filmmakers have utilized the color red to create a foreboding sense of unease, but rarely has it been used as blatantly as it is here. The crimson blots of color juxtaposed against the town's cold blue backdrop are more distracting than unnerving. They also dilute the suspense by telegraphing that doom is about to befall the unknowing protagonist. The red Indian war paint smeared on Nate's face initially resembles dried blood, as does the red lipstick on a window (there's also a red balloon, red stones, etc.). When Ethan parks his car in a forest and spots some nearby deer, he abandons his sleeping son to get a closer look. When he returns, Nate has disappeared from the car, which sets off a frantic search. The muted gunshot previously heard by Ethan in the woods suggests the possibility that his son could've been mistaken for animal meat by a hunter. Why doesn't Nate respond to Ethan's cries? And how could the child have escaped from a tightly buckled chair and locked car?

These are good questions upon which to build a decent thriller, but the story is not nearly as interesting as the premise indicates. "Crest" is less about the mystery and more about the broken relationship between Ethan and his embittered ex, Cindy (Lynn Collins), whose alcoholism led her to lose custody of Nate. She relishes in projecting her self-loathing onto Ethan, while treating her noticeably young, devoutly religious mother with contempt. "You have your god, I have mine," Cindy snarls while reaching for her beer. This line is a mere example of how Catherine Trieschmann's screenplay fails to convey the characters' struggles with any semblance of subtlety. There's also some strained attempts at contriving tension between a lesbian couple, Roxanne (Kate Walsh) and Jane (Elizabeth McGovern), who exist primarily to comment on the action like a Greek choir.



Kate Walsh and Elizabeth McGovern star in Gaby Dellal's Angels Crest.
Photo credit: Magnolia Pictures

It gradually becomes clear that Jane treats Ethan as if he were her son in order to fill the void left by her own child, whom she abandoned at a young age. “Crest” is essentially a tangled series of vignettes about neglected children thrust prematurely into adulthood. We’re supposed to feel sorry for these characters, and yet they persist in making thoughtless decisions that relieve them of any sympathy. Facing charges of criminal negligence, Ethan becomes obsessed with how Nate could’ve escaped his chair. So what does he do? He plucks another kid off the street and drives off with her strapped in the same seat. He doesn’t even bother to ask the kid’s mother for her permission. It’s scenes like this that cause audiences to quickly lose their patience. This story has nowhere to go except six feet under, and it takes forever to get there.

‘Angels Crest’ stars Thomas Dekker, Lynn Collins, Elizabeth McGovern, Joseph Morgan, Jeremy Piven, Mira Sorvino and Kate Walsh. It was written by Catherine Trieschmann and directed by Gaby Dellal. It opened Dec. 30 in New York and LA, and is available On Demand. It is rated R.



[12]

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