

Jodie Foster, Christoph Waltz Shine in Roman Polanski's Surprisingly Average 'Carnage'

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on January 13, 2012 - 11:28am

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Rating: **3.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – Roman Polanski may not seem to be the first choice for a film about culture clashes in New York City but he has notable experience with dramas with only a few characters in a few locations (“Knife in the Water,” “Cul-de-sac,” “Death and the Maiden”). He knows how to build character tension through interaction – the games people play with words. Sadly, “Carnage” doesn’t quite deliver on the same level as the Tony Award-winning stage play (or Polanski’s notable best) but there are still elements that work here. Given the Oscar pedigree of the people who made it, one can’t be blamed for expecting a bit more from it, but there’s definite value here, particularly in a pair of great performances.

In one of the Yasmina Reza's greatest mistakes in adapting her own play, we actually see the incident that was only referred to off-stage in the original as one boy hits another boy in a park. We don’t hear what incited the assault and the focus quickly switches to where it will reside for the bulk of this short film – the New York apartment of the Longstreets, the parents of the assaulted child. Penelope (Jodie Foster) and Michael (John C. Reilly) are doing their best to hide their anger at Nancy (Kate Winslet) and Alan Cowan (Christoph Waltz) as they cordially converse over cobbler while the Cowans conceal their disdain for even having to be there.



Carnage

Photo credit: Sony Pictures Classics

The first act of “Carnage” is easily the best as things start to get under the skin of the quartet of characters. It starts relatively slow. Nancy is

stunned that Michael essentially killed his daughter's pet, a crime she considers significantly worse than that for which her son is currently being castigated. The Longstreets are increasingly perturbed every time Alan answers his phone and behaves as if there's no one else in the room while he conducts business. Michael and Alan clearly play a few alpha male games as they have two very different worldviews and professions (it might be a little too simple to say that Alan comes off conservative and Michael is the liberal, but it's not far from the truth). After Nancy pukes cobbler all over Penelope's art books, which she probably put out just to impress anyway, things slide downhill quickly. When the alcohol comes out, the fighting escalates.

And then it just kind of ends. "Carnage" ultimately feels too slight and inconsequential to really matter as a piece of art. It's about two egocentric couples who would never even meet if their kids hadn't been in a fight, but it doesn't exactly work as character statement or social study. The theatrical source of the material can always be felt as the Longstreets and Cowans never come across as fully three-dimensional, especially Winslet's Nancy, who is horribly underwritten.



Carnage

Photo credit: Sony Pictures Classics

Luckily, Polanski assembled such an amazing cast that they overcome many of the flaws of the paper-thin screenplay. Count the Oscars (Jodie has two, Roman has one, Christoph has one, Kate has one, and John even has a nomination). This is an amazing cast who knows how to deliver and they do so here. It's not Winslet's fault that her character is the least-defined and Reilly does decent work even if he seems a bit miscast. Overall, the piece belongs to Waltz and, to a lesser-but-notable extent, Foster. The star of "Inglourious Basterds" is riveting (even if his accent is a bit inconsistent) in every moment, cleverly understanding that Alan is the kind of guy who partially hates being there but also gets a sizable amount of amusement out of the ridiculous situation, especially as the wheels come off the civility. Most of those wheels come off Foster's character and she gets to go downright insane by the end as the only character who really gets to turn it up to eleven. Watching the carefully-but-poorly-crafted façade she's built up crumble down is one of the film's highlights.

And, ultimately, that's the way to look at "Carnage." It's a piece with enough acting highlights to warrant a look but doesn't really add up to more than the sum of its parts. They may be some notable parts, but "Carnage" is proof that even one of the best casts of the year can't automatically produce one of the best films.

"Carnage" stars Jodie Foster, Christoph Waltz, Kate Winslet, and John C. Reilly. It was written by Yasmina Reza & Roman Polanski and was released in Chicago on January 13th, 2012.



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