

Gus Van Sant's 'Promised Land' Breaks Promise to Audiences

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Rating: **2.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – When a Gus Van Sant picture works well, it can be as rousing as “Milk” or as thrillingly experimental as “Elephant.” Few filmmakers have straddled the mainstream and independent realms with such success (Steven Soderbergh would be another). But when a Van Sant film fails, it often fails spectacularly, as proven by “Even Cowgirls Get the Blues” and that notoriously pointless “Psycho” remake.

“Promised Land” is far from Van Sant’s worse film, but it’s certainly his blandest since “Finding Forrester.” By tackling the immensely topical issue of fracking, the film promises to stage provocative verbal altercations between an energy company salesman, Steve Butler (Matt Damon), and an environmental activist, Dustin (John Krasinski). At least that’s what the trailers suggest, but the script co-authored by Damon and Krasinski (based on a story by Dave Eggers) turns out to be a groan-inducing bait-and-switch.

Readers can be reassured that this review is spoiler-free, essentially since the film spoils itself. Instead of exploring the moral complexity of both rivals, it paints their personalities in the broadest of strokes. Butler is basically a decent guy who believes he’s helping the very people he’s hurting, while Dustin is a stereotypical villain whose every move is designed to get under Butler’s skin. Krasinski has had an engaging screen presence in past films, most notably in Eggers’ “Away We Go,” but this role draws solely on the actor’s reservoirs of smug self-satisfaction. He is hatable from the get-go, and that makes his interplay with Butler less interesting. Damon has some strong scenes in which his character can’t manage to hide his mounting exasperation at the easily swayed inhabitants of the latest rural community in his crosshairs. His calculated wardrobe of small town outfits covered in dangling price tags is laughably artificial, but Damon makes Butler’s innate compassion for farming communities ring true. When he pitches his plan to buy a town’s drilling rights, he appears to be convincing himself as much as the citizens. It’s a good performance, but Damon’s own script lets him down. It lacks the wit and arresting eloquence that made “Good Will Hunting” so memorable.



Matt Damon stars in Gus Van Sant's *Promised Land*, a Focus Features release.

Photo credit: Scott Green

What would attract a filmmaker as adventurous as Van Sant to a script this timid? The final reel is so tidily uplifting that it leaves the audience with little to contemplate beyond the pitfalls of formulaic storytelling. Rosemarie DeWitt is one of the most gifted character actresses in the business, but her role here requires little more than a radiant sparkle to seduce the eyes of Butler and (in one of the film's lamest twists) Dustin. Frances McDormand's role as Sue, Butler's partner-in-crime, is somewhat more substantial if equally thankless, as she takes part in mildly amusing banter with a vague air of flirtatiousness. Her Skype conversations with her distant son have little reason to be in the film, except to illustrate that McDormand is in fact a human being and not a one-note monster. But there's little depth within these half-hearted stabs at character development. The sentimentality is laid on so thick that it sticks to the roof of viewers' mouths.

At least "Promised Land" doesn't condescend to its rural characters with the liberal venom that marred overtly broad satires such as "God Bless America" and the deplorable "Butter." Yet its glib attempt at tackling an issue as vital and important as fracking is insulting in itself. Damon and Krasinski's intention to make their film a conversation starter rather than a message movie is noble but dramatically inert. By avoiding the very questions it raises, the film emerges as a bipartisan letdown destined to satisfy very few.



Matt Damon and John Krasinski star in Gus Vant Sant's Promised Land, a Focus Features release.
Photo credit: Scott Green

In an Oscar season overstuffed with prestigious projects, “Promised Land” deserves to get lost in the holiday shuffle. It’s ironic that one of the year’s biggest awards season contenders is “Argo,” directed by Damon’s longtime collaborator and Oscar-winning co-screenwriter, Ben Affleck. For a while, it appeared as if Damon was the brains behind the “Hunting” script, but perhaps he was simply better at picking projects. He’s certainly the more accomplished actor of the two, but “Promised Land” suggests that Damon perhaps could learn a thing or two from Affleck about how to make a timely, edge-of-your-seat drama as crowd-pleasingly entertaining as it is naggingly troubling. If Van Sant and Damon really wanted to provoke audience’s minds, they shouldn’t have delivered an ending smothered in forced monologues and reassuring smiles.

‘Promised Land’ stars Matt Damon, Frances McDormand, Rosemarie DeWitt, John Krasinski and Hal Holbrook. It was written by John Krasinski and Matt Damon and directed by Gus Van Sant. It opened December 28th at local theaters. It is rated R.



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