

Quiet Desperation Gets Louder in 'Nebraska'

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on November 21, 2013 - 1:13am

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Rating: **3.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – Bruce Dern is an actor who has turned in some indelible performances in his over 50 year film career. He saves one of the best for now, as he breathes life into an old man who wants one more time in the sun. So begins a journey with his son, portrayed by Will Forte, in "Nebraska."

It is Dern who understands his role, as the man that life has passed by. He's barely holding onto the end of the road, but he desires dignity before that road rises up to meet him. It's a full characterization, and he communicates Bob Nelson's screenplay with more gesture than dialogue. Throw in the stark black and white vision of director Alexander Payne ("The Descendants"), and a unique view of family is realized. The conclusion is a bit precious, and Will Forte does seem overmatched by Dern's character, but "Nebraska" is a reminder of a generation in America that thought every promise was certain, without the harsh realities of old age.

Woody Grant (Bruce Dern) is an aging retired mechanic who receives some good news in the mail. It seems he has won a mail order sweepstakes, a million dollars, and the certificate indicates he can pick up his prize in Lincoln, Nebraska. This of course is sent to millions of people, but Woody is convinced he has won and that he must get to the promised land in Lincoln.



Bruce Dern as Woody Grant in 'Nebraska'
Photo credit: Paramount Vantage

This absolutely devastates his fed-up wife Kate (June Squibb), a crass and vain woman who shrieks when she speaks. Woody's son David (Will Forte) volunteers to drive his father to Nebraska to claim his "prize," after finding him trying to walk there. This will include a stop in the

small Nebraska hometown in which Woody grew up and met Kate, and they greet his million dollar news with joy and skepticism, especially from old friend Ed Pegram (Stacy Keach). All roads lead to the nirvana of Lincoln, if Woody can ever get there.

The showpiece in the film is the subtlety of Bruce Dern as Woody. He is slyly confused about the circumstance, but also obstinate in completing the mission. It is a reminder of aging in the throes of quiet desperation, within the frustrations of a life with not much happening in the end. Every gesture, gaze and mumbled piece of dialogue adds to the rich worth of Dern's performance, and although his character is drawn as negative, there is no contrary feelings against Dern as the old man. It's a remarkable late career triumph.

His partner and adversary in the journey is his son David, given the old college try by Will Forte, who is best known for comic sketch work on "Saturday Night Live." He's just not up to it, whether he has no experience to draw from or simply can't feel the role. He doesn't get there with Dern, and even has little chemistry with his brother Ross (Bob Odenkirk), even in one highly comic sequence.

It's possible its all part of the atmosphere screenwriter Bob Nelson and director Alexander Payne is trying to achieve, that of dry people in a dry land. This is a portrayal of Middle America in 2013, with the lost middle class trying to find some measure of happiness and dignity, both in the old age of Woody and the sour economic circumstance of David. It's a very low energy, barely registering, and Payne makes sure that is emphasized by presenting the story in black and white.



Woody and Son David (Will Forte) in 'Nebraska'
Photo credit: Paramount Vantage

There is a strange decision toward feel-good at the end of the film, and it is an awkward fit with the rest of the proceedings. Woody is not well liked, having run away from most of his difficult life decisions, and his wife makes matters worse. It's not clear in Woody's extended hometown family – dry as toast themselves – who is to blame for the old man's perspective, but their acceptance of him in potential wealth is a symptom of a larger disease. Nelson and Payne wanted everything to work out, that is apparent, but the ending doesn't fulfill the mean-spirited part of both the land and the soul.

But that doesn't take away from the magnificent Bruce Dern, who steps up to the plate and hits it clear out of the park. There is a hope that he is standing at that plate – along with his persona as Woody Grant – watching the ball soar through the clean Nebraska sky.

'Nebraska' continues its nationwide release in Chicago on November 22nd. Featuring Bruce Dern, Will Forte, June Squibb, Bob Odenkirk and Stacy Keach. Screenplay by Bob Nelson. Directed by Alexander Payne. Rated "R"



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By [PATRICK McDONALD](#) [15]
Senior Staff Writer
HollywoodChicago.com
pat@hollywoodchicago.com [14]

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