

‘Labor Day’ Provides Meaning to Romantic Tension

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on January 31, 2014 - 9:50am

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Rating: **4.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – There is a real power when the right filmmaker connects with the right performers. What appears on the surface to be a slight and well-worn story, gains a decided psychological edge. “Labor Day” features Kate Winslet and Josh Brolin, and writer/director Jason Reitman.

The story – adapted from a novel by Joyce Maynard – is about a convict kidnapping a single mom and son after a prison break. In keeping them in place as he hides out, a relationship develops between the lonely matriarch and the escaped prisoner. This theme has been explored before, but Reitman takes it to another level of resolve. The underlying mood and tension involving the emerging adolescence of the captured boy, the break in the psychosis of the newly-paired lovers and the overriding feeling that they might be caught at any moment creates a tension that raises the narrative stakes.

Adele (Winslet) is a depressed single mother in 1987 whose son Henry (Gattlin Griffith) is her only advocate. She has become virtually a shut-in, only venturing out to get supplies every few months. On one of those runs during Labor Day weekend, a stranger named Frank (Josh Brolin) appears from the shadows and kidnaps the pair. He is an escaped convict from a local prison, and a roadblock is put up on all the potential small town getaway points.



Adele (Kate Winslet), Henry (Gattlin Griffith) and Frank (Josh Brolin) in ‘Labor Day’

Photo credit: Dale Robinette for Paramount Pictures

This begins a standoff. Frank is essentially a decent guy, and proclaims his innocence. He becomes a protector for the mother and son, and quickly ingratiates himself into the clan. Over the next couple weeks, a bond grows between the escapee and Adele, which blossoms into an obsessive love. Henry represents this secret, and does everything in his power to hide the situation, as he is also under Frank's spell.

It's the hostage set-up that creates tension, both in the romance and the pursuit of Frank. The time is also the pre-mobile phone era, when disappearing was a bit easier. The simultaneous stories – the developing love and the outside pursuit of Frank – meshed impressively in Reitman's script adaptation, and as a filmmaker he was able to balance each for maximum effect. It's an old fashion potboiler with some bite, and is engaging even as it succumbs to a wrap-it-up ending.

Much of creating the atmosphere falls to the three principal players, with Winslet, Brolin and the son – portrayed instinctively by Gattlin Griffith – performing their roles purposefully within the story. Winslet could probably read a repair manual and make it work, she adds so much depth into the depression of Adele. Brolin moves beyond the easy characteristics of the condemned man, and adds an opposing delicate personality. Griffith is able to channel his inner teen angst, to go along with the angst of being captive.

The small town is used as a character as well, and all the typical folks that know the family – the bank teller, the grocer, the cop and the high school girl – become a menace to the secret being harbored. At one point during the crisis, the family is asked to take care of a special needs kid, and what he can't communicate to his flighty mother is an example of the constant wolf-at-the-door tone under Reitman's interpretation.



Adele and Frank Come Together in 'Labor Day'

Photo credit: Paramount Pictures

Tobey Maguire is the adult Henry narrating the story, and takes the rein of the role towards the end. Although it becomes requisite to redeem his mother and Frank, the presence of this automatic conclusion in the story feels like the only weak link in the viewing. All the events help each other in the past, present and potential future – and the hope for Frank and Adele is part of those events.

There is the theme of the soulmate in "Labor Day," and in an lonely world this factors into the connection of these two lost souls. In the search for purpose and redemption, we may only need each other.

"Labor Day" opens everywhere on January 31st. Featuring Kate Winslet, Josh Brolin, Tobey Maguire, Clark Gregg, James Van Der Beek and Gattlin Griffith. Screenplay adapted and directed by Jason Reitman, from a novel by Joyce Maynard. Rated "PG-13"



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