

Philip Seymour Hoffman Lives Again in ‘God’s Pocket’

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on May 20, 2014 - 11:34am

- [1980s](#) [2]
- [Caleb Landry](#) [3]
- [Christina Hendricks](#) [4]
- [God’s Pocket](#) [5]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [6]
- [IFC Films](#) [7]
- [John Slattery](#) [8]
- [John Turturro](#) [9]
- [Joyce Van Patten](#) [10]
- [Movie Review](#) [11]
- [Patrick McDonald](#) [12]
- [Philadelphia](#) [13]
- [Philip Seymour Hoffman](#) [14]
- [Richard Jenkins](#) [15]



Rating: **3.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – Watching Philip Seymour Hoffman perform, now that he has passed on, is a bittersweet reminder of his ability and power to embody his deeply felt characters. He does it again in one of his last roles, adding his special brand of acting to the messy story within the gritty noir drama, “God’s Pocket.”

The film is directed and co-written by John Slattery (who portrays Roger Sterling on TV’s “Mad Men”), and is based on a 1983 novel by Peter Dexter. The director has an eye towards recreating the dark depression of the dying industrial landscape in America during the late 1970s/early ‘80s. The story is full of union thugs, small time hoods, abused wives and the frustrated working class, but as a whole they are not stitched together with any proper authority. Although there are many obvious holes in both the story and characters, the film works enough to provide a glimpse as to what could have been. And some of the performances – especially from veterans Hoffman and John Turturro – are worthwhile.

In a working class neighborhood in Philadelphia, nicknamed “God’s Pocket,” lives a sad sack small timer named Mickey (Hoffman). He has money troubles, which worries his wife Jeannie (Christina Hendricks). His stepson Leon (Caleb Landry) is a loose cannon who works at the brickyard. When Leon’s mouth gets him in trouble, the situation leaves him dead.



Neighborhood Guys: Mickey (Philip Seymour Hoffman) and Bird (John Turturro) in ‘God’s Pocket’

Photo credit: IFC Films

The neighborhood both gossips and mourns their lost son. God’s Pocket had recently been highlighted by a famous Philadelphia newspaper columnist named Shelburn (Richard Jenkins), and Jeannie thinks the alcoholic reporter can find out what happened to her boy. In the meantime, Mickey is trying to get enough money for the funeral, and turns to his friend Bird (John Turturro) to help him out. Time and money is running out for the working class in America.

The timing and setting of the film is the last gasp of the working class and their loyalties to the urban neighborhood. Setting the film on the edge of “when Rome fell” is reflected in the characters, who are romanticized but not authentic. This is a throwback, but not in a good way, because there is a lot of sacrificing of truth to portray the God’s Pocket community as something out of the ordinary, but the result is more like a caricature than a neighborhood.

One of the more interesting inauthentic characters is Jenkins as the newspaper columnist Shelburn. He is not given much to do except read his columns as narration, which are supposed to be more popular than a Philly cheesesteak sandwich, but ends up just sounding cheesy. He’s a drinker with no redemption, which makes him irritating, and his character derails the last act through his awkward insertion.

The supporting cast is hit and miss. Given little meat to work with, Turturro still manages to add enough quirks to make his character named Bird work, although it’s not really clear where he fits in Mickey’s world. Director Slattery also cast his “Mad Men” co-star Hendricks in a key role as Leon’s mother and Mickey’s wife, desperately mourning her son. She plays the role so low key that it almost disappears. The motivations for her character are sorely lacking, and Hendricks can’t generate any real emotional heat.



Jeannie (Christina Hendricks) in ‘God’s Pocket’

Photo credit: IFC Films

And then there is Hoffman, in one of his last performances. He does know Mickey, and even though the persona of the man is a loser, Hoffman is still able to coerce an understanding of what makes Mickey tick. That is his wisdom and genius as an actor, and his presence in the film allows for several compelling scenes, including a foot chase sequence that – given the circumstances of his passing – gains an unexpected poignancy.

If the desire was for a character study, as this film tried to attain, it is best to ditch the colorful stereotypes and past-their-expiration nicknames, and actually focus on the richness of genuine personality. There was something in “God’s Pocket,” but it got buried under too much lint.

“God’s Pocket” continued its limited release in Chicago on May 16th. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Philip Seymour Hoffman, Christina Hendricks, John Turturro, Richard Jenkins, Joyce Van Patten and Caleb Landry. Screenplay by John Slattery and Alex Metcalf, from a novel by Peter Dexter. Directed by John Slattery. Rated “R”



[16]

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- [3] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/caleb-landry>
- [4] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/christina-hendricks>
- [5] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/god-s-pocket>
- [6] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/movie-review/hollywoodchicagocom-content>
- [7] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/movie-review/ifc-films>
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