

Jake Gyllenhaal Turns Up His Power in ‘Stronger’

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Rating: **3.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – The second major film about the 2013 Boston Marathon Bombing (after last year’s “Patriots Day”) is “Stronger,” and it wisely focuses on one individual rather than the bigger event. Jake Gyllenhaal portrays Jeff Bauman, a spectator near the explosion that lost both his legs.

There are two elements that position this film above Lifetime-Movie-of-the-Week territory... the unflinching look at a man recovering from losing both his legs while not having the resources that other people might have, and Jake Gyllenhaal’s interpretation of that situation. Gyllenhaal is an actor’s actor, using his instrument as a means to communicate beyond the dialogue. I don’t know how Jeff Bauman is in real life, but if I had to guess based on Gyllenhaal’s portrayal, it would be accurate to the real guy. Gyllenhaal’s Jeff never panders, capitulates to false heroism or steps away from the negative parts of recovery, despite some questionable Boston stereotypes around him.

Jeff Bauman (Gyllenhaal) is a working class goof from Boston. He has an on-again/off again relationship with Erin (Tatiana Maslany). There are off again at the point that Erin decides to run the 2013 Boston Marathon. Jeff decides to surprise her at the finish line, and even constructs a sign cheering her on. As Erin approaches the finish, a bomb goes off.



Tentative Thumbs Up from Jeff Bauman (Jake Gyllenhaal) in ‘Stronger’

Photo credit: Roadside Attractions

Jeff is caught right near the blast point, and loses both his legs above the knee. The next couple of years is a recovery period, one that aided by his mother Patty (Miranda Richardson). Erin and he also reconnect, and she joins him at the small Bauman apartment. The period of healing is characterized by Jeff’s confusion as to who he is post the attack, his flashbacks to the bombing, and his difficulties with his new relationship with Erin.

Gyllenhaal and Tatiana Maslany as Erin have a good idea of how to play out their unusual relationship, despite the script (by John Pollono) not giving them much to work with – their give-and-take they experience feels real. All the other characters react to Gyllenhaal’s Bauman, and the actor plays with each of them like the well tuned violin that drives the symphony. When the film was announced, I was perplexed as to why Gyllenhaal would take on such a “recovery movie” role. He answered that perplexity with his usual high-level and mature performance.

The atmosphere around the character was standard issue – with the exception of Maslany – the screenwriter and director David Gordon Green chose to create those “Boston Accent” stereotypes that begin to annoy as soon as you see Fenway “Pahrk” in the opening montage (there has to be some other symbol of Beantown, isn’t there?). The actors either underplay it (like Jake) or become full blown Jimmy-Fallon-on-SNL mode (“Did you get that, Tahmmy?”). In some scenes, it becomes downright embarrassing, and almost derails the entire film.



Jeff and Erin (Tatiana Maslany) in ‘Stronger’
Photo credit: Roadside Attractions

But David Gordon Green (“Prince Avalanche,” “Joe”) is also an unconventional storyteller, and he uses the bombing as a flashback point during highly stressful times during the recovery. There is also a scene between Jeff Bauman and his “rescuer” Carlos Arredondo – who was also known as “the man in the cowboy hat” in an iconic photo from the day – which was touching and unexpected. It was the perfect precursor for their later appearance at (you guessed it) Fenway Pahrk.

Really though, this should be the last film where actors attempt the Boston Accent. Even done well, it grates on the ears, and distracts from a story. If done badly, it has the power to stop a film in its tracks and revive the spirit of Zombie Babe Ruth, to curse the Red Sox anew. “Tell me you got that, Tahmmmy!”

“Stronger” opens everywhere on September 22nd. Featuring Jake Gyllenhaal, Tatiana Maslany, Miranda Richardson, Richard Lane Jr and Kate Fitzgerald. Screenplay adapted by John Pollono, based on the memoir by Jeff Bauman. Directed by David Gordon Green. Rated “R”



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