

‘Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri’ Examines Our Violence

Submitted by [JonHC](#) [1] on November 20, 2017 - 9:12pm

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Rating: **4.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – Film is often an expression of our society, either as a depiction of how it really is or how it should be. Few films are as daring as Martin McDonagh’s “Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri,” which isn’t afraid to show us the state of our society and offer a realistic solution through a grim drama that is as humorous as it is devastating.

The topics of rape and police incompetence are no laughing matter, but Martin McDonagh knows that to be truly impactful, the film needs moments of levity to keep it from becoming a deluge of depression. Much like his previous film, “In Bruges”, McDonagh presents us with deeply flawed and damaged people, only to later have us sympathize with even the worst of them. McDonagh paints a tragic, American pastoral scene about a complacent rural community. Most people we encounter in this community are simultaneously good and bad, doing the right things for the wrong reasons and vice versa. Everyone else falls into a morally gray area.

McDonagh puts his story in an American setting to comment on the state of the violence in our country. Every week there is a new mass shooting, violent action against a minority group, etc. He draws our attention to the racist actions of law enforcement against people of color by having a police officer who continually displays violent racist actions but is excused by his superiors and his actions written off as a “boys will be boys” apology. McDonagh recognizes how violence stems from police corruption, but at the same time doesn’t condone it. He also shows us how most of the problems plaguing this once quiet town are the direct cause of men, emphasizing the damaging effects of the patriarchy that protects its own and holds firmly onto their outdated beliefs.



Frances McDormand plays a woman with a mission in ‘Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri’

Photo credit: Fox Searchlight Pictures

The power in "Three Billboards" doesn't come from a clear moral stance, but a muddy, skewed one that isn't afraid to question our morality if we were put in the same situation. We are never shown the rape or the burning of the body because that's not what the film is about. It focuses on the aftermath and all the grief, anger and guilt that the unresolved murder brings up. No one's actions to the murder were morally good because it didn't come from a place of understanding or compassion.

This quote from Martin Luther King, Jr. comes to mind:

"Hate begets hate; violence begets violence; toughness begets a greater toughness. We must meet the forces of hate with the power of love."

Every character faces a point in the film where they are confronted with the motivations of the other person, forcing a sort of metamorphosis in them that fundamentally alters their views. McDonagh isn't one for sugar-coated, neat endings, so this film takes a much less Disney approach and a much more Grimm's Fairy Tales finish. Despite all the character growth and development, he treats them as fundamentally human, which means that the mental and emotional changes they are going through aren't going to happen overnight. There could be several more mistakes to be made on the way to being better human beings, but the point is that they are trying. McDonagh knows that the perfect human being doesn't exist, but his message is that the world would be a much better place if people at least tried.

The emotional core of the film is structurally supported by the story but overwhelmingly sustained by the ensemble cast. Frances McDormand delivers a poignant performance that will stay with you long after the film is over. She is no stranger to dark comedy, like "Fargo", and is effortlessly able to draw from a deep emotional well while delivering comedic flourishes that only add to the human experience. Unlike "Fargo", in this film, the incompetent cop is played to perfection by Sam Rockwell, who is meant to represent the average white, male American, but never verges on the side of stereotype or caricature. The entire supporting cast, consisting of Woody Harrelson, Abbie Cornish, Lucas Hedges, Caleb Landry Jones, Samara Weaving and Peter Dinklage, each play their respective parts like separate sections in an orchestra. Each character offering their own wisdom and insight into the human condition.



Woody Harrelson and Sam Rockwell question Frances McDormand's intentions in 'Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri'

Photo credit: Fox Searchlight Pictures

When you are constantly surrounded by something, it is hard to get a clear perspective of it. Sometimes, an outsider's perspective (like British/Irish filmmaker Martin McDonagh) is needed to take a look at just how dire the situation. Through a completely possible fictional story, "Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri" takes a look at America's violence problem and contextualizes it in a small town setting to bring the issue home. There is no right or wrong, just a middle ground that needs to be reached by building a bridge in between both extremes and working from there.

"Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri" opened everywhere on November 17th. Featuring Frances McDormand, Sam Rockwell, Woody Harrelson, Abbie Cornish, Lucas Hedges, Caleb Landry Jones, Samara Weaving and Peter Dinklage. Directed by Martin McDonagh. Written by Martin McDonagh. Rated "R"



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