

## Entertaining ‘A Simple Favor’ Can’t Maintain Its Mojo

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CHICAGO – As the secrets are revealed in “A Simple Favor,” filtered through the witty and entertaining directorial style of Paul Feig (“Bridesmaids”), the story moves with charm and energy for three-quarters of its running time. But as the mystery gets solved, the conclusion doesn’t live up to the promising beginning.

Feig unusually adapted this from a novel (by Darcey Bell), so the plot was set in a stone and structure within the screenplay by Jessica Sharzer. The top of the film is a study in contrasts, as a “perfect Mom” encounters a less-than-caring mother in their children’s school. The Mom of Perfection is looking to jumpstart her life of mendacity, and the other Mum provides that path with her afternoon boozing and sex conversations. This is the strength of the film, Anna Kendrick (as perfect Mom) is essential casting against Blake Lively’s wild mater. But the plot dictates that Blake’s character disappears, and when that occurs the story becomes more conventional. But the front piece is fun and saucy, with Feig-ian jabs at motherhood expectations, fashion and New York City pretentiousness. Thus it becomes the sizzle, followed by the fizz.

Stephanie (Anna Kendrick) is a recently widowed single mother, who uses her meager insurance settlement to become super-Mom to her son Miles (Joshua Satine) and his activities. She also has a video blog (“vlog”) where she passes along her Mommy tips, much to consternation of the rest of the town’s parents. But there is obviously something missing in her, and she is about to find it.



Stephanie (Anna Kendrick) and Emily (Blake Lively) of ‘A Simple Favor’  
Photo credit: Lionsgate

Emily (Blake Lively) has a son in Miles' class, and as she connects with Stephanie, it becomes obvious this is the companionship is what super-Mom was missing. Their boozy afternoons turn into confessions, and the exchange of information creates a sense of uncertainty. When Emily disappears, Stephanie gets more entrenched in that intrigue, including a connection to Emily's husband Sean (Henry Golding). Altogether, their lives will never be the same again.

The chirpy perkiness of Anna Kendrick is perfection in the role of Stephanie – her last name is Smothers, as in “smother mother” – but she is also well used in revealing the character’s dark side. Kendrick has a authenticity to her acting, despite her girl-next-door look and demeanor. She contrasts directly with Blake Lively’s Emily, a real rock-and-roll performance, and what makes the connection sweeter is how their developing friendship is revealed to be both light and darkness. As Stephanie’s boldness becomes more assertive, Emily seems to lose a bit of her “balls.”

The film is set in Connecticut, an hour or so away from New York City, and Emily’s job in PR for a Tom Ford-wannabe (“Ford wishes he could be me”) gives Paul Feig a great opportunity to prick the disconnected entitlement New Yorkers tend to have. Kendrick has some of her best scenes interacting with them, including an artist portrayed by Linda Cardellini (from the beloved Feig-created “Freaks and Geeks”). The film succeeds in the clash of these opposing lifestyles.



Stephanie and Emily Share a Toast in ‘A Simple Favor’

Photo credit: Lionsgate

Where it falters is within the bargain basement solve-the-mystery plot. Henry Golding as Sean is a weak point, and the relationship he develops with Stephanie after Emily disappears bogs down everything else. Stephanie also morphs into a detective of sorts, for a cold case that is best left unsolved. As these developments thicken, the narrative starts to feel like walking through wet cement. The two contrasting characters were the passion that kept the story engine running initially, but once one of them disappeared that engine didn't function as well.

But any Paul Feig joint is better than most films, as he has a certain eye for high-level sophistication in character development and a trademark offbeat humor. He should stick to original screenplays, as not to be stuck in the wet cement of dictated plot, as it dries up and turns to stone.

*“A Simple Favor” opened everywhere on September 14th. Featuring Anna Kendrick, Blake Lively, Henry Golding, Rupert Friend, Jean Smart, Joshua Satine and Linda Cardellini. Screenplay adapted by Jessica Sharzer, from a novel by Darcey Bell. Directed by Paul Feig. Rated “R”*



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